

# English Studies from Archives to Prospects



# English Studies from Archives to Prospects:

*Volume 1 –  
Literature and Cultural Studies*

Edited by

Stipe Grgas, Tihana Klepač  
and Martina Domines Veliki

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## PREFACE

Whenever we think about what it is we do in academic literary studies, we do so taking account of time. The times that are subsumed under that time of thinking are manifold. On one hand is the time of the institution in which this disciplinary practice takes place. Another time to consider is the history of the discipline itself: the historical evidence that has been produced by readings of literary texts. In addition, if the object of the discipline is ongoing literary production, then we have to be ever cognizant of new publications. Finally, since literary studies engage (in more or less direct ways) contemporary issues and how they impact the reader, we must acknowledge processes and events outside the field. We have to say that this temporality is not specific to literary studies, but is shared by the humanities as a whole.

Unlike in the sciences, there is no clearing house in the humanities, which sifts the archive and antiquates knowledge that is judged deficient or simply wrong. Rather, the humanities owe a debt to the past that can never be settled; texts from the past and the readings they spawned continually beckon to us. Second, since interpretative paradigms in studying literature are not measured by their truth claims concerning the world, they persist even when the circumstances in which they emerged have changed. These paradigms are questioned and challenged, but are rarely discarded outright; they coexist on our horizon of reading, and are activated either by personal inclination or research exigencies. One opts for a particular paradigm believing that it foregrounds issues judged to have been hidden by older paradigms. Those very occlusions become the agenda of new readings. This explains why we have intermittently witnessed the proliferation of disciplinary “turns” in the humanities.

If these “truths” are endemic to the disciplines, they also hold for the exterior conditions in which disciplinary practices are conducted. If scientific knowledge can dispense with past instruments of the pursuit of knowledge—laboratories and the like—and if these can be “museumified”, the humanities cannot utterly discard the enabling conditions of their pursuit within institutions. Their very *raison d’être* must be seen as partaking in the tasks of the university. The academic study of literature as practiced at the English Department in Zagreb during the last 80 years (whose anniversary occasioned the writings assembled in this collection)

has attempted to live up to this task, and continues to do so even in circumstances when the very idea of the university has come under attack.

Different possibilities of grouping the following papers were weighed. We decided upon the one that organizes the book in a way that shows how the disciplinary archive can be modified and expanded—while keeping in mind the need to acknowledge past literary production and research—and to engage its present condition and what that condition forebodes. If the uneven number of articles under the three headings evinces a bias in how Croatian literary scholars practice their discipline, it is evident that the issues we indicated find an echo in their research.

The first section, “Working with the Archive” opens with Željka Švrljuga’s article not only because its title uses the word archive, but because it develops an argument that illustrates how the past is always engaged in literary studies. Using Derrida’s purchase on the word “archive” as her point of departure, Švrljuga shows how a contemporary text stages a dialogue with the past. In her reading of Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemmings: A Novel* Švrljuga demonstrates how the dominant national narrative “whitewashes” history, and how a literary text helps resurrect those—in this case women of color—who were submerged and disempowered in such narratives. Methodologically speaking, the article, addressing as it does historical knowledge, enacts an interdisciplinary network that enriches the reading experience. Sintija Čuljat addresses George Meredith, and her article exemplifies what is at stake when we return to the literary archive. Not only does she point to a text that has not been at the center of recent critical readings, but she demonstrates that reengagement with this Victorian writer brings issues of contemporary relevance to the fore. Using Meredith’s “eclectic philosophy” as the framework of her reading, Čuljat focuses upon his ethics, and how this concern in his narrative converges with his poetics. According to her, Meredith’s “disengaging, liberating poetics stands out of the philosophical religious and ethical systems of his day”. As a consequence of this disjuncture, Čuljat argues that Meredith can be reclaimed as a “protomodernist proponent of a higher knowledge”, which in turn enables her to incorporate Lacan and Levinas into her explanation of this asynchronicity. Sanja Šoštarić targets a more recent part of the literary archive; her primary focus is Thomas Pynchon. She examines different stages of Pynchon’s opus, points to some of the most important readings that have accrued around his texts, and inserts them into the general discussion of postmodernism. Dating her engagement with Pynchon, Šoštarić reveals early 21<sup>st</sup> century pronouncements on the end of postmodernism. From this point, she looks back on the archive of critical

readings of Pynchon, and bemoans what she perceives as the lack of political and economic agendas in readings that have been disproportionately interested in Pynchon's enigmatic style. Tatjana Jukić analyzes that which occurs when literary theory leaves the confines of the text and incorporates the latest theory into its thinking. Jukić focuses on Gilles Deleuze's assignment of particular importance to Anglo-American literature as that assemblage "where philosophy and its memory are to suffer an ongoing reconstitution, also where the collective and the political are configured for philosophy". In her argument, Jukić draws attention to a number of Victorian figures and stages a dialogue between them and contemporary high theory. The yields of such a dialogue are explored, and thought through in the author's own philosophically informed terms. In her article, Martina Domines Veliki revisits the Romantic Sublime. In a detailed presentation of the conceptualizations and representations of the sublime, this article exemplifies how work on the archive brings forth issues and themes that are not only of historical relevance but are problems that continue to engage human thought.

