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"Another side of the picture": Analyzing the Outsider's Perspective in Virginia Woolf's *A Passionate Apprentice*

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Abstract

The fact that the diary form includes more genres and mixes the public aspect with the private one has meant that it is considered a "minor" genre compared to the more canonical ones. Over time its alleged lack of rules and its hybrid and elusive nature has led critics to associate the diary with traditional women's literature. Women's diaries are therefore doubly marginal within the literary tradition. This marginality, however, has not prevented the diary from becoming a means of free expression and emancipation of the woman writer. *A Passionate Apprentice* is the collection of Virginia Stephen's youth diaries from which the author's spontaneous decision to write from the margin emerges. It is a space that Virginia herself shapes and allows her to analyze and challenge social hypocrisy and family pretensions. In an extreme rejection of Victorian society and its masculine tradition, Woolf tries not to succumb to the "cogwheels" of patriarchal power by using the diary as the personal space of an outsider. The choice to write from the margin is conscious though painful, but the author's voice becomes more convinced precisely when – in pursuit of her aesthetic quest – Virginia crosses new boundaries and finds her own vision as a professional writer. The first part of the paper – after a brief introduction to the diary genre – focuses on the 1897 diary and Virginia's creation of the fictional character of Miss Jan. The second part focuses on the 1903 diary and the observations of Victorian society and its mechanisms from a marginal perspective that allows Woolf to grasp deeper meanings.

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1. The Diary genre

In *On Diary*, Philippe Lejeune analyzes the diary, a genre little considered for many years and sometimes snobbishly traced back to para literature, therefore marginal compared to more traditional genres. According to Lejeune "A diary is not only a test: it is a behaviour, a way of life, of which the text is merely a trace or by-product. [The diary] is the point where life and literature meet" (Lejeune 2009, 262). As a "hybrid form", it is not possible to trace its boundaries within a single gender. According to Lejeune, the diary occupies an intermediate zone (in between) between two opposite poles (Lejeune 2009, 94) and focuses on a space *between* the monologue and the dialogue. It partly escapes the definition of monologue because the author addresses someone, but it cannot be defined as a dialogue because this someone turns out to be the author himself. By virtue of the fact that the diary includes several genres and mixes the private aspect with the public one, the diary form has always been accused of a lack of rigour and rules, in open contrast with canonical literature. The second part of the collection – *The Diary on Trial* – reports a series of attributes that over time have traditionally been associated with the genre: for Ernest Renan, the diary is dangerous and unhealthy (Renan in Lejeune 2009, 148); In *The Book to Come*, Maurice Blanchot defines the diary as a useless genre that exasperates nothingness, a hybrid whose only value is its insignificance (Blanchot 2003,185). Beatrice Didier writes that the passivity and randomness typical of the diary underline a certain femininity (Didiere in Lejeune 2009, 150). The elusive nature of the diary, the difficulty in placing it in a predetermined category, and the apparent lack of rules led to its association with traditional women's literature. This is because the diary was one of the few literary forms available to women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The type of writing that the diary receives is perceived by critics as too personal or emotional. More men than women wrote diaries until the mid-nineteenth century and, until then, both male and female diaries were public documents. After that period the diaries became more private and were written more frequently by women, increasing

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considerably towards the end of the nineteenth century. Detractors of the diary brand its writing as feminine even though most of the diaries were written by men.

