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Redefining the Boundaries of Historical Writing and Historical Imagination in Carolyn Steedman's *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age*

Summary

One of the dominant features of the late 20th and early 21st century academic debates on the nature of history is a curious form of radicalism both in the ranks of defenders of traditional approaches to history/historiography and eloquent champions of postmodern theories. These debates will provide the context for my reading of Steedman's *Master and Servant*, which probes disciplinary boundaries of history and fiction in order to explore the unhistoricised ways of love and labour in 18th century industrial Yorkshire. As Steedman inhabits the position of both a professional historian, with all the ideological implications of that position, and Nelly Dean, a servant and narrator in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, this paper will consider her approach to historical imagination in the light of deconstructionist genre of historical writing.

Key words: Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant*, history, fiction, postmodernism, traditional historiography, deconstructionist genre, Emily Brontë, Nelly Dean, E.P. Thompson.

Redefiniranje meja historične pisave in historične imaginacije v delu *Gospodar in služabnica: ljubezen in delo v industrijski dobi v Angliji* Carolyn Steedman

Povzetek

V akademskih razpravah o naravi zgodovine ob koncu dvajsetega in na začetku enaindvajsetega stoletja je med drugim v ospredju tudi nenavadna oblika radikalizma, tako med tistimi, ki zagovarjajo tradicionalni pristop k zgodovini/zgodovinoписju, kot med tistimi, ki prisegajo na postmoderne teorije. Omenjene razprave tvorijo kontekst mojega branja dela *Gospodar in služabnica* avtorice C. Steedman, ki s pomočjo proučevanja disciplinarnih meja zgodovine in fikcije raziskuje 'neuzgodovinjene' načine ljubezni in dela v industrijskem Yorkshiru v osemnajstem stoletju. Glede na to, da C. Steedman zavzame hkrati položaj poklicne zgodovinarke, vključno z vsem, kar to predpostavlja, ter Nelly Dean, služabnice in pripovedovalke v romanu *Viharni vrh* E. Brontë, bo članek obravnaval njen pristop k historični imaginaciji v luči dekonstrukcijskega žanra historične pisave.

Ključne besede: Carolyn Steedman, *Gospodar in služabnica*, zgodovina, fikcija, postmodernizem, tradicionalno zgodovinoписje, dekonstrukcijski žanr, Emily Brontë, Nelly Dean, E.P. Thompson

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1. An introduction into cultural wars in the name of history

History as an academic discipline has suffered many forays of postmodern thought in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The choice of war metaphor in the opening sentence is not accidental as, more often than a kind academic exchange of arguments, these challenges may be characterized as militant campaigns in the name of history. Although battles *in* history, especially in the war-saturated 20th century, entail horrific death statistics, these battles *for* history, thankfully, rage only on the pages of academic journals such as *History and Theory* and *Rethinking History*. The defenders of traditional approaches and eloquent champions of postmodern historiography have been engaged in fierce, and often cynical, debates over issues such as defining a proper historical methodology, authority of historical evidence, representation of history, literary nature of history, role of the historian and alike. However tempting as it is to resort to simplifications in discussing positions of historians in this academic/cultural war, I will try to think of them as textual battles waged on diverse literary and philosophical fronts whose purpose is not a triumph of any particular side, but the *process* of textual confrontation and negotiation. Surely, some of the more radical supporters of the postmodern turn in historical thought would jump at the previous sentence as a typical example of a liberal (non-ideological) attempt at compromise by locating the truth somewhere in the middle, which, unmistakably points at our inability today to think of history without being aware of our own position in the contemporary theoretical discourse.

Amongst the issues that deepen the gap between the two opposed views of historiography, the rhetorical nature of historical discourse and/or the problematic relationship of the historical writing and the novel as a literary genre have been particularly prominent. In the mid 1970s and early 1980s Dominick LaCapra and Hayden White initiated the process of theorizing the fruitful, although rarely officially acknowledged, exchange between literature/literary criticism and history/historiography.