The cartographic metaphor in the title chosen for the second batch of papers, "mapping", indicates that English and American studies have nowadays become global. This international reach stages points of contact at which scholars from abroad interpret phenomena and figures from their home cultures in dialogue with readings provided by Anglophone scholarship. Lada Čale Feldman does this by drawing attention to readings of Milan Begović's novel *Giga Barićeva* that have recognized its connection to James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In her own reading, she expounds in greater detail Begović's "debt" to the Irish author and then shows how the elaboration of that debt intimates a thematic whose recognition and explanation lead us to Freud, specifically to his *Contributions to the Psychology of Love*. The title of Morana Čale's article, " 'What Is a Ghost': Joyce Haunting Krleža" paints the Irish author as a mirror against which to read Croatia's most significant modern writer. She takes note of the fact that major Croatian scholars of literature in English engaged Krleža's novel *The Return of Philip Latinowitz* and drew attention to the strange absence of Joyce in modern Croatian writing. Morana Čale reviews and addresses the explanations provided for this absence, and offers a critique in which she contends that Joyce "haunts" Krleža's writing. In a detailed analysis of three librettos by the Italian composer Gaetano Donizetti, Katja Radoš Perković recounts how the composer interpreted and incorporated into his work different subjects from the Tudor period in England. She describes how English history and literature figured prominently in Italian 19<sup>th</sup> century opera, how English intertexts

shed light on Italian preoccupations, and how these originals were transformed in cross-cultural appropriations. Jelena Šesnić begins her article on Croatian diasporic writing by reviewing extant engagements with the topic, but contends that there is a lack of “sustained, trans- and interdisciplinary effort” in Croatia that “would initiate a full-scale dialogue addressing the social potential, cultural and economic capital, symbolic grounding, anchors of continuity, and other facets of the Croatian diaspora as it laterally and vertically connects and re-connects itself worldwide.” Šesnić’s article can be seen as an intervention that not only maps Croatian diasporic writing into, primarily, American studies, but opens a field of inquiry for any kind of future Croatian studies. The final contribution to the second section of the book is Tihana Klepač’s reading of the female figure in the discourse of Australian nationalism. This reading undertakes a twofold mapping: it maps onto the archive of English and American studies a continent whose literature and culture cannot but be incorporated into the globalizing thrust of the discipline, but does so by showing that the nation-based approach is already fractured by gender differences. Broadly speaking, the papers assembled in this section exemplify an intercultural approach, which not only juxtaposes different cultures but which does so from a particular place, inscribing the interests and experiences of that place onto cross-cultural encounters.

The third and final group of articles supplements these forays into the past of the disciplinary archive, and the various ways in which this archive has been broadened, by looking into the future of the discipline. Borislav Knežević views English studies and its evolution within the much broader concept of liberal education, and traces this imbrication by calling upon crucial figures within the historical trajectory of the discipline. Concerning the present of English studies as an academic discipline, Knežević contends that it has “expanded its traditional boundaries and generated traffic across increasingly unstable disciplinary borders,” concluding that in this manner the discipline “has thus come to develop a liberality of its own when it comes to the scope of its broadening interests”. Just as Knežević argues that it is necessary “to historicize the very times of English as a discipline”, Stipe Grgas argues that the discipline needs to be seen as partaking in the general condition of the humanities at the present moment. His title indicates that during the present conjecture, which is witnessing an ascendancy if not a totalitarianism of economic interests, the knowledge and experience that the study of literature yields are simply not deemed to be of use. So as not to end on this downbeat tone, we round off the collection with Sven Cvek’s article in which he shows how a book by a Croatian writer published in the United States (Snežana Žabić’s *Broken*

*Records*) impacts upon the agenda of both English studies and larger post-socialist controversies. According to Cvek, an approach to literary production that privileges the interpretative matrix based on identity and that takes ethnicity as its central analytical category “results in considerable epistemic losses”. On the other hand, when the focus shifts (to class, for example), other perspectives are opened that allow us insights into “a world shaped by flows of capital” and “sub-, trans-, as well as plain old national social formations”.

These brief comments on what the reader will find collected in this book do not purport to give an exhaustive account of either their content or their methodologies; they should serve as indicators of the topics dealt with in individual chapters. As such they are invitations, addressed to the potential reader. If there is a common denominator underlining the different contributions, then it is the unuttered acknowledgement of debt to an institutional setting in which the disciplinary practice of studying and teaching literatures in English has been, and is, taking place. We feel this must be reiterated, because we opine that the once-privileged position of literary studies in the curriculum should not have been taken for granted. Messengers proclaiming the need to change the structure of the university are not bringing good news to those working in the humanities. They are at the gates of our institutions, and the gates behind which we create and examine literature. We have stated that it is in the very nature of humanistic knowledge to admit its debt to the past, and we do so here. But as editors we also acknowledge our debt to the contributors to this collection. Without their work, it would not have been produced. In the present circumstances, both here in Croatia and elsewhere, that work is increasingly less recognized, not to mention compensated. We hope that the acknowledgement of our debt partially mitigates the frustration that one inevitably feels when engaged in this labor.

The Editors



# **PART I.**

## **WORKING WITH THE ARCHIVE**

# CHAPTER ONE

## HISTORY THAT REFUSES TO BE WHITEWASHED: BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD'S *SALLY HEMINGS: A NOVEL*

### ŽELJKA ŠVRLJUGA

There is no history, only fictions of varying degrees of plausibility.  
—François Voltaire

“Let us not begin at the beginning, nor even at the archive. But rather at the word ‘archive.’ ”<sup>1</sup> Thus opens Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, with this philosopher's characteristic plunge into the etymology of the word: in this case, the Greek source *arkhē* and its dual implications of origin and order. While the former denotes the principle of beginnings (physical, historical, or ontological: history qua sequentiality), the latter implies authority (law and social order: a nomothetic code). In the Greek word's derivative *arkheion*—the residence of the *archon*, or leading magistrate—whose function is both private (as home) and public (by way of housing official documents which the archon guards), Derrida sees an established shift from private to public spheres. He offers Sigmund Freud's London home, which is now a museum, as his example of an institution that guards more than written documents.<sup>2</sup>

