

**SOPHISTICATED LADIES IN LIFE AND LITERATURE:
Selective Portraits**

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For each one of my major *professional accomplishments* I have to thank *my family*: my husband, to whom this book is inscribed by paraphrasing old American Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet’s celebrated poem title “To My Dear and Loving Husband”. I have been fortunate to find in him the best moral support for a lifetime. Then to our son, Toma Peiu, now a filmmaker, visual artist, educator, scholar, researcher in the US, I will always owe so much more than I can thank him for: from the exciting books of such fascinating contemporary American authors and professors as Katherine Verdery and Anne F. Hyde, (both of whom are fondly discussed later in this book), to his constant involvement in the visual presentation of my books. They say that it is not the cover that makes the book. I just hope my books with covers after Toma’s ideas are at least as interesting as their covers. These covers’ final shapes are signed by Ion Aramă, a gifted young visual artist, who meanwhile has become also a very patient family friend. On the other hand, I also must thank my son for the always inspiring presence of my brave, resourceful daughter-in-law, Luiza Pârnu, a fine daring young filmmaker and successful academic, teaching now in the US, together with her husband; she is one of my main heroines in this volume. Last but not least, I owe Toma’s Grandmother, i.e. my own Mother, this never quenching curiosity about good books. Reading really runs in this family.

If there is any sort of lesson/message to convey now, after reading and writing about all these smart "*sophisticated ladies in life and literature*", I think that the best meaning of *feminism* is above all respectable *hard work* and *genuine talent* for a particular domain of activity, in which someone specializes after numerous years of devoted endeavor. This formula has always spoken volumes and yielded the evident results. Because what actually has put all these ladies on our imaginary map of heroines is what they have *professionally* accomplished, above just some (would-be) ideological small talk. And consequently what makes a good writer/scholar/artist of such a lady is never (just) her being a woman, but her being a *professional*. This must be the *ars poetica*, or the creed of such outstanding people as all these compelling personalities, dead or alive, mentioned in my book – a creed which I myself will always share with them wholeheartedly.

Foreword

My present volume's title has three clues: the first one is a playful allusion to Duke Ellington's international jazz standard; the second one would suggest a wide range of *creative activities* in which all my protagonists here portrayed are involved: not only *literature*, but also filmmaking, anthropology, history – various *walks of imaginative life*; the third one is the *art of the portrait*, stemming from painting, graphics, *visual arts*, of course. But after all, this is how my title comes full circle: the famous jazz tune "Sophisticated Lady" suggests a funny tender portrait, therefore *music* has its own way to portray people, too. Here I am taking my chances with *words*: I know, compared to painting and music, words are ironically the weakest means to actually say something. I could quote from Shakespeare to Faulkner, all the classic lines to discourage any such attempt. Yet all I can do now is just try again.

Here are quite a number of wise ladies whose exceptional *works* are being contemplated now: their *portraits* are all *professional*. Within my title terms beginning with the letter L, *love* would have its own right place. All these authors here presented have been *in love with their professions*, with their jobs of work. In my previous book about American romantic writers¹ I even had a phrase for this: the "*professional romance*". It applies to these lady authors, too. Their works are so significant for us today since they came out of (a sublimated) passion. And it is the fertility of their original lucid *minds* that finally accomplished such intricate works as these we shall discuss in this volume.

Mine here is an eclectic book of essays about ladies who have earned their places in our memory as unmistakable gifted writers of fiction, as poets, as artists, as filmmakers, as actresses, as literary theorists and critics, as thinkers, as scholars, as anthropologists, as university professors, as historians, as researchers, as literary translators. I have kept the *chronological order* in which my essays, academic articles, reviews, prefaces, one interview, were *first published* in various academic reviews, literary

¹ *Romantic Renderings of Selfhood in Classic American Literature*, C.H. Beck, Bucharest, 2017.

magazines, volumes. This is why I have specified such details in footnotes promptly added to each one of the twenty-one sections' titles.

Furthermore it may be interesting to note that most of the feminine literary and cultural personalities here considered – two thirds of them all – are *our contemporaries*, or at least were born *during the 20th century*.