LaCapra pointed at “the narrowly documentary or positivistic uses of literary texts” (1996, 124) by those mid 20th century historians who focus only on the content of the novel as a source of useful knowledge of the relevant social contexts. He challenged this restricted form of exchange because it made literature redundant, using it as a source of information that can be gained from other documentary sources (*ibid.*, 126). The title of Hayden White’s book from 1987, *The Content of the Form*, playfully indicates the inadequacy of a simplistic approach to the form of literary/historical writing which reduces the form to the status of an empty container into which a meaningful content is subsequently implanted. Accordingly, White claims that the use of a particular narrative form “entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications” (White 1990b, ix). Thus, realism, as the chosen mode of writing for majority of traditional historians, is stripped of its aura of neutrality and objectivity, which opens the theoretical space for the discussion of various forms of representation and the

particular cultural and political content inscribed in these forms. This is precisely where history revisits the novel, this time not as a source of ready-made contexts but as an abundance of forms, each of which subversively rewrites the content of history.

Echoes of these debates, as well as instances of far more flagrant usurpation of the border between literature and history, can be discerned in Carolyn Steedman's historical account of love and labour in the English industrial age, *Master and Servant* (2007). The aim of this paper is to discuss the ways in which Steedman's deconstructionist writing redefines the boundaries of historical writing and historical imagination. However, since Steedman is a Professor of History at the University of Warwick, her professional context undeniably interferes with her theoretical position and vice versa, which is why some intersections of a traditional academic and a postmodern approach to history will be considered first.

2. A brief survey of the warring sides

As early as 1973, Hayden White, in his *Metahistory*, addressed the issue of realistic representation in historical writing by defining the historical work as "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*" (White 1993, 2).

In doing so, White foregrounds the linguistic aspect of the historical work, thus making its representational strategies the focus of his discussion and not just a vehicle for telling the story. Furthermore, the use of the verb 'purport' adds a dose of uncertainty and incompleteness in the relation between the historical work and the historical past whereby the subversive potential of language is inscribed in the very definition of historical writing. Explanation/interpretation is defined as inseparable from representation, which challenges an understanding of interpretation as an independent activity that is subsequent to fact-based description of historical events (White 1990a, 125–8). In other words, a description of historical events, which includes a selection of facts and their arrangement into a meaningful whole, also prefigures answers to questions of why and how things happened in the past, contrary to the traditional view of historical description as a neutral description based on the meaning found in the historical facts. Finally, White claims that this poetizing of historical facts is not an alternative to the realistic representation (*ibid.*, 126). Quite the contrary, it is an integral part of all cultural practices as it is impossible to discipline the language of our thought processes by separating its literal use from figurative use. These concerns have remained central to his conception of the historical narrative defined in his subsequent work as an extended metaphor which does not *image* historical events but invokes familiar patterns within which our culture thinks of such events (*ibid.*, 91). In a more recent appropriation of this idea, Keith Jenkins points out that the very act of committing the historical past to writing, turning it into a conference paper, film or performance entails *troping* that reality into something it never was. As such, it is a linguistic, figurative, *imaginative* (it is an act of imagination and *not* downright fabrication) undertaking as much as it is an empirical one (Jenkins and Munslow 2004, 3).

Reactions and counter-reactions to these ideas over the past 30–40 years constitute a new history of history that is constantly being rewritten and I will briefly look into some of them. One of the prominent traditionalists among historians, Geoffrey Elton, concedes that historical truth can never be recovered in full and beyond all doubt, but claims, nevertheless, that uncertainties surrounding it arise from the deficiencies of the evidence rather than from what Hayden White and his followers attribute to the process of imaginative transformation of events in the organizing

mind of the historian. Even though in his writing Elton problematizes the mythic nature of many historical narratives, such as that of the British Empire, with a critical awareness of the impossibility of dismantling one myth without actually replacing it with another, there is still a myth that cannot be challenged. Namely, by asserting that historians are not bound by any human or divine authority (Elton 1998, 176-9), he places the historians outside of human community and history although they are deeply enmeshed into various human networks.

Another 'traditionalist,' Keith Windschuttle, finds the postmodernists' preference of plurality hypocritical since "they are happy to legitimise a multiplicity of voices as long as they all belong to leftist groups of which they approve" (2002, 275). More important than the usual anti-postmodernist agenda of his writing is his genuine anxiety over a dramatic decline of interest in traditional history at the university level in English speaking countries. Loss of students to the alluring cultural studies is not only symbolically mourned but mentioned in the context of sincere concern for professorial tenures and much dreaded early retirements of those unable to keep up with changes in the study of history (ibid., 271-2). All of this suggests that so-called 'cultural wars' are not mere skirmishes over terminology but developments that affect some previously protected categories such as integrity of historians and historical truth as well as existential issues of those 'doing' history.