On the other side of the Atlantic, the home museum known as Monticello on the plantation of the same name, which was designed and built by another archon and national icon—Thomas Jefferson—likewise safeguards an “archive” of private transactions and canonical writings, its potential inconsistencies and holes notwithstanding. It is these “holes”—which have stirred the curiosity and swallowed the attempts of those who

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida. 1998. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, 2; 3.

have tried to fill them—that are of interest here, reflecting Voltaire’s skeptical view of history, which this essay’s epigraph portends.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the contents of an archive are as much history as they are “fictions of varying degrees of plausibility.” In light of this statement, non-written sources, such as orally rendered testimonies, rival the official, written ones, competing for the status of accuracy, veracity, and authenticity. With the Western world privileging the written word because of its permanence of inscription and its “authority” due to an alleged stability of meaning, the spoken word, even when eventually recorded, seems to have fared poorly in comparison. Yet while the process of authentication implies the use (and abuse) of power to argue for whatever fiction of truth one takes to be viable, it also implies a competition between different traditions, discourses and histories. What this logically and epistemologically implies is that we deal with two sets of truths, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but whose validity cannot simply be canceled if and when a veil of silence envelops either or both of them. This is the premise that lies in my title, one that signals that the whitewashing of history may conceal another hue lying buried underneath—a coloring that relates to different traditions, sources and skin colors.

The second half of my title brings in a woman of color—Sally Hemings—who has been bleached or darkened according to either the observer, or the function she has been given in historical and oral accounts and fictional renderings.<sup>4</sup> While her name is not necessarily immediately recognized outside the U.S., its association with and disputed relationship to Thomas Jefferson are still a bone of contention in American historical, literary, and genetic debates. Whether this association relates to the novel this paper examines (which has outraged declared Jeffersonians because of

<sup>3</sup> Since the publication of her first novel *Sally Hemings*, Chase-Riboud has imported Voltaire’s adage into her novels of slavery as a kind of signature, and a reservation against potential accusations of her liberal use of history. See Chase-Riboud. 1994. *Sally Hemings*. New York: Balantine Books, 166, 1994. -- *The President’s Daughter*. New York: Crown Publishers, 442; and -- 2003. *Hottentot Venus*. New York: Anchor Books, 302.

<sup>4</sup> Chase-Riboud lists around twenty monikers by which Sally Hemings was known. These have not been reproduced here, in order to avoid stigmatization by way of repetition. Moreover, Thomas Jefferson’s letter of 4 March 1815 to Mr. Francis C. Gray, while in no explicit manner referring to Hemings, could have been used to argue for her “whiteness” (by virtue of her color as a quadroon), but also her “blackness”, because her slave status followed that of her mother. *Founders Online*. “Thomas Jefferson to Francis C. Gray, 4 March 1815.” Accessed March 26, 2015. <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-08-02-0245>

the poetic license with which Barbara Chase-Riboud approaches history); or to the film and television series the novel inspired;<sup>5</sup> or to the 1998 publication of DNA analyses that have prompted further deliberations;<sup>6</sup> it is a historical antinomy that seems difficult if not impossible to resolve. Thus Chase-Riboud's 1979 novel can only be said to explore what Fawn M. Brodie's 1974 biography, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, intimates: that Sally Hemings was not only Jefferson's slave, whose presence in history is recorded in the Monticello inventory with a price tag, but that she was also his natural wife and the mother of his slave children, whose patrimony not even the genetic "archive" can corroborate. Having left no trace of her own except her progeny, and with her role in history downplayed or mocked, Sally Hemings remains a historical cipher that invites scrutiny and interpretation. Madison Hemings' and Israel Jefferson's respective memoirs, while not part of an acknowledged historical archive, are nevertheless "ascertained" records that history has downplayed. Why? It seems difficult to accept that one of the founding fathers of the American nation and the third president of the United States was a founding father of a slave family, which, if true, makes him guilty of miscegenation. By no means the only one to be involved in an outlawed relationship of this type, this Father ideal, who proclaimed that "all men are created equal" and are thus rightfully entitled to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" had a skewed understanding of the implication of his claim. "All" did not include the population of African origin, which remains a national shame that the U.S. must come to terms with.<sup>7</sup> The historians' motivation for dismissing Madison Hemings' and Israel Jefferson's testimonies could not have been grounded in the fact that the two black men were Jefferson's former slaves, but may lie in the legal

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<sup>5</sup> *Jefferson in Paris* (1995) and *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal* (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Eugene A. Foster et al. 1998. "Jefferson Fathered Slave's Last Child." *Nature* 396: 27–28.