Feminist critics have pointed out that the diary has been an important means of expression for women in many cultural, economic, and ethnic contexts. In *Gender and the Journal*, Cinthia Gannett writes that the term diary, when it was coined, did not have the negative meaning of excessive sentimentality, or femininity that it has for many; on the contrary, *diary* was used as a synonym for *journal* for hundreds of years and referred to a wide range of writings both public and private. Over time, the term *diary*, unlike *journal*, was increasingly approached to women's writing. Gannett points out the imbalance present in the literary tradition, which counts almost exclusively men among the great diarists of history but also points out the fact that those who dictated the canon were exclusively men. Criticism of the diary consists of a chorus of male voices, which almost always evaluate works written by men while female diarists are excluded or not given much attention (Gannett 1992, 111). In *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women*, Judy Simons writes that the reason for the secondary importance attributed to the diary was the awareness – on the part of the purely male critics – that it was a powerful medium, capable of extending the limits of female creativity and able to give the authors the opportunity to treat, without any censorship, topics strictly forbidden elsewhere (Simons 1990, 18). At a time when silence and modesty were generally considered feminine virtues, it was to the diary that women turned to when other means of written expression were precluded for them. For many eighteenth and nineteenth-century women, personal diaries turned into an indirect means of resisting codes of behavior with which they did not feel comfortable, allowing them to release feelings and opinions that had no other outlet.

2. "Poor Miss Jan is bewildered"

Woolf's early diaries were published under the title *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals* edited by Mitchell A. Leaska. What emerges from the diaries is a vivid portrait of

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the life of a teenager and then of a girl from a good family in Victorian society, in the period from 1897 to 1909. The diary is the account of the apprenticeship that the young author undertakes through writing but also the account of the life of a young woman who approaches maturity and adulthood in a life full of pain and loss – among all, those of her beloved mother Julia – and who tries to come to terms with family and social expectations; its pages offer a space free from constraints, which she carves out herself: the space of an outsider, from which she observes the reality in which she lives and creates. The feeling of being an outsider – which accompanied Virginia throughout her life – would later find a more mature expression in *The Three Guineas*, a political pamphlet written in 1937, in which Woolf denounced the connection between the war and the treatment of women and theorised a "Society of Outsiders" made up entirely of women. In *Three Guineas* Virginia urged her readers to embrace and defend their difference – taking advantage of the outsider's perspective – to think with an autonomous and free mind, to generate bright thoughts, inspired by the principles of justice, equality and freedom: "The questions that we have to ask and to answer […] are so important that they may well change the lives of all men and women forever […] Think we must […] let us never cease from thinking--what is this 'civilization' in which we find ourselves?" (Woolf 2020, 949). The assertion of the importance of freedom of thought is central both in *Three Guineas* and in the diary. Keeping a journal was a way young Virginia slowly learned to respect herself as a thinking being endowed with a will of her own, by which she tried to give meaning to her life (DeSalvo 1991, 236). 1897 was the year of her recovery after a nervous breakdown, as well as the year in which her father and doctors had decided that she was not stable enough to receive lessons or go to school. Therefore, she was the only one in the family to keep a diary when in fact she was also the only one of the Stephen siblings who was not taught anything. The diary served young Virginia to defy the judgment of uselessness that had been expressed about her by Leslie Stephen and the doctors, but it also served her to win that place in history, even if history had ordinarily deprived women of a place in its pages and recorded

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only the lives of the "great" men (DeSalvo 1991, 236). On February 3, Virginia writes desperately: "Ida [Milman] has asked us to tea there tomorrow - no way of it" (Woolf 1992, 29). Exasperation due to Victorian rituals that were repeated every day is evident in this passage but also the anguish caused by growing social pressure. The next day Virginia writes her impressions of the visit to the Milmans: "Had a long dreary tea with the Milmans, dances were discussed afterwards, in which Miss Jan did not take much interest" (Woolf 1992, 29). The Miss Jan mentioned in the diary is none other than Virginia herself who very often – only in the diary and letters of the first months of 1897 – speaks of herself in the third person, giving life to a fictitious projection to which she gives the name of Miss Jan. According to Mitchell Leaska, the name derives from "January", the month of Virginia's birth (Woolf 1992, 5). This literary alter ego appears in the first entry of the diary and then continues to appear throughout the year 1897. Always portrayed in a comically vulnerable position, Miss Jan is used by Virginia to express opinions and judgments but also to describe herself in different contexts, almost all of them social. Miss Jan – but especially the writing of the diary – serves Virginia to distance herself from events, to observe them from a more marginal perspective, and to shake off the anguish arising from the social expectations of others. The creation of this character allows Woolf to perform and simultaneously observe her bewilderment and embarrassment from the outside. In February, on the occasion of the visit to Stilman writes: "Poor Miss Jan utterly lost her wits, dropped her umbrella, answered at random, talked nonsense and grew as red as turkey cock. Only rescued from this by S. [Stella] proposing to go away. So, we left, I with the conviction that whatever talent Miss Jan may have, she does not possess the one qualifying her to shine good in society" (Woolf 1992, 67). In this passage, Miss Jan is depicted as a compassion-inspiring, socially clumsy, and disorganized character. Starting from the assumption that the first diaries represent the formation of the Victorian female self – a necessary process for all women who wanted to integrate into society – to discipline herself Virginia had to distance herself from her feelings by attributing certain emotions to Miss Jan (DeSalvo 1991, 112). During 1897 it was much