Similarly, in what appears to be a balanced view of conflicting approaches to historiography, Lloyd S. Kramer provocatively claims that "[h]istory departments will never advertise for 'carnavalesque historians' with poetic 'historical imaginations'" (1989, 121), which raises the issue of the practical applicability of the postmodern approach in the classroom.

In an interesting and lucid analysis of postmodern fallacies Arthur Marwick draws attention to their highly imprecise use of language. Hence terms such as 'discourse analysis', 'deconstruction', and 'historical narrative' cover a range of meanings and constitute tools for analyzing virtually all cultural products, which results in erudite but essentially ambiguous historical writing. Further on, self-awareness in a historian is, in Marwick's view, an ability to *control* his/her metaphors, rather than the other way round (1995, 6). For the sake of precision, Marwick is eager to appropriately name some postmodern practices so he comes up with the distinction between metaphysical (postmodern) and historical approach to historical study. The label of the 'metaphysical', according to Marwick, allies the postmodernists with the epochalist 19th century philosophy which essentially viewed the world and man in terms of a preset overarching theory. Practitioners of the historical approach, on the other hand, remain humbly convinced that, instead of fitting everything into an obscure theoretical discourse, they should simply consult specialists of the fields with which they are not fully acquainted in order to produce valid interpretations. However, once named, postmodern/metaphysical obsession with the workings of language fails to stabilize the contested notion because it irresistibly evokes other uses of the word metaphysical in similar contexts, such as its use by the renowned 18th century critic Samuel Johnson in reference to John Donne and his followers. Although initially derided as 'men of learning' for whom showing their learning "was their whole endeavour" and who therefore "instead of writing poetry, [...] only wrote verses" (Johnson 2009, 15), the 17th century metaphysical poets have certainly changed the way we think of the poetic language and its ability to challenge various received notions of poetry and selfhood. T.S. Eliot and many others have challenged the meanings attached by Johnson to the "displaced philosophical term" (Bloom 2008, xv) 'metaphysical,' thus making it a sort of palimpsest which both informs and undermines Marwick's use of the term. Rather than exercising self-conscious control over language, Marwick's attempt to name the practices of the postmodern historians seems only to release the gates of language, thus unwittingly entering the domain of the theoretical discourse.

3. Deconstructive historical consciousness of Carolyn Steedman

Amidst the clamour of orthodox and dissenting voices produced in these debates on the nature of history at the turn of the 21st century, it is difficult to discern the contours of historical writing which would duly acknowledge the theoretical unconscious and yet keep faith in history as an urgent need to know the past, at least in one of its many guises. Carolyn Steedman's *Master and Servant*, however, appears to be acutely aware of all the fine as well as those more disconcerting workings of theory without relinquishing the belief in the meaning of the past. This approach to history, as will be argued further on, corresponds to what is broadly defined by Alun Munslow and Keith Jenkins as deconstructionist historical writing.

The British historiographers Jenkins and Munslow discuss 'the nature of history today' by distinguishing between three basic historical genres: reconstructionist, constructionist and deconstructionist. To these they add the position of endism, as a challenge to the very idea of history, and acknowledge the porousness of the newly installed genre borders.¹ Eschewing the limitations of the subject matter, political agenda or particular theoretical framework in the organization of their readings, they foreground the view of histories as "aesthetic, figurative, positioned, imaginary artifacts – and especially literary artifacts" (Jenkins and Munslow 2004, 5). The historians' choice of a particular genre reflects their attitude "towards empiricism, how they perceive the nature and status of facts and their description, how they deploy the explanatory strategies of emplotment, tropology and ideology, and how they view language as the vehicle for their thinking" (ibid.).

Based on these parameters, reconstructionist historians are distinguished by their endorsement of empiricism as a safe path towards the true knowledge of the past, i.e. the accurate narrative of the individual events in the past, while constructionists believe that an appropriate social theory (such as race, gender, imperialism and nationalism), rather than a scrupulous source analysis, is a way of getting at the true story of the past. Although the methodologies differ, both approaches/genres are characterized by their belief in language as a reliable and neutral tool at the disposal of historians.