Another noteworthy detail is *their nationality*. There are fifteen feminine personalities of *American literature and culture*: Emily Dickinson (the quintessential American poet); Kate Chopin (the brave novelist and short story writer of the turn of the 19th century American South); Charlotte Perkins Gilman (the audacious feminist thinker and writer); Edith Wharton (the Old New York refined novelist, short story writer, poet, and merciless social satirist); Gertrude Stein (the early 20th century writer, poet, central personality of the Paris colony of the so-called "lost generation" American expats); Flannery O'Connor (an "impossible" writer of the New South, exquisitely sharp-witted, and with no patience with human stupidity and other moral flaws); Eudora Welty (the Southern writer and photographer with a keen eye for the infinite masks of the big lie); Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald (much more than a flapper-muse, a feminine writer of the Jazz Age, to be rediscovered and rescued from the shadow of her much more famous husband); Margaret Mitchell (a tough Southern historical novelist, resilient and thoroughly documented); Toni Morrison (a major African-American writer and scholar, the first one to win the Nobel Prize in Literature); Katherine Verdery (a formidable anthropologist, ethnographer, an American authority in Romanian studies); Anne F. Hyde (an admirable historian, a Pulitzer Prize finalist author, an academic personality with a resourceful literary mind); Therese Anne Fowler (a best-selling historical novelist, so convincing in her charming fictive portrait of old Miss Zelda, remarkable for both her unique talent and tough documentation); Katie Henninger (a successful university professor and restless traveler around the world); Yaa Gyasi (a young historical novelist, able to give life to her fictive characters recovered from old documents and records of an incredible transatlantic past; a fine disciple of Toni Morrison).

Then I have carefully read and analyzed two literary and scholarly personalities from Canada: Alice Munro (a world famous writer, a Nobel Prize winner, a contemporary good follower of classic psychological realism masters); and Linda Hutcheon (the overpowering literary theorist and critic, a decisive personality in *postmodern studies* all over the world; Professor Honoris Causa of the University of Bucharest).

Then I have approached three emblematic English writers from the UK: Anne Brontë (a tough romantic novelist, the third youngest one of the Brontë sisters, for quite a while almost a case of *cancel culture* because of her elder sisters, Charlotte and Emily); Virginia Woolf (the British avant-garde novelist and short story writer, an exceptional thinker, devoted to women's emancipation, a compelling essayist, an elite feminist); Angela Carter (a successful but prematurely lost novelist, fantastic short story writer, prolific essayist of the 20th century final decade).

And then, last but not least, I have paid my tribute to seven contemporary Romanian personalities "*in life and literature*": Ana Blandiana (perhaps the best feminine Romanian poet ever; one of our very few enlightening cultural personalities all through the latest three decades, since the 1989 historical upheaval moment); Rodica Marian (a fine poet and thinker, a distinguished philologist and cultural traveler); Lidia Vianu (a most prolific writer, a poet, too, an exemplary translator of literature, a prominent academic personality of the University of Bucharest); Michaela Mudure (herself a prolific writer, a gifted literary translator, a prestigious academic personality of the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj Napoca); Luiza Pârvu (a young film director/filmmaker, also an academic personality herself, working in the US for the latest decade); Olimpia Melinte (a young successful film actress); Amelia Precup (a young academic personality of the Babeş Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, also a literary translator).

All in all, no less than twenty-seven feminine literary, scholarly, and cultural personalities have been discussed in my present book. They will all provide me now with first rank teaching stuff for my students, as the best sources of inspiration "*in life and literature*".

But first I want to thank them all in my mind: they have taught me a lot and enhanced my responsiveness to various aspects of "*life and literature*". If my "*selective portraits*" here are just *sketches* of these ladies' rich, intricate, and inspiring personalities, I can only hope that a particular good reader of my book may one fine day accomplish this (fortunately inexhaustible) work of research.

1. From Old Western History Back to Old Family and Trade Stories¹

It is a privilege for me to review this book for many reasons. First of all, it represents today's best American research in matters of history, anthropology, mentalities, traditional culture: it is vivid, enlightening, enjoyable. As a book about politicians' cynicism and abuse, invasion of neighbors' territories, utmost violence, gruesome battles and raids, atrocities, massacres, unlimited cruelty – it was first published in the spring of 2022, this fateful year for our entire world peace. As such, it echoes a kind of atmosphere nowadays rendered familiar once again, unfortunately, though in some other parts of the same world. As usual, those who suffer are families of people with no decision power, but with the stamina of good survivors.