<sup>7</sup> Only after DNA results were published (which ascertain a high probability that Jefferson fathered Hemings' last child) could even a skeptical reader accept the ironic gesture of Kyle Baker's "Happy Independence Day!" cartoon, which was posted on the artist's website on July 2 2007. It depicts Jefferson penning an oft-quoted line from the Declaration of Independence—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . ."—comfortably seated in his study, while a small black figure, outside the study window, peeps inside, imploring, "Daddy, I'm cold." The calligraphy/plain lettering nexus stages the comfort of the home compared to the reality of the outside world. The child is literally out in the cold, between the overseer whipping field hands, and the father figure engrossed in his idealist pursuit, eerily reflecting the post-DNA paternity debate and its inability to admit even one slave child into the family home.

practice of excluding black statements, which obviously did not expire along with the institution of slavery. Madison Hemings' 1873 affidavit, which was published four years before his death, asserts not only that Jefferson was his father, but that his mother was Jefferson's concubine, and that Jefferson fathered *all* of his siblings.<sup>8</sup> Israel Jefferson's confirmation of the truthfulness of his friend Madison Hemings' claims did not win much sympathy with Jefferson scholars,<sup>9</sup> although some revised their views in the post-1998 publication of DNA tests. Others, including Andrew Burstein, suggest that Jefferson's elder brother Randolph is most likely the children's father; interestingly, in doing so Burstein follows the oral testimony of Jefferson's white descendants.<sup>10</sup> Unable to resolve the patrimony of Sally Hemings' children, Burstein skews his argument and directs his attention to Madison Hemings' rhetoric. His primary concern is Madison's reference to his mother as Jefferson's "concubine" (which, with the help of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, Burstein reads to mean "whore").<sup>11</sup> This leads him to conclude that Sally (always referred to by her first name alone) was a poor mother, because her son did not indicate otherwise.<sup>12</sup> Burstein's argument and the title of his article—"The Seductions of Thomas Jefferson"—inadvertently reveal that he, too, was seduced, by Jefferson's rhetoric and silence, and refuses even to consider a less favorable interpretation of his historical hero. Since it is difficult, even impossible, to claim anything concerning

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<sup>8</sup> Madison Hemings. 1873. "Life Among the Lowly, No. 1." *Pike County (Ohio) Republican*. March 13. Accessed April 19, 2015.

[http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/\\_Life\\_Among\\_the\\_Lowly\\_No\\_1\\_by\\_Madison\\_Hemings\\_March\\_13\\_1873](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/_Life_Among_the_Lowly_No_1_by_Madison_Hemings_March_13_1873); reprinted as "Reminiscences of Madison Hemings" in Fawn Brodie. 1974. *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*. New York: Norton, 471–76.

<sup>9</sup> Israel Jefferson. 1873. "Life Among the Lowly, No. 3." *Pike County (Ohio) Republican*. December 25. Accessed April 19, 2015.

[http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/\\_Life\\_Among\\_the\\_Lowly\\_No\\_3\\_by\\_Israel\\_Jefferson\\_December\\_25\\_1873](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/_Life_Among_the_Lowly_No_3_by_Israel_Jefferson_December_25_1873).

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Burstein 1999. "The Seductions of Thomas Jefferson." *Journal of Early Republic* 19.3: 508

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that Burstein seeks support from Johnson's *Dictionary*, but fails to look up the word in the OED, which gives a much more neutral or nuanced definition: "A woman who cohabits with a man without being his wife; a kept mistress" ("Concubine"). While the critic's choice may be based on the historical moment, for which Johnson's dictionary is closer in time and may be more accurate, one may wonder why he does not cite Noah Webster's *Dictionary*, or any other American source.

<sup>12</sup> Burstein, 509.

this case with certainty, one should at least acknowledge the possibility of doubt.

There is another closely related issue that needs to be addressed before this discussion focuses on the novel: one that involves the practice of historiography. Within a context where Michel de Certau designates the “antinomy” between what he labels “ethics” and “dogmatism,” historiography participates in both. Or, according to de Certau:

Ethics is articulated through effective operations, and it defines a distance between what is and what ought to be. This distance designates a space where we have something to do. On the other hand, dogmatism is authorized by a reality that it claims to represent and in the name of this reality, it imposes laws. Historiography functions midway between these two poles: but whenever it attempts to break away from ethics, it returns towards dogmatism.<sup>13</sup>

In its dual commitment to theory (dogmatism, laws, and authority) and practice (ethics), historiography describes the former as a legislating force, prescribing on one hand and censoring on the other. Conversely, ethics-cum-practice imposes no limits but demonstrates what can be done—or done differently—if and when, for instance, historiography becomes more than “scientific” and “univocal” discourse. This “more” in “more than scientific” can be found in “the myths and legends of the collective memory, and the meanderings of the oral tradition”, whose status as source may be downplayed by historiography. This is because of the gap between the ordinariness (baseness of discourse, style and information) of these meanderings, and historiography’s scientific discourse, with its concomitant clarity and unambiguousness.<sup>14</sup> While this view may seem provocative to professional historians, its unconditional refutation may place them on the side of law-enforcement, whose rigidity threatens the interstice that invites, or even demands action and intervention. However, the insecure status of knowledge when dealing with fiction, which itself cannot and does not claim Truth, relies on “the stratification of meaning: it narrates one thing in order to tell something else; it delineates itself in language from which it continuously draws effects of meaning that cannot be circumscribed or checked.”<sup>15</sup> When fiction, oral tradition and myths

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<sup>13</sup> Michel de Certau. 1986. *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 199.

<sup>14</sup> De Certau, 200.

<sup>15</sup> De Certau, 202.

join forces, if they do not challenge historiography outright they at least render it ambiguous.

Therefore, if there is no historical basis for the commotion that Chase-Riboud's novel has triggered, we can question why the Jefferson scholars react to it as they do. Since I am not a historian by profession, I read the text for what it declares itself to be—"A Novel"—yet I see history as being on par with textuality, as knowledge of the past, which, when translated into the written word, becomes a "story"—an idea supported by the aphetic form of the word "history". The continuing debate concerning Sally Hemings has remained a protectionist enterprise that guards Jefferson from fallibility, thus from lack of ethical norms and the gentility to which he so candidly aspired. His almost godlike presence commanded an authority that few were capable of resisting in his lifetime, and that still has a grip on his followers today.