Deconstructionists, on the other hand, are influenced by the poststructuralist interventions in the study of history, in particular the linguistic turn, which is why they do not believe in the possibility of dis/re/covering an original meaning of the past. Accordingly, they emphasize the creative role of the historian as an author who "dispens[es] with linear narratives in favour of multi-voiced, multi-perspectival, multi-levelled, fragmented arrangements" that provide new ways of 'representing and figuring' the past (Jenkins and Munslow 2004, 116).

Many of these deconstructionist methods² may be recognized in Steedman's exploration of the ways of love and labour of domestic servants in the English industrial age in West Riding, Yorkshire, in

- 1 This explains why it is possible for some authors, including Steedman, to flirt with two genres at the same time, e.g. with deconstructionist and endist. However, as Jenkins and Munslow claim, it is very unlikely for an author to combine ideologically disparate genres, such as reconstructionist and endist.
- 2 Apart from taking obvious pleasure in her authorial role, which allows her to explore the possibilities of subjectivity as an indispensable part of historical methodology, Steedman uses other methods recognized as deconstructionist by Jenkins and Munslow. These methods clearly challenge the epistemological principle of empiricism according to which the content (of the past) has primacy over the form (representation of the past), which is why her hybrid, multi-layered, repetitive narrative form is constantly foregrounded. Likewise, Steedman does not invoke pre-existence of historical meaning in the events and people themselves, but points at the artifice inherent to the reading and emplotting of an already historicised past. This is how she identifies the places where her documentary and fictional historical materials contradict themselves and provide space for her own version of the past.

the period between 1780–1810. The title of her historical narrative, *Master and Servant*, clearly indicates intertextual presence of popular 18th century novels and conduct books, the most famous of which is Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, whereas her writing is positioned at the intersection of meticulous archival research and the disturbing silence of some of her protagonists. Starting out with what seems to be very little – an obscure 18th century preacher, John Murgatroyd, his domestic servant, Phoebe Beatson and George Thorp, Phoebe's lover and the father of her child who refuses to marry her – Steedman is faced with tenuous historical evidence. Her research is placed within the strictures of Murgatroyd's prolific but fairly unimpressive personal writings, Phoebe's textual absence, which is accounted for by her illiteracy, as well as the stubborn silence of George Thorp.

In order to find alternative entrances into this segment of the past, Steedman tries to *read* their writings and their silences, as well as their failure to act in accordance with our preconceived notions of 18th century clergymen, female servants and their lovers. Here are the 'historical facts' that need to be emplotted: Phoebe, aged 38, gets pregnant by George Thorp while working in the household of a widowed clergyman, John Murgatroyd. Against all the logic of foreseeable patterns of behaviour of 18th century servants and clergymen, George Thorp refuses to marry her and make 'an honest woman of her' although he is summoned by the local authorities to own the child and pay for it and urged by Reverend Murgatroyd to marry Phoebe. Furthermore, Murgatroyd does not dismiss Phoebe from service but allows her to stay in his house and have her illegitimate child whom he baptizes, accepts as a part of his family and endows with 300£ upon his death.

The story of a genuine affection, largely that of an elderly clergyman for his servant's illegitimate daughter, is intertwined with the story of domestic servants as unacknowledged progenitors of the English working class. Prompted by her reading of Murgatroyd's diaries, which give meaning and texture to Phoebe's otherwise unrecorded life, as well as the disturbing absence of domestic servants from E.P. Thompson's acclaimed historical narrative, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Steedman pursues her research of (unusual) love and (unacknowledged/unwritten) labour.

The diaries, namely, provide a valuable insight into Phoebe's constant engagement in the so-called out-working system. Apart from receiving regular payment for her domestic work, Phoebe was also hired by the local agent as a domestic worsted spinner, which means that she used her labour to transform wool into yarn, thus producing a commodity for sale. She was a part of a large out-working network, along with many other women in that region, as well as engaged in domestic service which was "the largest single occupation for women" (Steedman 2007, 21) at the time. Murgatroyd recorded the details of her work and payment arrangements, which casts a fairly different light on the employment of servants and their role in the making of the working class.