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easier for Woolf to write "as Miss Jan says" – pouring emotions on her fictional character – than to face the feelings she herself felt. In other words, if there was an emotion particularly difficult to express verbally, that same emotion was transposed to the character Miss Jan, in the diary and – less often – in letters. The perspective of Miss Jan allowed adolescent Virginia to explore thoughts and ideas of a theological nature that if spoken in the home of her father – the agnostic Sir Leslie Stephen – would sound like heresy. In Virginia's diaries, DeSalvo sees the attempt of a young woman to "find her own voice"; an accusation against a society that demanded female silence: "for women as everyone knows are not supposed to have a voice of their own" (DeSalvo 1991, 98). On the first day of February, Virginia writes an entry that makes the power dynamics within the Stephen family clear:

> A terrible idea started that Stella and I should take lodgings at Eastbourne or some such place, where Jack is going next week—Impossible to be alone with those two creatures, yet if I do not go, Stella will not, and Jack particularly wishes her to—The question is, whether Nessa will be allowed to come too—If so, it would be better—but goodness knows how we shall come out of this quandary as Vanessa calls it. […] I have been in a dreadful temper all day long, poor creature—and lead Stella and Vanessa a life—Cannot protest too strongly against going (though I do) or else S will have to give it up, and her poor young man would be miserable—but think of going! If we go, we should start next Monday, and stay away till Saturday. This is a dreadful fix—Poor Miss Jan is bewildered. (Woolf 1992, 27)

The imposition by her father Leslie to act as chaperone to her half-sister Stella and accompany her to Eastbourne fills Woolf with an enormous sense of helplessness, which results in anger and disappointment. Predicting that she would be held responsible for the couple's behaviour, Virginia immediately expresses her bad mood – "A terrible idea" – and realizing that her opinion and her voice would not be taken into account, Virginia remarks her anger – "I have been in a dreadful temper all day long" – then dissociates from herself by adding "poor creatures". When such feelings are called into question, Virginia evokes Miss Jan who helps her dissociate from her own identity. On February 19, after a visit to the Stilman, Virginia again offers empathy to her alter ego: "Poor Miss Jan utterly lost her wits dropped her umbrella, answered at random talked nonsense [...] (Woolf 1992, 39). The episode strengthens Virginia's awareness of her social clumsiness and leads her to admit:

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"[...] whatever talents Miss Jan may have; she does not possess the one qualifying her to shine in good society" (Woolf 1990, 39). The use of "poor Miss Jan" leads Virginia to deny herself the right to feel dejected as an unheard voice, as well as to internalize feelings such as anger that did not suit a Victorian young lady (DeSalvo 1991, 228). Only through the fictitious identity of Miss Jan, Virginia allows herself to express her legitimate feelings of bewilderment in the face of situations she could not control, both as a teenager and as a woman. Lounsberry, on the other hand, believes that Miss Jan's primary function is to gain understanding and attention from others and above all sympathy (Lounsberry 2014, 35). Coinciding with the untimely death of Stella, Miss Jan disappears from the pages of her diary and letters without being mentioned again. The use of this fictitious character during a difficult year like 1897 allowed Virginia to create the basis for her intellectual identity but above all, it was the first and most provocative act of her adolescence, perpetrated however from a socially acceptable perspective (DeSalvo 1991, 237).