Moreover, this volume has the outstanding merit of changing its reader's previous approach of some essential aspects of American history and civilization, such as the essential importance of the *American Indigenous peoples*, and then of their *mixed-descent families*, in both these fields of study; their quest for identity; last but not least, the traps of racist theories. But it also has the merit of (deeply and dramatically) refreshing the reader's understanding of the finest classic American literature, due to this most accurately and brilliantly provided historical context thus recovered from the shadows of the past.

For instance, in my case, William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha remains a fascinating mystery, despite my almost three decades of assiduous research of it. Yet now, after reading *Born of Lakes and Plains: Mixed-Descent Peoples and the Making of the American West* by Anne F. Hyde², I may return to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha from an incomparably better viewpoint. For Yoknapatawpha³ has never been just about the South, whether "Old" or

¹ The basis of this section in my present volume is the book review I wrote for the recently published work of Prof. Anne F. Hyde of Oklahoma University, Pulitzer Prize Finalist. My review is first published by *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai*, Cluj-Napoca, No. 4/2022.

² Professor Anne F. Hyde is a Pulitzer finalist as the author of numerous other impressive volumes studying the "Making of the American West". She teaches history at the University of Oklahoma, USA.

³ Let us remember here that, according to Faulkner himself, in the Chickasaw people's language Yoknapatawpha means "*water-flows-slow-through-flat-land*". In other words now, possibly the kind of *plains* Anne F. Hyde writes about in her book.

"New". It is at least as much about the West, whether "Wild" or "sivilized" – just as Huckleberry Finn would put it, voicing his own rebellious master-maker, Mark Twain.

On the other hand, Anne F. Hyde can tell a love story quite well, up to the rewarding wedding moment, and especially afterwards. As a cool historian, she can plead for the old novelistic plot pattern of the "reasonable" *marriage contract*, in which mind and soul merge ideally, and is persuasive in a manner at once warmhearted, full of feminine insight and irony, not quite beyond compare to that of the classic novelist of manners. After all, the contemporary American historian's message in a nutshell is that love prevails against any legal absurdity.

Marriage has always been a risky alliance. The spider-web-like network of economic and social relationships revealed in this book as yielded by the ancient institution (or rather *survival-strategy*) of *marriage* – allegedly "free-willing" and "under no constraint" – is amazing. All the more so since this book studies particularly *intermarriage*. *Hope, courage, commitment, devotion, resilience* – this is the minimum *moral basis* that the young couple should contribute to the survival contract of complex partnership. Within the *five main families* whose *mixed-descent genealogies* the author has followed up by means of intricate/perverse census documents and archives, ever since the 17th century until (almost) today, this survival partnership has been shared by (one or more) Native American women married to (one or more) White men, coming from France, England, Canada or America. This *moral basis* has been crucial, from one generation to the next. A *family* is supposed to promise its offspring that kind of protection and affection, especially required by survival in such a *tough country and climate*, as those of the Northern American continent (i.e. Canada and the US), as this book demonstrates so convincingly.

The family *business basis*, on the other hand, was originally *fur trade*; then it became *bison hide trade*. Contemplating this *intermarriage trade foundation* may again bridge the gap between the historical past, here rekindled to life, and our own contemporary issues. Because *fur trade* has lost so much of its appeal today, not only since humans have become more seriously concerned about their fellow animals' lives, but also since *global warming* has imposed itself as an issue endangering the lives of "all creatures great and small", humans included. Who wants *fur* anymore today? Yet for centuries on end, *fur* was not only one of the (European) royalties' luxuries, but also generally useful as a shield against the terrible winter frost. It is a question that makes

Then there is also the mysterious "Ikkemotoubbe: a dispossessed American king", in Faulkner's 1945 "Appendix" to *The Sound and the Fury*. He is only mentioned there, within the entire Faulknerian diegesis. Yet he is an essential Indigenous American ghost of allegorical Yoknapatawpha.

the same reader here remember Herman Melville's (pseudo-whaling) masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*. Who needs white-whale sacrifice today, when we can just turn on the light, taking the precious gift of electricity for granted?