Love and labour, therefore, become two aporias that significantly complicate our understanding of larger cultural patterns of 18th century life in England. Although some aspects of Steedman's research are empirical, strictly archival and, therefore, in line with her professional requirements, her historical method is largely based on her *reading* of primary historical sources *against* other historical interpretations, such as Thompson's *Making*, written in Yorkshire and coloured by West Riding sources (Thompson 1964, 13), and several works of philosophy and literature, most important of which is Emily Brontë's Yorkshire-based novel, *Wuthering Heights*, while openly positioning herself within her reinterpretations.

In line with Jenkins' remark that all kinds of historicizing are "self-referencing, problematic expressions of our various interests, an ideological discourse *per se* without any real access to the past as such, unable to engage in a dialogue with anything other than an 'always already' historiographically

constituted historicized past” (2000, 151), Steedman carefully orchestrates or, more precisely, manipulates several textual threads, thus prefiguring a new interpretation of love and labour in 18th century West Yorkshire. Nevertheless, she manages to escape the echo of endism traceable in Jenkins’ writing by neutralizing the severely ironic edge of postmodern theorizing with a genuine passion for storytelling.

She starts by tracing the absence of domestic servants from Thompson’s account of the English working class to Adam Smith’s characterization of domestic service as non-work in 1770s, which was later adopted by Karl Marx as well. Apart from this obvious example of intertextual and ideological borrowing, Hayden White points out that, for all the praise the book received due to its rejection of methodology and abstract theory, its author is still not immune to the allure of narrative and tropological patterns. In his Preface, Thompson envisions his narrative as “a biography of the English working class from its adolescence until its early manhood” (Thompson 1964, 11), whereby he tropes his history into a metaphor of biography, which is in itself a problematic and subversive genre, while adolescence and manhood are culturally determined metaphors (White 1990a, 16).

In the manner of a genuine deconstructionist, Steedman positions her authorial self within her historical narrative and introduces Nelly Dean, a servant and narrator from Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, as a much needed multi-faceted presence and a source of historical knowledge. In doing so, she clearly defies the rules of empirical epistemology of reconstructionists as well as a plausible social theory of constructionists, while, unlike the endists, she admits the possibility and meaningfulness of historical inquiry. The narrative and ideological scaffolding beneath her historical method seems to be fully uncovered, allowing us to follow closely as she construes her narrative and offers a counter myth. Reconstructionists and constructionists would most probably find this historical method exceedingly relativistic, not to say unethical, and Jenkins’ mischievous remark that “the past is utterly promiscuous: [and] will go with anybody – Marxists, Whigs, racists, feminists, phenomenologists, structuralists, empiricists, Eltonists, Foucauldians, ‘postists’” (2000, 153) certainly does not help in achieving any kind of reconciliation between the genres.

4. Nelly Dean at the intersection of history and literature

Nelly Dean, as she is constructed and narrated within the bounds of Steedman’s historical imagination, sprang out of a number of contradictions surrounding the story of Reverend John Murgatroyd, Phoebe Beatson and George Thorp.

Firstly, the aporetic function of Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights* as a character who has drawn far more modern critical attention than the novel’s main characters, Catherine and Heathcliff, makes her a source of new readings. Her problematic status is nowhere more apparent than in film adaptations of the novel, none of which dares to deal with Nelly in a creative manner, so she remains virtually unfilmable. Similarly, all the three protagonists from 18th century industrial Yorkshire resist interpretation and refuse to fit into standard patterns of their class behaviour.

Secondly, Nelly and Phoebe have a lot in common. They are both domestic servants living in the same region of England, not far removed from each other in terms of time, who see their work as a particular kind of job they do for money. Phoebe is a servant and an out-worker and Nelly oscillates between *Wuthering Heights* and *Trushcross Grange*, depending on the work availability. Still, as Steedman observes, 18th century poor working women remain “as silent as the grave” (2007, 10) to all the probing of historians, which rings false in conjunction with the ‘clamorous voice’ of the two most famous domestic servants and storytellers in English literature – Nelly Dean and Pamela.