3. "A Stoic with a heart"

The social events of London society become the focus of the diary of 1903, with the euphoria and glitter of the ballrooms. The diary of 1903 portrays Virginia's debut in society where – forced by her half-brother George Duckworth – she began to attend the high society of London receptions. George had taken it upon himself to introduce Virginia to society and have her attend countless parties where she felt painfully out of place. The pages of the diary and letters of 1903 are not written by the hand of a teenager but are the result of the work of a young writer – Virginia is twenty-one years old – who begins to have very clear ideas about her life and her inclinations. It is clear to her, above all what she does not want: she does not like to attend parties, does not like to dance, and she cannot immerse herself in a world that seems full of appearances and emptiness. The clash between the eternal natural world and the ephemeral, artificial, and sometimes destructive world of London parties and dances emerges from the pages. The look assumed by young Virginia is that of the outsider

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who, despite being in the middle of a dance, is not dazzled by lights or seduced by music. Although the feeling of being an outsider links the pages of the diary to those of *Three Guineas*, the author's attitude differs greatly over the years. The curiosity and critical interest that animate young Virginia's social observations gave way to the "clear, rational and ironic prose" (Fusini 2021, 283) that distinguishes the political pamphlet in which – with cool logic and biting humour – Virginia tied together women's rights (or, rather, their denial) with patriarchy, Nazism and fascism. The rigid division of the world into public and private "services" (Woolf 2020, 815), associated respectively with the male and female spheres, is also present in the diary. In the 1903 diary, London is constantly compared to the countryside: the city represents culture, male literary tradition, and even (social) death (Lounsberry 2014, 54). The country, on the other hand, is configured as a symbol of nature, femininity, the unconscious, and freedom from constraints. The first entries contain very critical episodes of Victorian social life written from the marginal perspective from which Virginia felt she had to observe the reality in which she was immersed. The young author takes a step back, not only metaphorically – she remains distant and isolated at every party she finds herself attending – and observes the social dynamics in action, at the very moment in which they are revealed, learning to observe in the way a professional writer observes. In *A Sketch of the Past*, autobiographical writing of 1939, Virginia recalls that she attended the social evenings with the detachment of the professional writer, although slightly fascinated by the gossip of society at the height of its performance: "There was a spectator in me who, even while I squirmed and obeyed, remained observant, note taking for some future revision" (Woolf 2018, 11717). While admitting that at times some social rituals fascinate her, in general, Virginia does not understand them or – if she does – cannot take part in them. Very often the bleak perception of the emptiness of the situations she is witnessing becomes acute in her soul, but beyond the sparkling façade made of silk clothes and frivolities underlie deeper dynamics, which deviate from the alleged superficiality of the scene.

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On June 29, Woolf writes a piece entitled *A Dance in Queens Gate*, in which she describes a garden party she witnessed from her bedroom window, a recurring element in Virginia's future production[1]. In this regard, Mancini writes that the urban landscape is observed from inside the house or through a window, a purely feminine perspective: "grazie a [le finestre] si può respirare un refolo d'aria pura e di libertà, assistere non visti allo svolgersi degli eventi che avvengono al di fuori, comunicare con chi sta oltre quelle mura, meditare sulle proprie emozioni e sulla condotta altrui, oppure sognare di poter evadere un giorno dalle oppressive mura domestiche e dalle delimitazioni sociali e morali" (Mancini 2020, 2954). The gaze that sweeps out of the window gives Virginia the opportunity to meditate – in observing it – on a world in which she was asked to be part but which she preferred to observe from the outside, safe in the intimate space of her room:

