

Choosing the Outsider Role

Virginia Woolf's third diary, her 1903 diary, may be the most important of all her thirty-eight diary books. In the crucible of family crisis—her father's slow death—a saving move occurs. The twenty-one-year-old compares London with the country across her 1903 diary: London represents for her culture, the male literary tradition, even (social) death; the country stands for nature, the female, and the unconscious mind.

Wiltshire, the site of their eight-week summer holiday, only accentuates (in Woolf's diary) the male/female, culture/nature rub, for the Stephen family lodges in the shadow of "the great man of the place": near Wilton, Wilton Hall, and the Pembrokes (PA 189). Virginia visits Salisbury Cathedral and, finding it surrounded by its restrictive close, contrasts it with nearby Stonehenge lying open on the Salisbury plain. The 1903 diary offers the first sign of the crucial role the downs and solitary country strolls will play in Woolf's creative life.

As she rejects London social success and chooses the outsider role, Woolf reads (and lauds) James Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson* during her Wiltshire stay. Boswell's *Hebrides Journal* was a three-month "sketchbook," like her own diary-in-progress, and across its pages Boswell and Johnson contrast the country with "great cities," the very theme of her 1903 diary. Boswell, she finds, has visited Wilton Hall as a guest of Lord Pembroke; he is himself an ambiguous "outsider," redefining in his *Journal* the "Great Man" tradition. Boswell's *Journal* introduces Woolf to Samuel Johnson. She offers in her 1903 diary the first glimpse of the uncommon literary critic she will become in her *Common Reader* essays.

An *outsider* is one excluded from a party, an association, or a set—one detached from the activities or concerns of her community. The dictionary even defines an "outsider" as "a contestant given little chance of winning." To be "Outside the Walls," as Woolf titles one of her 1903 diary's essay-entries, is to be

in a space beyond boundary or limit. By choosing the outsider role at this pivotal moment, Woolf chooses to be detached, apart, and divergent. She moves at age twenty-one to the frontier—to unmarked territory she will make her own.

Virginia Woolf's 1903 Diary

"Outside the Walls"

(PA 188)

Nearly four years pass between the 1899 and 1903 journals. Were diaries written but—sadly—lost or destroyed? Or did the diary pulse retreat on return to the city? Whatever transpired, Virginia rediscovers her 1899 diary in 1902, for she writes in its pages "Time disentombs a certain number of things, & among them this sheet of paper" (PA 416). She rereads her Warboys diary and sees its historical worth. "This book in days to come will contain one of the very rare records of Warboys before the fire," she notes.¹ Perhaps this thought fuels the 1903 diary. The new diary resembles the 1899 diary, only amplified and smoothed. While the 1899 diary contains nineteen entries across forty-seven Warboys days, four of them titled pieces, the 1903 journal offers thirty titled essay-entries across a three-month span. Like the 1899 journal, the 1903 diary begins with four (or five) daily entries before finding its periodic rhythm.

However, the 1903 diary differs importantly in both place and structure from the 1899 holiday diary. The 1903 diary begins in late June, and its first ten entries survey London before the family's July 31 departure for an eight-week holiday in Wiltshire. Virginia uses the word "chapter" across this diary, suggesting that she sees the volume as a shaped work, its opening third a London study, followed by eighteen entries that offer a contrasting Wiltshire "country" chapter, and concluding with a return to the city for a short (two-entry) epilogue at September's end.

A portrait that praises a woman, Lady Katherine Thynne, starts the 1903 diary; in fact, this free and self-assured woman provides a blessing on the twenty-one-year-old diarist's work. "An Afternoon With The Pagans," the title Virginia gives this late June entry, offers her first portrait of the English aristocracy. It foreshadows the admiration she will feel for Vita Sackville-West decades later and defines the qualities she will always find attractive in the English upper class. Lady Katherine Thynne, the Countess of Cromer, and her sister, Lady Beatrice Thynne, were the daughters of the fourth Marquis and Marchioness

of Bath. Virginia and Vanessa visit them at St. Albans with Lady Robert Cecil, daughter of the second Earl of Durham, who will soon become Virginia's friend. Woolf depicts all three aristocrats as pagans, and Lady Katherine more particularly as Venus, as a "divine Giantess," and as "a great benevolent goddess" (PA 184, 185). Even before this diary entry, Woolf's equation of Lady Katherine with a pagan goddess can be followed in her letters to Violet Dickinson in the first months of 1903. Her most suggestive reference occurs April 10, 1903, where she links the country to pagan renewal (and to women). "Spring in the country is like a clean bath," Virginia writes to Dickinson. "I get born anew into the bosom of my God once a year—a God half Katie and some rakish old Pagan, like you" (L #76, 1: 73).