In the precocious beginning of the (same) reader's career, always fond of American literature, James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo's *Leatherstocking* diegetic cycle provided an exotic, adventurous challenge of the imagination. Only much later on did the voices of Bumppo, the lonely white scout, and Chingachgook, the tragic Mohican father-figure – talking together as friends about the correspondence and differences between their *mother tongues* and their traditional representations of cosmogony, life and death – acquire their true *elegiac* meanings. The same suggestion of inhuman sacrifice of a *natural and native world for ever lost now* can be found now between the lines of Hyde's dense book. Beyond her huge effort of gathering *facts*, the author proves here a genuine *literary* narrative gift, which can only render her work ever better suited for anyone else's study and rereading. Because Anne F. Hyde does (indirectly) interpret these historical facts, just like a refined *writer*, without pushing the reader to conclusions.

Hyde emphasizes particularly the importance of *languages, translation, chronicles*, a quality which renders her book *self-reflexive*, as it deals with the (d)elusiv e *power of words* all along the much troubled American history. The book actually culminates with the evocation of George Bent, a *mixed-descent* offspring himself, "White and Cheyenne, [. . .] removed from Colorado to Oklahoma" (Hyde 2022, xix) – an early 20th century chronicler of Native American history as partly his own life-experience, but also a possible example of that old ironical phrase "*traduttore – traditore*" (i.e. translator and traitor).

On the other hand, Native American *reservations* still exist in today's US. Hyde's book presents an impressive account of these reservations, ever since their beginnings, sustained by accurate maps and photographs. For many American *mixed-descent families*, as well as for the ever fewer American Indians, these reservations have represented sometimes *shelters*, yet some other times – *prisons*.

Hyde's book consists of twelve chapters, with well-nuanced subchapters. The foreign reader, perhaps acquainted with rather conventional American scholars' approaches of such upheaval moments in American history and civilization as: the Revolutionary War of Independence, the Louisiana Purchase, the Civil War, the Gold Rush, will be surprised by this new viewpoint. Because here such momentous historical changes are recaptured from these *mixed-descent families'* points of view. For those people involved in *fur trade*, and then in *bison-hides trade*, whether living and working on Canadian or (what would eventually become American) territories, such

overpowering events came implacably, challenging their resilience and resources of self-adjustment.

The Prologue, so poetically entitled “Seasons of Marriage and War”, presents the beginnings of *fur pelts trade* on the Northern American continent, even earlier than the 17th century; it sums up the entire book’s plan, therefore is good to revisit after having read the entire book through. Adventurous immigrants from France, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, once crossed the Atlantic, ready for a new life, and likewise ready to share it with daughters of Indigenous people’s chiefs. And yet:

Marriage, central to alliances, did not mean a lifelong commitment to a single person. [. . .] A marriage outside one's clan was a strategic relationship. It strengthened ties to other villages and clans and was essential to meeting clan needs for hunters, warriors, or parents.

(Hyde 2022, 8; my emphasis)

Nevertheless, *White European fur traders*, such as “Henry Hudson and the English traders who followed him to Hudson Bay, teaching them how to survive winter and find fur” (Hyde, 12), came as *intruders* upon a traditional Indigenous *modus vivendi*:

The trade in furs with Europeans unbalanced long-established political relationships between Native nations. [. . .] Intermarriage remained crucial to their efforts to protect power and manage the costs of killing, which had become easy.

(Hyde 2022, 13; my emphasis)

For the sake of their new *mixed-descent families*, those first Indigenous wives were ready to accept double names, for instance Ozhaguscodawayquay (i.e. Green Prairie Woman) became Susan to her English speaking family members. Hyde’s research offers so much more than just these recovered original names: it makes the reader wonder about those women’s *double personalities*, their gift for *foreign languages*, and their *psychological sophistication*.

These are just in a nutshell the most obvious qualities of Anne F. Hyde’s latest book. Even if she may never start a novelist’s career, this volume remains a generous source of inspiration for writers to come. They could be today her students, inspired by her research and lectures.

On the other hand, this book also deserves a Romanian version as soon as possible. A good translation into Romanian could be so much more persuasive and useful than my enthusiastic review.

Works Cited

books

Hyde, Anne F., *Born of Lakes and Plains: Mixed-Descent Peoples and the Making of the American West*, W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 2022