> About two hours ago, when I went to bed, I heard what I took to be signs of merry making in the mews. A violin squeaked, there was a noise of loud voices & laughter. […] my critical mind when awake enough to think at all about it, decided that the fiddle squeaking &c. was token of a ball – not in our street – but in Queens Gate – the tall row of houses that makes a background to the mews. The music grew so loud, so rhythmic – as the night drew on & the London roar lessened, that I threw up my window, leant out into the cool air, & saw the illuminations which told surely from what house the music came. (Woolf 1992, 164)

The sound of violins, laughter, and chattering attracts Virginia who for a moment feels euphoric, overwhelmed by the urge to dance, stripped of all inhibitions: "The music has begun again - oh dear – the swing & the lilt of that waltz makes me almost feel as though I could jump from my bed & dance it too. [...] you [...] yield to that strange passion which sends you madly whirling around the room – oblivious of everything save that you must keep swaying with the music" (Woolf 1992, 165). The spectacle of the night sky highlights the littleness and transience of those men and women intent on dancing among trampled

[1] In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), returning from a conference in Oxbridge, Virginia looks out a window as she begins to think about what to write on the subject of "women and the novel." In *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (1924), the window becomes a literary medium that Woolf uses to critique Edwardian style. At the window Clarissa Dalloway takes a moment from her party and ponders the tragic death of Septimus Warren Smith, in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

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flowers and crumpled silks: "I am looking into the awful night sky – It is so thick tonight that not a star shows – The same sky stretches round the world, I think – But the music again! Brave little mortals fiddling & dancing beneath it! " (Woolf 1992,165). The outsider's gaze sweeps over the entire scene and compares the natural world with London's ephemeral, artificial receptions. At this point, Virginia notices a large tree silently and quietly silhouetted against the chatter of the party, epitome of the clash between the natural world and the city that – in Virginia's words – sees the former win on the latter: "[...] from my bed I see the leaves of a tree outlined against it. I don't know why it is, but this incongruity – the artificial lights, the music – the talk – & then the quiet tree standing out there, is fantastic & attracts me considerably" (Woolf 1992, 165 -166). The seeming lightheartedness of the scene begins to be cracked by small touches that Virginia scatters throughout the narrative, dissonant notes that alter the apparent serenity of the moment by making the whole scene mournful. The fiddlers appear stout and pale, sitting in the same corner playing – with little conviction – always the same music, looking around with exhausted and disillusioned eyes: "I can no longer dance in spirit - nor I fancy do the fiddlers fiddle with that gaiety with which they started. After all they are not inspired Gods, calling men to a more joyous & passionate existence, a dance which shall last through life & into eternity - they are pale, perhaps stout men, who fiddle thus every night of the week" (Woolf 1992, 166). The scene becomes increasingly bleak and dreamlike as the dance turns into a vision of ghostly (self)destruction and the music takes full control of the dancers: "Nobody is dancing in time to it, now I am sure – or they dance as pale phantoms because so long as the music sounds they must dance – no help for them."(Woolf 1992, 166). In a moment the music regains strength and spares none of those present, sucked into a relentless whirlpool. But something suddenly changes and the sky has a different hue, deathly pale but alive. The dawn breaks in. In the end, only the intervention of the natural world and the triumph of dawn restores order, illuminating the birth of a new day and putting an end to the dance: "The dawn is folding the world in its pure morning kiss of salutation. No lamplight can burn

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in the radiance of that whiteness - no music can sound in the pause of that awful silence. The Dance is over" (Woolf 1992,167).