In line with her project of revising and rewriting historical data, Chase-Riboud gives voice to a repressed woman of color, whose youth, alleged beauty and "whiteness" seem to have seduced the national godhead into promiscuity and miscegenation.<sup>16</sup> With scant though significant historical support, the novelist, like Brodie before her, configures her historical character from plausible but unrecoverable data by reading between the lines of available sources and appraising silences. What the critic alludes to, the novelist translates into Sally Hemings' personal narrative, which responds to the discourse of history. This discourse comes from the pen of Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia* and his personal correspondence, but also from the writings of others, including Abigail and John Adams, Edmund Burke, W.E.B. DuBois, Frederick Douglass, Friedrich Engels, Harriet Martineau, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Constructed as an as-if dialogue, where the verifiable excerpts are epigraphs to a significant portion of the novel's chapters—providing a narrative impetus and historical lens—the novel creates Sally Hemings as the subject of her own narrative, commanding both her life story and the voice that renders it. To highlight her revisionist project, the author adopts the slave-narrative format, giving voice to a former slave and admitting her story to historical discourse. In line with the themes of slavery, which resurface in contemporary fiction, the genre has re-emerged as a neo-slave narrative—an aesthetic and interpretative culturally coded stratagem, with which the writer ponders the history of slavery and the condition of the slave subject.

<sup>16</sup> The fictional Abigail Adams, an adamant detractor of slavery, sees Hemings as "a white slave", the replica of Jefferson's wife Martha, the title character's half-sister. The novel brings this piece of information home on various occasions (Chase-Riboud, 73).

Like many writers before and after her, Chase-Riboud adopts it in her attempt to rescue Sally Hemings from historical amnesia, or, better, to undo the injustice done to her and her progeny. What white history represses, the revised slave narrative expresses, thus challenging the received interpretation of her character and place in history. Accordingly, the novel constructs Sally Hemings as an agent of history, whose agency, albeit limited by her condition, does not free her from responsibility when it comes to her own destiny and the destiny of her children.<sup>17</sup>

Although Chase-Riboud's project is neither "revolutionary [n]or revelatory" to quote Larry L. Martin,<sup>18</sup> it signals a critical change from white presentation to black representation of subjectivity and history, neither of which is devoid of problems. While the former risks inaccuracy and distortion because of potential racial or cultural biases, the latter is by no means innocent in its appropriation of the slave's subjectivity and voice. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cautions, the word representation has a double meaning, implying "'speaking for,' as in politics and [...] 're-presentation' ['speaking about'], as in art or philosophy."<sup>19</sup> This indicates that, despite a benevolent effort to accord the eponymous character the proper deference, the gesture of granting her voice and representing her creatively is nonetheless a form of appropriation and exploitation, which Chase-Riboud's novelistic project aims to counter and undermine.

Aware that the neo-slave narrative may be seen as a discourse that replicates the monological format that it tries to contest—the discourse of history—the author creates a polyphony of voices that support, silence, and question the story of Jefferson's "dark" shadow, who, the novel proposes, followed him from his Paris years until his death in 1826. Jefferson and the Adamses, who figure both outside and inside the plot scheme (in the mentioned excerpts-cum-epigraphs, and as characters in the novel), keep company with John Quincy Adams, Aaron Burr, and John Trumbull. The three white men—America's sixth president, Jefferson's vice-president, and the official painter of the revolution—each have a reason for betraying Jefferson's alleged indiscretions but observe a

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<sup>17</sup> When Hemings accompanied Jefferson's daughter Maria (better known by her nickname Polly) as her personal maid to Paris in 1787, she could have claimed her freedom, since slavery was outlawed in France.

<sup>18</sup> Larry L. Martin. 1980. "Sally Hemings by Barbara Chase-Riboud." *The Journal of Negro History*. 65.3: 275.

<sup>19</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds). 1988. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 275.

gentleman's code, thus protecting the honor of a once-cherished friend. Chase-Riboud refuses to speculate over their protectionist policy and deftly plays out their potential agendas, demonstrating in the process each man's fear for his own reputation should he smear the image of the national idol. A comment made by the fictional John Trumbull—"The history of private passions has no place in public history"<sup>20</sup>—while not denying the Jefferson-Hemings liaison, voices a public concern with historical appearances and official (authorized) history, sidestepping the notion of individual responsibility that almost led to another president's impeachment in more recent times. Like the 42<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States, whose middle name, incidentally, is Jefferson, the nation's 3<sup>rd</sup> President would probably have disputed his inappropriate relationship with a slave woman 30 years his junior had he been impeached, and his declaration would have consequently been read as proof of his innocence.<sup>21</sup>

By bringing significant and verifiable agents of history into her narrative, Chase-Riboud stages their participation in the whitewashing of history. Their silence on the Jefferson-Hemings issue provides different cues to its interpreters on either side of the racial divide, while verbally embodying the proverbial principle to "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil". Their potential hypocrisy surfaces as inconsistency between thought and speech in their separate interviews with census taker Nathan Langdon, who seeks them out in his quest for information on Sally Hemings. Although it is Langdon's job as state official that brings him to the title character's cabin door in the novel's opening, his fascination with this enigmatic woman grows with each subsequent visit. Inspired by the myth that surrounds her as well as his interest in Jefferson, Langdon aims to resolve the mystery of this extraordinary relationship. Local rumors, gossip, traditional ballads, James T. Callender's caustic accusations and challenge to Jefferson to acknowledge his paramour—which were published in *The Recorder* in September 1802 and would soon spread throughout the country—and John Quincy Adams's humiliating poem from 1803 all find their way into the novel, and testify to Sally Hemings' presence in American history. Despite her public invisibility, the fictional Aaron Burr proclaims her "the most famous lady of color in the United States" at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> Having recognized in Langdon a "cipher [who] had been playing God" by declaring her white, Burr refrains

<sup>20</sup> Chase-Riboud, 174.