Thirdly, appointing Nelly Dean as the “historian of English industrial modernity” (Steedman 2007, 28), the author places her at the very intersection of fiction and literature, which allows her to inhabit many different roles. Her nodal position in this book draws attention to the literary nature of social and historical knowledge in the story of love and labour in 18th century Yorkshire. Absences and silences in history are particularly susceptible to the influence of literary patterns. Therefore, we read Phoebe Beatson’s life as a fortunate escape from the familiar melodrama of a poor woman seduced and then abandoned to the unspeakable misery of prostitution in the streets of urban centres. The power of this representation of female domestic servants that pervaded religious tracts, social realist novels and conduct books proved to be the crucial reason for rejecting William Pitt’s proposal for a tax on the employment of maidservants in 1785. Although the government needed money for various political and military campaigns, parliamentarians protested that enforcement of tax would make young women’s employment an unbearable financial burden for their employers, which would in turn result in their dismissal and inevitable descent into prostitution (Steedman 2007, 52). This is how literary romance or sentimental plot is transformed into legal fiction.

On the one hand, with his ‘untypical behaviour’ John Murgatroyd rewrote the plot of domestic romance, thus creating the historical and literary space where Phoebe and Nelly can meet. On the other, Murgatroyd’s knowledge of various kinds of love is clearly derived from books, such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, London journals, Thomas Nettleton’s *Treatise on Virtue and Happiness*, the ‘archetypal text of the West Riding Enlightenment’ (Steedman 2007, 186) and Henry Fielding’s novel *Tom Jones*, which indicates that the subversive influence of literary patterns works in mysterious ways.

Acknowledging a fictional character as a sort of alter ego without actually relinquishing the position of a professional historian, Carolyn Steedman curiously resembles her historical subjects, Nelly Dean and Phoebe Beatson, in the sense that she moves back and forth between her disparate self-imposed roles. In doing so, she invokes another similarity, this time with the famous statement of Hayden White that history takes advantage of the supposedly neutral ground it occupies between science and art so that it borrows freely from both discourses without undertaking the formality of swearing allegiance to either of them. However, unlike history in White’s statement, Steedman does not claim neutrality for she does not assume the space between her different roles to be empty. Actually, it is quite the other way around. It teems with hesitation, self-introspection, discourse analysis and, above all, passionate reading of familiar texts in search of crevices that might unfold new interpretations.

Assuming that self-reflexivity of the historical narrative, which implies the application of the analysis of style, genre and narrative structure to the historian’s sources and their written interpretations, is crucial to deconstructive historical consciousness (Munslow 2006, 62), Steedman conveniently ‘meets the requirements’ by writing Nelly Dean into her *history*. Not in the actual *past* because, as she repeats all too often, there was never a real Nelly Dean in the past.

Steedman’s authorial intervention, however, is playfully flaunted at the readers when she marries Nelly to Lockwood (2007, 206) and then examines the social, historical and literary consequences of this marriage. Or when she claims that Nelly is what Phoebe is pregnant with (ibid., 197), or that Nelly’s narrative begins in the very moment of little Eliza’s conception (ibid., 198)!

When it comes to the historical method, Steedman removes epistemological barriers between her primary historical sources (Murgatroyd’s diaries), other historians’ interpretations (Thompson’s history) and Brontë’s novel. With the commitment of a professional historian, she points out the facts, both historical and fictional, which make Phoebe and Nelly part of the shared historical

imagination in which they “may be allowed to at least complicate the other histories we have of this time and place, in which servants must forever be a non-industrial, unradical non-productive footnote” (ibid., 228).

In order to historicise Nelly Dean, Steedman considers her as an event in her narrative, thus echoing Foucault’s thoughts on effective history, which reads an event as an enactment of discontinuity, as opposed to traditional history, which forcefully dissolves an event into an ideal continuity or a natural process (Foucault 1991, 88). Accordingly, Nelly is a usurper of narrative power and a masked ‘other’ who erupts into our historical imagination every time she is recontextualised or reimagined “for a thousand purposes never dreamed of by [her] author” (Steedman 2007, 196). Instead of resorting to a traditional historian’s search for origins and grand theories, or the past “as it actually occurred,” Steedman concurs with Foucault’s (and Nietzsche’s) vision of natural affinity between history and medicine, writes a “history of the present” (Flynn 2005, 45) and *diagnoses Nelly Dean with historical significance* due to her ability to unsettle our reading of both history and fiction.