A Garden Dance describes another party at which Virginia finds herself pushed "into a thick knot of human beings" (Woolf 1992, 170). The room is packed with people shaking hands, introducing themselves, and then heading to the centre of the room: "A small centre [...] in a state of circular motion". The circular movement recalls the whirlpool that swallows up the dancers in *A Dance in Queens Gate*. If the waltz attracts everyone into the whirlpool at the centre of the room, Virginia moves away, crosses the room, and from the window observes the scene with the necessary, cynical detachment: "Here we stopped & looked about us, with the cynical coolness of youth just a little excited, & determined not to show its agitation." (Woolf 1992, 170) Interestingly even more than thirty years later, Virginia uses the term whirlpool several times in *A Sketch of the Past* to describe the exhausting inevitability of the duties demanded by Society: [...] we [Virginia and Vanessa] realized that we had to make a place for ourselves in this bewildering, frustrating whirlpool (Woolf 2018, 11805). The marginal perspective from which she observes the frenzied dance provides bleak details, in portraying the unequal struggle of the smaller against larger forces, a theme Virginia also addresses in *The Death of The Moth*, published posthumously in 1942: "[...] from a small distance the dancers looked painfully like flies struggling in a dish of sticky liquid" (Woolf 1992, 170). The physical space Virginia places between herself and the anonymous crowd of dancers allows her to feel "pleasantly detached, & able to criticize the antics of my companions from a cold distance (Woolf 19942, 170). The spectacle that unfolds before her – despite the frenzy, the music, and the lights – exerts no attraction in the young woman's eyes: “No sight in the world is so ugly and depressing as a room full of people who do not know each other. One concludes at once that they are extraordinarily ugly or extraordinarily dull or extraordinarily badly dressed" (Woolf 1992, 170). Fancy clothes mark a change in "social demeanor"; once worn "I will be ready to talk about the floor, the weather and other frivolities, which I consider trivialities in a nightgown”. It is not surprising then that Woolf

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prefers the authenticity of her nightgown to the artificiality of ball gowns: "A nice dress makes you artificial – ready for lights and music – ready to accept that artificial vision of life that is presented to one in a ballroom – life as seen by electric light and washed down by champagne" (Woolf 1992, 169) Just as in *A Dance in Queens Gate*, Nature and Society meet and the comparison creates an illusory effect: "Once again I noticed that strange fusion of the two lights: the pale light of the sky and the yellow light of the lamps and candles, illuminating together the green leaves and the grass. It creates a curious unreal effect" (Woolf 1992, 171).

The July 15 entry, *Thoughts Upon Social Success*, sees Virginia deeply pondering the mechanisms of social success at work at a ball to which she was invited. First of all, she admits that she does not possess the gift of social success, that she feels alienated from events and therefore more inclined to savour her role as an outsider: "We always seem to be outsiders where everybody else is intimate" (Woolf 1992, 167). In acknowledging that she does not possess any social peculiarities, Virginia reflects on the female gender and admits that there is one thing that consoles her, that unites all the women of the world: "we are equally at home everywhere – (not at all, that is to say) & we are confined to no one set in particular". On such evenings Virginia rarely exchanges a word with anyone, preferring to observe social mechanisms from the outside at the very moment in which they manifest themselves: "All the same I can sit and watch with pure delight those who are adept at the game" (Woolf 1992,170). In *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf recalls one of the few occasions when – during a reception at the Chamberlains', she joined the conversation with a party guest and then regretted it almost immediately: "And then on I plunged, and told him – the words come back – that snobbishness, that money making, deserved imprisonment as well as theft and murder. But I had plunged too deep; the glue stuck to my quivering feet" (Woolf 2018, 11719). Woolf's attitude moves between the euphoria, the excitement of novelty, and the emotional detachment of the writer who – in attending a show – reflects on what words she will then use to best describe it, once at home safe in her private space: "I recall that the good