In "An Afternoon With The Pagans" Virginia makes clear what she admires in the Countess: "She doesn't think how she looks. . . . Indeed the whole atmosphere of the place was one of careless ease. . . . She held forth as of old; declaiming her impossible theories in the same half laughing half serious way; pouring scorn upon us all" (PA 184, 185). Lady Katherine's "impossible theories" authorize Virginia's own in the entries that follow. "I would be a pagan—if I could," the twenty-one-year-old declares (PA 184). "Good bye' [the Countess] said, in a voice which sounded like a blessing—a half humorous blessing," Virginia writes at entry's end (PA 185). The Countess was in her sixth month of pregnancy during this visit; therefore her blessing may have been felt as a mother's blessing as well.

The other portrait in this opening London "chapter" celebrates another theorizing woman: Virginia's Greek teacher "Miss Case." This undated essay is included among the first ten diary entries and reveals that Virginia now thinks of her diary as a "sketchbook." "Two days ago I had my Greek lesson from Miss Case," the entry begins. "I reflect that it may be my last, after a year & a half's learning from her—so wish, entirely presumptuously I know, to make a rough sketch, which is at any rate done from life" (PA 181–82). Like Lady Katherine Thynne, Janet Case was a woman of "ardent theories & she could expound them fluently. She used three adjectives where I could only lay hands on one," Virginia writes (PA 182). Case took her pupil "quite seriously," and, as a result, Virginia notes, "I was forced to think more than I had done hitherto" (PA 182, 183). In a few years, the Bloomsbury circle will offer similar push. However, the importance at this moment of Janet Case and Lady Katherine Thynne as self-confident woman theorists should not be overlooked.

After receiving the blessing of "pagan goddess" Lady Katherine Thynne, Virginia pens three essay-entries June 29, June 30, and July 1 on the London social

scene—each from an “outsider’s” perspective and each critical of society life. In her June 29 entry, “A Dance In Queens Gate,” she describes a dance as seen and heard from her bedroom window. (This is the most literary of the 1903 entries, and Virginia places it first when later she shapes and binds the diary.) The 1903 diary compares city and country life. Here Virginia contrasts the eternal natural world with the ephemeral, artificial, even destructive social world of the London dance. She takes note of a great glass skylight “under which I suppose the dancers are drinking champagne & devouring quails” and then presents an image of her own role as outsider: “I dont 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” (PA 165–66).

The first half of “A Dance In Queens Gate” captures the lure of the social whirl: “oh dear—the swing & the lilt of that waltz makes me almost feel as though I could jump from my bed & dance it too. . . . [Y]ou . . . yield to that strange passion which sends you madly whirling round the room—oblivious of everything save that you must keep swaying with the music . . . If you stop you are lost” (PA 165). However, as an outsider, she can shift her eyes at will. She looks at the skylight and the tree; she sees the fiddlers as well as the dancers and notes that “these fiddlers dont believe a word of it,” that is, of dreams of “love & freedom & life moving in rhythm & waltz music” (PA 166). However the social dance calls, and “A Dance In Queens Gate” mounts, like Poe’s “Masque of the Red Death,” to a vision of mad and ghastly destruction: “they dance as pale phantoms because so long as the music sounds they *must* dance—no help for them. . . . They are sucked in by the music. And how weary they look—pale men—fainting women—crumpled silks & trampled flowers. They are no longer masters of the dance—it has taken possession of them” (PA 166–67). In the end the natural world, the dawn, triumphs. “No lamplight can burn in the radiance of that whiteness—no music can sound in the pause of that awful silence. The Dance is over,” the entry prophetically ends (PA 167).

“A Garden Dance,” the next day’s essay-entry, describes another musical evening, this one actually attended. In a December 1902 letter to Violet Dickinson, Virginia expressed a more positive view of dance: “Adrian and I waltzed (to a Polka!), and Adrian says he can’t conceive how anyone can be idiotic enough to find amusement in dancing, and I see how they do it but feel all the pretty young Ladies far removed into another sphere—which is so pathetic—and I would give all my profound Greek to dance really well, and so would Adrian give anything he had” (L #62, 1: 63). Six months later, her view changes. In her previous 1899 diary, she imagined a reader for her journal, stating, “it makes me

put on my dress clothes such as they are" (PA 144). In 1903, dress clothes are scorned in favor of the writer's nightgown. "Honestly, I enjoyed my window dance the most," she writes, contrasting the previous night's experience with the current evening's dance at Sir Walter Phillimore's:

To begin with, for this dance one had to be properly dressed—& that is a penance—while last night I could lie with my nightgown open & my hair tumbled over my forehead as it is at this moment. . . . Though I hate putting on my fine clothes, I know that when they are on I shall have invested myself at the same time with a certain social demeanour—I shall be ready to talk about the floor & the weather & other frivolities, which I consider platitudes in my nightgown. A fine dress makes you artificial—ready for lights & music—ready to accept that artificial view of life which is presented to one in a ballroom—life seen by electric light & washed down by champagne. (PA 169–70)

The twenty-one-year-old rejects this ballroom life, her outsider role once more offering other views. She feels "pleasantly detached" at the dinner dance "& able to criticise the antics of my fellows from a cool distance" (PA 170). She is "thoroughly content to lie in an arm chair & watch the Ladies in their light dresses pass and re-pass. . . . It was like some French painting" (PA 171). She aestheticizes the moment, the dance serving as material for art. As in "A Dance In Queens Gate," she observes nature as well as society and contrasts the two. "Again I noticed that strange blending of the two lights—the pale light of the sky & the yellow light of lamps & candles both together illuminating green leaves & grass," and the entry ends with her delighted escape to her home where she can "open my book of astronomy, [and] dream of the stars a little."² The next day's entry, "An Artistic Party," focuses again on dress. Once more she thinks "dress clothes (a rude test of merit!)," and confesses she "could have been well content to take [her] evening's pleasure in observation merely" (PA 176).