<sup>21</sup> See Anne du Cille. 2000. "Where in the World Is William Wells Brown? Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings and the DNA of African-American Literary History." *American Literary History* 12.3: 450.

<sup>22</sup> Chase-Riboud, 161.

from providing the desired information for fear that his own personal history would surface with his revelation:

Many great men, including himself, had illegitimate children, yet the special loss of a son or daughter to an entire race had something mythical about it. How fatal and touching this story was, and how ironic that it should be Jefferson, the image-maker, the definer of America, the nation's most articulate voice!<sup>23</sup>

Langdon's desire to prove Jefferson's frailty eventually makes him a dupe in the endeavor.

The Langdon-Hemings meeting—which provides the narrative frame of the novel, and leads to a kind of friendship motivated by the young man's curiosity and the middle-aged woman's need for company and attention—triggers the narrative, and is textually pronounced as “volatile performances” that allow “a new Sally Hemings to emerge.”<sup>24</sup> By translating her silence into words, Sally Hemings claims her subjectivity with a first-person narrative, which she offers to Langdon but not to the reader. This tactical narrative gesture reveals the author's awareness of the pitfalls of representation, and ensures re-presentation without representation. Finding the young man an engaged listener, Hemings delivers the intimacies of her life with Jefferson, making him wonder what prompted America's third president to enter a relationship with a “mulatta” when he could have selected any white woman of his choice. Unwilling to offer an alternative “truth” to the plausible one, or to embroider the romance, which could damage the credibility of her character, Chase-Riboud uses what little information is available and transforms it into her narrative *raison d'être*. Hemings finds herself betrayed for the sake of her dead lover when, after a year of sporadic but welcome interviews with Langdon, she discovers that he has registered her and her two youngest sons into the official Virginia census as “white”. The limited third-person point of view reveals the textual and historical antinomy in Langdon's overdetermination and duplicity. He changed Hemings' color to protect Jefferson from potential accusations of miscegenation, while overtly claiming that he wanted to protect Hemings from the Virginia law that banished freed slaves a year after their manumission. By drawing this marginal character of history into her narrative, Chase-Riboud stages a tug of war between ethics and dogmatism regarding the interpretation of Sally

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<sup>23</sup> Chase-Riboud, 166.

<sup>24</sup> Chase-Riboud, 39.

Hemings' role and treatment in history. She reveals a historical paradox and its underlying contradictory racial agendas. Accordingly, Langdon is her trope of whiteness, as a legal representative of the whitewashing project of history that has been ingrained in historical biases, and to which his status as a white male makes him blind.

His poorly masked protectionist policy and even worse rhetoric, which reveal a proprietary and phallogocentric attitude in his words, “I ... decided [to change your color]”, provoke Hemings’ rage and this caustic rejoinder:

‘*You* decided.’ He couldn’t tell whether she was going to laugh or scream. ‘*You* decided! For fifty-four years I’ve been Thomas Jefferson’s creature, and now... now *you* decide it’s time for me to be yours. *Yours!*’ She began to laugh. ‘It’s Judgement Day! Instead of being black and slave, I’m now free and *white*.<sup>25</sup>

The thrice repeated cry of “you decide(d)”, which returns the message to its sender (the “I decided” with which the subject matter is introduced), exudes mockery with its emphasis on “*you*”, and culminates with detachment and derision in the final “*yours*”. The I/you nexus, which guarantees subjectivity, and binds us all in dialogue and nominal symmetry, highlights the translatability of power relations with the power of language. Nathan Langdon’s attempt to protect Hemings from trespassing turns him into a trespasser himself, and an undesired presence.

The breach of confidence and friendship that results from this interview makes Sally Hemings aware that she has surrendered herself and her life story to yet another white man, whose intrusion and subsequent betrayal feel like mental rape. Having been seduced to reveal “her mind, her thoughts, her feelings, her history,”<sup>26</sup> Hemings has been robbed of all a slave could call her own, and is finally ready for transformation. Her schooling in “the triple bondage of slave, woman, and concubine”, which her mother offers and whose destiny she shares,<sup>27</sup> brings Hemings to the realization that her fault in loving the enemy and bearing his children makes her an accomplice in her own enslavement and the perpetuation of the abominable institution, through being a mother. The white men’s betrayals, empty words and promises and her own self-betrayal and blindness prepare her for action and mental self-emancipation. Although urged by her brother James to claim her freedom during their stay in

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<sup>25</sup> Chase-Riboud, 50 (italics in the original).

<sup>26</sup> Chase-Riboud, 53.

<sup>27</sup> Chase-Riboud, 33.

France, the teenage Sally, blinded by love, postpones her petition, forgets her condition, and becomes re-enslaved upon her return to Virginia. Having cheated herself—or having been cheated out of her freedom by her willful return, and deceived by her “husband”—lover who does not free her or her children in his lifetime for what the novel terms selfish reasons (their emancipation would imply their banishment from Virginia)—Sally Hemings is kept in bondage even after his death. Eventually freed by Jefferson’s daughter Martha, Sally Hemings is granted permission to live on the outskirts of Monticello—as a trespasser—even after Jefferson’s estate is sold.