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friend who is with me still, upheld me; that sense of the spectacle; the dispassionate separate sense that I am seeing what will be useful later; I could even find the words for the scene as I stood there (Woolf 2018, 11719). The artificiality of Victorian upper bourgeois society gives contrasting sensations: if on the one hand, Woolf is dazzled and fascinated by the pure conventionality of the receptions she attends, on the other hand, the sense of unreality that pervades her is acute: "If it was unreal, there was a thrill in that unreality "(Woolf 2018, 11720). The "social gift" does not belong to her, not because it is out of her reach but because she does not want to waste time pursuing it, unlike the girls of her age who instead make it the ultimate goal of their lives. The reflection on young women of her age leads Woolf to call them "social flowers", sleeping during the day and active only when the clock strikes eight o'clock. The bell brings them back to existence, and requires them from the darkness in which they live to finally bloom in the living room as "hyacinths in June". The association with flowers is taken to the extreme when Virginia struggles to recognize them as human beings: "Has she a stalk or a body – is she clothed in silk or gauze or are they flower petals that shine on her?" (Woolf 1992, 168). Despite realizing the total falsity of the Victorian social ideal, Virginia tells herself and her diary to admire these fragments of society "even though I myself take no part in it". The social game requires enormous skills but the fundamental elements are clothes, strictly silk, and perfect ornaments to mask problems and sorrows:

> You must consciously try to carry out in your conduct what is implied by your clothes; they are silken – of the very best make – only to be worn with the greatest care, on occasions such as these. They are meant to please the eyes of others – to make you something more brilliant than you are by day. This seems to me a good ideal. You come to a party meaning to give pleasure; therefore you leave your sorrows & worries at home – for the moment, remember, we are all dressed in silk – without sorrow or bother that is – more than that, you must be prepared to be actively happy: if you talk it must be at least to express pleasure at something; better still if you can, say something amusing: seriousness is just as much out of place here as an old serge skirt. (Woolf 1992, 168)

For two or three hours, therefore, the participants in the game decide to show their "silk façade", without ever digging dangerously deeper, without challenging the sophisticated social mechanisms in action. Efficient mechanisms, as well as cruel and ruthless, designed

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to extinguish any artistic inspiration of young women: "Society in those days was a perfectly competent, perfectly complacent, ruthless machine. A girl had no chance against its fangs. No other desires – say to paint, or to write – could be taken seriously" (Woolf 2018, 11721). One might then think that the men and women who populate these events are only empty shells, wedged between the gears of the Victorian social "machine": "it is easy to conclude that society is hollow—that the men & women who make it are heartless" (Woolf 1992, 169) Actually beyond the surface there is what Virginia calls "another side of the picture". The apparent superficiality of the scene hides the miseries and sorrows of men and women in elegant clothes who courageously try to move forward, and react to social forces of enormous magnitude thanks to the power of laughter: "There is nothing really so desperately difficult, I am sure, as laughter. The whole pressure of the world is to make you take things seriously (Woolf 1992, 169). To achieve social success and survive the masquerade "one wants the courage of a hero". In the eyes of twenty-one-year-old Virginia, not only courage is the fundamental weapon to shine in society, but also a certain amount of nobility of soul: "[...] to be successful I think one must be a Stoic with a heart" (Woolf 1992,169).

4. Conclusions

Despite being accused of inconclusiveness, lack of rigour and rules, and therefore marginalized as a secondary genre with little academic value, the diary has proved to be a powerful means of rediscovery of the self, thanks to which light has been shed on "moments of being" of which otherwise there would be no trace if we relied exclusively on the most traditional genres. A doubly marginal genre as a diary – as intimate practice and as a genre associated with female writing – turns out to be doubly important for the rediscovery of a world hidden from view and on constructions of femininity that very often deviated from the conventional image perpetrated by the literature of the period. In Virginia Woolf's case, the margin itself is consciously chosen as a new perspective – that of the outsider – from

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which to look at the world, in the discovery that words were her most powerful weapon for dealing with reality and social pressures. Behind the shyness and social awkwardness of her youth, there was a constructive force at work, an impulse towards writing and towards a profound analysis of reality and society that found its expression in the pages of the diary, in the awareness that being an outsider, being outside the swirling centre, allowed a vision that those on the inside do not always manage to grasp.

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