Likewise, Steedman claims that Anglican God *happened*³ in Murgatroyd’s writing and taught him to love Phoebe’s illegitimate daughter thus signalling discontinuity in history of the same kind that accounts for Nelly’s love for the Earnshaw and Linton children which thrived, and was an integral part of her employment contract (2007, 212), in spite of morbidity that was constantly read into the novel by the critics.

Finally, Steedman’s deconstructionist reading/writing of history problematizes Thompson’s narrative of the making of the English working class as an enclosed text whose borders are not to be assailed, but at least disturbed, by the excluded presence of domestic female servants. If this proves to be too demanding a task for Phoebe, Steedman makes sure that Phoebe can rely on the knowing presence of Nelly Dean whom she has released from the novel enclosed by various reductive critical interpretations, perhaps none more so than the preface provided by the author’s sister, Charlotte Brontë, who, in order to protect her sister from hostile reviews, relocated the novel from political controversy into the “secret recesses of ... emotional life” (Armstrong 1989, 46).

5. Conclusion: What about the future of historical writing?

In my concluding remarks I will try to place Steedman’s history in the context of discussions of the prospects for writing and teaching history in the 21st century. The urgency of these issues proves that history, although controversial enough, is far from obsolete in what appears to be the heyday of advanced information technologies.

Education Secretary of the current Conservative government in Britain, Michael Gove, has appointed a committee, among whose members are Niall Ferguson, “the British historian most closely associated with a rightwing, Eurocentric vision of western ascendancy” (Higgins 2010) and Simon Schama, a historian and author of the mega popular BBC documentary series *A History of Britain*, with the aim of revising and revitalizing history syllabus in schools. However, Michael Gove’s views of British literature (“Our literature is the best in the world – it is every child’s birthright, and we should be proud to teach it in every school.”) and history (“Children are growing up ignorant of one of the most inspiring stories I know – the history of our United Kingdom.”) (Vasagar and Sparrow 2010) seem to resuscitate the spirit of the Victorian Britain and it is uncertain how they will work for 21st century Britain.

3 Interestingly, Thompson uses the same term in his definition of class: “I do not see class as a ‘structure’, nor even as a ‘category’, but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships” (1964, 9).

Fortunately, history resides not just in schools but elsewhere as well. These alternative residences of history, such as the novel, film, internet resources and alike, are far more difficult to control, while their influence is more than considerable. And how is the professional academic history to survive all these challenges of political and moral interventionism, on the one hand, and commercial imperatives, on the other? Joan Scott believes history should be a form of critique by which she means a historian's ability to ask questions about the sources of the values and standards by which he/she makes judgments of the past (2007, 34–5). David Harlan draws the attention to the new history being produced outside the academy and the need to meet that challenge by teaching students to be responsive to all those alternative forms as that is the only way for them “to develop historical imaginations that are morally sustaining and politically relevant” (2007, 121). Harlan even proposes the making of a map that would delineate the domains of different modes of historical representation. This resembles a sort of a peace agreement between historical genres which should ensure non-violation of genre borders, although it remains unclear where exactly in that map he would accommodate Steedman's mixing of genres.

Historians are urged to face up to the challenge, not by burying themselves even deeper into the archives to unearth sources not yet seen, but by harmonizing their presentation of history with other modes of art, such as “a collage, a comic book, a dance, a rap-song cycle, a series of emails sent to everyone online, or a combination of expressive forms we have not yet seen” (Rosenstone 2007, 14). However, Joan Scott wisely remarks that, although history and literature are susceptible to the same kind of analysis, “overly enthusiastic disciplinary borrowing” might not be the best way to approach these two forms of knowledge. Boundaries between them should be constantly problematised and investigated but their complete obliteration should not be a precondition of serious scholarship (1999, 8).

Steedman's version of ‘historying’ is an attempt to respond to the challenges that have besieged history as an academic discipline at the turn of the 21st century. Her historical subjects and methods freely traverse disciplinary borders and she freezes these textual images of a schizophrenic historical consciousness. The result may not always be technically impressive but the images are certainly inviting because they incite our desire to reread and re-imagine history.

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