Though unable to change her slave past, the eponymous character symbolically erases it by burning its documents and mementos—her Paris portrait, Jefferson’s letters, and, finally, her diaries. This is another clever narrative maneuver, which consists of simultaneously presenting and withdrawing the missing evidence of Sally Hemings’ legacy, aptly eschewing a representational fallacy. The portrait that signifies her careless and naïve girl self of her Paris years is an identity no longer her own. By burning Jefferson’s letters, she erases his material presence from her life and destroys his commanding word (of love?), which seduced her in the first place. By destroying her diaries, Hemings, in turn, destroys the palpable link with the past that her body contains, thus dismissing the white body of knowledge—the written word—that does not recognize her. Her timely action is a result of a chain of events: her refusal to flee slavery with her brother James on French soil; James’s mysterious death, which haunts her; and Jefferson’s refusal to recognize his sons because of the one-drop rule. The father’s disavowal of his flesh and blood inspires her murderous thoughts, but seeing no solution for her children in such a violent act, Hemings decides instead to kill Jefferson with love. Although of dubious lethal effect, love becomes a shield with which she protects her children, and actively engages in their emancipation. If the fictional Sally Hemings participates in bringing Thomas Jefferson down, it is with her defiance to burn the letters that she wrote to him over the years. Her refusal to obey matches her unwillingness to erase herself from history. As a finishing touch, Hemings refuses the dying man her declaration of love, hoping that he would see it in her presence and sacrifice over the years. Letting him die in this way, she sends him to his silence with her own.

Although a political weapon of limited scope, the protagonist’s silence is by no means a withdrawal from the word. While withdrawal would imply death, Sally Hemings, in her final refusal of whiteness, finally speaks up, voicing her protest against her circumscription, which violates her subjectivity and status. Similarly, the neo-slave narrative speaks, not

only for its eponymous character, but for the nameless slave subjects lost in and to history. Predicated on the traditional form that it continuously revises, the genre resists the white straightjacket that its 19<sup>th</sup> century forerunner was forced to wear, thus manumitting its form. This manumission primarily concerns the *Ur* genre's traditional white frame and formulaic wording. With no need for white sanction, Chase-Riboud nevertheless knows that the genre she adopts is indelibly linked to the white discourse. The call of white history that, as already stated, figures in the novel's numerous epigraphs, finds a narrative response in the text. Not surprisingly, a large portion of epigraphs comes from Jefferson's *Notes*, most prominently from Query XVIII, which explores the manners and morals of slavocracy and their impact on all segments of the population, regardless of color. As if mimicking her character Sally Hemings' destruction of Jefferson's letters, Chase-Riboud symbolically "shreds" Query XVIII to pieces, scattering its fragments according to her narrative needs, albeit unable to spoil Jefferson's word. While this gesture suggests destruction, it also serves as the textual glue of the novel's sequel, *The President's Daughter*, which uses the shreds of the Query that its prequel omitted. By reducing the role of white historical discourse to disembodied fragments, the writer refuses the whitewashing of black history and proposes a dialogue. This dialogue between different cultures, traditions and voices opens a space that demands our ethical intervention.

This intervention between rumors and the so-called official history of private affairs has turned into "history by default", whereby the story of Sally Hemings is entrenched in "the confines of parochial Monticello, instead of a larger warp and weave of American history."<sup>28</sup> After years of denial, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello bowed to the repressed truth of the Jefferson-Hemings union and its resulting offspring. Two years after Foster's DNA findings were released, the *Report of the Research Committee on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings* declared that the Archon of Monticello "most likely" fathered *all* of Sally Hemings' children.<sup>29</sup> This added to the evidence of the missing staircase that led from Jefferson's bedroom to a tiny chamber above it. Having originally discovered the staircase in an archival picture, Chase-Riboud climbed it

<sup>28</sup> Chase-Riboud, 2009. Afterword. In *Sally Hemings: A Novel*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 353.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Jefferson Foundation. "Conclusions. Report of the Research Committee on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings." Accessed June 30, 2015. <http://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/i-committee-charge-and-overview>; Points 2. and 4. of Conclusions are an epigraph to Barbara Chase-Riboud, Afterword, 349.

during one of her visits, to see where it went. Its disappearance following the novel's publication resulted in a literal hole in the wall: a reaction the writer ascribes to the part of her plot wherein the stairwell enables the couple's secret rendezvous.<sup>30</sup> Hence, Hemings' hole in the wall (in which she used to hide) becomes a hole that swallows her, echoing the general policy of her erasure. The novel contends that Monticello's sale releases Hemings of the weight and history of her own enslavement at the same time as it dispossesses Jefferson's only surviving daughter of her father's legacy—the architectural pride of Albemarle County.<sup>31</sup> As one of Jefferson's many creations, Monticello has not only made history: it has also faked it.

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<sup>30</sup> Chase-Riboud, 358–59.

<sup>31</sup> Chase-Riboud, 288, 301.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# EMANCIPATORY IDEAS AS A NARRATIVE CONSTANT IN GEORGE MEREDITH'S *RHODA FLEMING*

SINTIJA ČULJAT

When we reflect on authorial attempts at transgressing the confines of the Victorian novelistic paradigm, we cannot but observe the expressive and ideational breadth of George Meredith (1828-1909). The question is posed as to whether the implementation of this author's ethical judgments affects the narrative structure of his fiction. Adherence to the perpetuation of moral precepts of good, or "using fiction as an ethical weapon" (Trevelyan 1906, 173) generates both narrative flexibility and allusiveness in his novels, which are framed as "readings of life" and "studies of man". The concept of spiritual growth as immanent in both genders, and the display of suffering that leads to spiritual recovery, impregnate his prose works. Meredith is prone to the employment of metaphor to fuel his novelistic imaginary. The narrative compactness that he has achieved signals an innovative mode that was considered stylistically obscure by critics. His commonsensical ethics, which propound the elevation of life through comic spirit, and use of wit, thus overlap with the artistic attitude and narrative ethos of an "unvictorian mind" (Horowitz Murray 2010, 52).