These three entries, all critical of London society life, lead to the July 15 essay-entry "Thoughts Upon Social Success." Significantly, when she binds her diary, she places this entry out of chronological order to follow "A Dance In Queens Gate." The essay's spur is that evening's "very typical entertainment," during which she rarely speaks but savors the "outsider" role yet again (PA 167). "We always seem to be outsiders," she acknowledges. "All the same I can sit by & watch with pure delight those who are adepts at the game" (PA 167, 168). She ponders the "social gift" (PA 167). It is not out of reach, she acknowledges; however, once more she resists its cultivation. She imagines most young women her

age as social flowers coming alive only at night. They are flowers, however, not human beings, and she finds “this very beautiful & attractive but always a little puzzling” (PA 168). She protests, perhaps excessively, that she “most honestly admire[s] such scraps of society . . . even though I myself take no part in it”; however, she sees in the social ideal just that—an ideal fundamentally false, for it ignores much of the world:

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. . . . The talk is very swift & skimming: it is not part of the game to go deep: that might be dangerous. All this a moralist might say, is very artificial. . . . [I]t is easy to conclude that society is hollow—that the men & women who make it are heartless. (PA 168, 169)

Here the social critic seeks “another side to the picture” and locates “the courage of a hero” in the masquerade (PA 169). However, the best the twenty-one-year-old can do is find something of Walter Scott’s laconic nobility in society life. To be socially successful, she concludes, “one must be a Stoic with a heart” (PA 169).

In the 1903 diary’s opening London “chapter,” four of the ten essay-entries reject the narrowness and artificiality of society life, finding it ultimately destructive, while two celebrate theorizing women. The London chapter closes with two further striking entries, the first, “The Country In London,” the pivotal entry in the 1903 diary.³ This entry develops in fits and starts, the diarist allowing her mind to associate freely and capture subterranean impressions. “[W]e are getting ready for Salisbury,” Virginia writes, and explains that “getting ready” for her means “I collect books on all conceivable subjects & sew together paper books like this I write in—thick enough to hold all the maxims in the world” (PA 177). Revealingly, she confesses that she actually begins her “country” planning in October—that is, almost immediately on her return each year from the country. And then come seven startling sentences:

It is quite true that I read more during these 8 weeks in the country than in six London months perhaps. Learning seems natural to the country. I think I could go on browsing & munching steadily through all kinds of books as long as I lived at Salisbury say. The London atmosphere is too hot—too fretful. I read—then I lay down the book & say—what right have I, a woman to read all these things that men have done? They would laugh if they saw me. But I am going to forget all that in the country. (PA 178)

These words signal the twenty-one-year-old's conscious turn from the masculine literary tradition associated with the "too fretful" London "atmosphere" toward a more natural, almost bovine or ovine, existence in the country (PA 178). The country seems not only more natural to her than the city but also linked to the unconscious: "I am going to forget all that in the country" (PA 178). Perhaps the country is natural *because* one can be more unconscious there. "I write—with greater ease, at times, than ever in London," she continues, and this leads to an epiphany: the first articulation of her vision of the "common mind": "I think I see for a moment how our minds are all threaded together—how any live mind today is of the very same stuff as Plato's & Euripides. . . . It is this common mind that binds the whole world together; & all the world is mind. . . . I feel as though I had grasped the central meaning of the world" (PA 178–79).

Here stands the writer's worldview (and further literary aesthetic), offered at age twenty-one. She notes that when this vision fades, movement in the "free air" of the country "soothes" her and makes her "sensitive at once" (PA 179). The free air of her diary does the same. London, in contrast, erects obstacles to her vision: "In London undoubtedly there are too many people—all different—. . . & they must all be reconciled to the scheme of the universe before you can let yourself think what that scheme is" (PA 179).

Nevertheless, she remains ambivalent regarding the city. She recognizes its challenges. "Of course, people too, if one read them rightly, might illuminate as much as if not more than books. It is probably best therefore in the long run to live in the midst of men & women—to get the light strong in your eyes as it were—not reflected through cool green leaves as it is in books" (PA 179). However, she ends the entry by again taking the outsider stance and prizing the country's essential role in her creative life: "Nine months surely is enough to spend with ones kind!" (PA 179). "The Country In London" captures a vital moment in Woolf's emergence as a writer. She is not prepared to give up London (and the male literary tradition it represents). She will face its strong light.