Meredith's experimental endeavor uncovers an eclectic narrative with progressive ideas of living, contained in a parity of religious feeling, revolutionary urges and the conviction of liberty and law. His libertarianism infuses his multi-genre work, allowing for continuous appraisal of the given poetic or novelistic form. Non-doctrinal concepts that sustain Meredith's literary meaning include individual autonomy and self-preservation, in contrast to the positivist, utilitarian sense of self-reliance and self-interest. He inveighs the systems of Victorian androcentrism and patriarchy through the formation of characters undergoing spiritual evolution. The innermost change is made manifest in

these characters' discursive performance, as their verbal displays confirm the gradual dissolution of their respective gender roles, and sever the pre-given Victorian concept of intersubjective relations.

The process of ethical de-norming illuminates the discursive and formal mutability of Meredith's novel—description gives way to dialogue and discursive digression, which results in the self-demonstrative exchange of opinion. The aesthetic strategy of conflating oppositions is in concord with the author's belief in ethical equilibrium; consequently, Meredith's concept of ethical equivalence opens up to innovative fictional dialogues that enable him to draw the characters' mindsets. Thus, by downplaying the affective aspect of his creations' plight, he gives advantage to the demonstration of ideas that they uphold. Conveying his characters' attitude takes most of the story time and sustains the omniscient narrator's interventions; the characters' combative perceptions of life are painstakingly depicted, and the climactic point of opposing views retarded, so as to highlight the tenacity, patience and endurance that are misnomers for defeat, apathy, and entropy.

In Meredith's eclectic philosophy, Norman Kelvin recognizes elements of naturalism against sentimentalism, and finds "...his main tenet of liberal reform to have been stemming from John Stuart Mill's social philosophy of the Fortnightly group, which is opposed to both conservative restraint and revolution..." (Kelvin 1961, 27). Still, while unraveling Meredith's opaque diction, we can trace the consistent application of invariable ethical justifications with a view to the "cultivation of the reader" (Arnold 1990), rather than a mere dissemination of leitmotifs from his artistic register.

Meredith's ethical reasoning applies to the cardinal principles underlying his characters' pursuits, which could ultimately compromise their integrity or "earthiness". In the narrative of *Rhoda Fleming*—a three-volume novel issued in 1865, containing 48 chapters—such principles are literally addressed either in the narrator's summaries, or in the protagonists' accounts of their own experiences:

- “Rhoda is almost all pride” (Robert Armstrong) (Meredith 1914, xxiii);
- “Self-indulgence is the ruin of our time”;
- “...remorseless mastery that lay in Rhoda's inexorable will..” (Meredith 1914, xxiv);
- “We must learn to forgive.” (Meredith 1914, xxv);
- “A truism, truisms, whether they lie in the depths of thought, or on the surface, are at any rate the pearls of experience” (Meredith 1914, xxviii);

“Brutal selfishness is the phrase for my conduct” (Edward Blancove) (Meredith 1914, xxxiv).

The multi-genre mastery of Meredith the poet, novelist and essayist shows his work as indelibly protomodernist. His spirited psychological novels dispense with the generic tradition of realism to develop a narrative mold, resonant with the changeable individual within a changeable Victorian body-collective. In her estimate of the highly allusive style of Meredith, Virginia Woolf argues that

[m]any of our doubts about him and much of our inability to frame any definite opinion of his work comes from the fact that it is experimental and thus contains elements that do not fuse harmoniously... (Woolf 1935, 229)

His unfailing “pleadings for the equality of women” (Trevelyan 1906, 191) originate from a genuine ethical motivation to contradict the pre-ordained concepts of womanhood, or to defy those “enduring epithets” of “sweet and pliant women” (Cohen 1995, 147). Meredith foregrounds unorthodox views through his heroines’ delineation in *Rhoda Fleming*, but his proleptic, individually liberating ethical code is aimed at transcending the rhetoric emptiness of generic statements such as: “[t]he world against one poor woman is unfair odds” (Meredith 1914, xxxviii), and “[i]t is ignorance that leads to the unhappiness of girls...” (Meredith 1914, xxxix).

When Meredith advances his staple narrative argument of independence of thought and deed, he is most persuasive when capturing the modes of deadening emotional and intellectual integrity; *Rhoda Fleming*’s female characters have difficulty asserting their autochthonous identities in the framework of conceptual and ideological patterns. While Dahlia pursues her allotted gender role adamantly, Rhoda is given the task of being Dahlia’s aide, and is meant to alleviate her sister’s tribulation. They both fall silent victims to the Victorian ideational paradigm regarding women, within their yeoman father’s marital scheme, which is intended to relieve the aggravating social circumstances of commassation and migration from the country. The sisters also persevere in their understanding of the Victorian ethical norm, once Dahlia, overwhelmed by the betrayal of emotional gratification, slips into the status of fallen woman, after visiting the London abode of her fiancé Edward Blancove. The third female agent, Margaret Lovell, sets a Meredithian golden mean (Trevelyan 1906, 64) in that she incarnates the inevitable poise between ascetic and hedonistic views. Despite this, she is curiously proactive in her resilience to the patriarchal appropriation of women’s liberty. Through her enchanting wit, she seems to supersede the restraints of a Victorian woman’s position.