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POWER AND PASSIVITY IN VITA SACKVILLE-WEST'S *ALL PASSION SPENT*

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Abstract

This article will analyse some philosophical implications in Vita Sackville-West's novel *All Passion Spent* (1931). Passivity constitutes the *fil rouge* of the novel; this article argues that the novel represents culture as opposed to reality and indicates passivity as an alternative, bothgnoseological and ethical, to culture. The novel anticipates some key aspects of the Foucauldian concept of power-knowledge, though not mirroring it perfectly; by recognising the similarities with Foucault, this article argues that passivity is, in the novel, the only possible strategy of resistance to power. While several previous readings of *All Passion Spent* have dealt with the issue of power, they have focused on the difference in gender roles; I aim to show that the novel represents society as oppressive in itself and for everyone. Finally, I take into account the weaknesses of the resistance strategy suggested in the novel, addressing its elitism and the difficulties of escaping power structures.

Key words

Sackville-West; Modernism; power-knowledge; Foucault; power; passivity; resistance

Introduction

Vita Sackville-West has achieved a solid position in literary history as Virginia Woolf's lover and inspirer of her novel *Orlando*, but her own works have been overshadowed by Woolf's innovative prose and influence in later literary production: unlike her lover, Vita Sackville-West did not achieve the status of classic and there are not many critical works concerning her books. However, during her lifetime, Vita was the most popular of the two writers.¹ *All Passion Spent*, published in 1931 by the Woolfs' Hogarth Press, was one of Vita Sackville-West's best-sellers (Barkway 2010: 242); in fact, her novel *All Passion Spent* (1931) has remained popular in British culture, as suggested by BBC's choice to release a TV adaptation of the book in 1986. As Alichia Lynn Starr Keddy (2019: 33) states, "[i]t has all the elements of the most successful popular fiction with its jaunty tone, brisk pace, and satisfying ending"; the novel balances these characteristics with the re-evaluation of old age and proximity to death as a period of freedom, peace of mind, and honesty to oneself, something to look forward to, and not something dreadful.²

The plot of the novel can be briefly summarised as follows. After the death of Lord Henry Holland, Viceroy of India, his wife, 88-year-old Lady Deborah Slane, a character whose main feature is passivity, moves to a cottage in suburban Hampstead to wait for her death while reflecting on what she has done with her life (i.e., nothing besides what was expected from her). She does so with few interruptions – mostly visits of friends as old as she is –, until she dies, with the consoling persuasion that her great-granddaughter will choose for herself instead of satisfying social expectations.

The fact that almost nothing happens nicely complements the theme of Lady Slane's passivity throughout her life, which I believe is the main focus of the novel. As Glendinning (1995: VIII) states in her introduction to the novel,

[the fact that *All Passion Spent*] seems drawn in pastels [...] is misleading. Vita Sackville-West built into *All Passion Spent* much of her lifelong anger about the way society distorts and inhibits the individual, particularly if that individual is a woman.

I argue that *All Passion Spent* condemns the worldly modelisation of reality as limited on both cognitive and moral grounds; in the process, it delegitimises any action that has significant effects on the world. Therefore passivity, because it is not an action, becomes a paradoxical form of *reaction*, the only acceptable one in the new system of values created by the novel. However, I also aim to show the limits of the model of passive resistance: its availability only in favourable economic and social conditions and its dependence on the same modelisation of reality it should resist.

All Passion Spent has received several feminist readings, that point out the difference in power between men and women represented in the novel. I believe that gender is only one aspect of the representation of power in the novel. Agreeing with other scholars, such as David Medalie (2004: 12) and Alichia Lynn Starr Keddy (2019: 7), about the fact that the innovativeness that the novel lacks in style is fully compensated by its pregnancy in themes,³ I argue that *All Passion Spent* anticipates some aspects of Michel Foucault's modelisation of power.⁴

Reality

The characters in *All Passion Spent* can be split, without too much simplification, into two groups, based on their way of conceiving the world.

The biggest group includes most of the characters; it is implied that it includes most people in the fictional world, regardless of whether we meet them or not in the novel. Their way of approaching reality is through a shared cultural construction of what the world is and how it works; that is, through a shared set of notions including commonsensical knowledge, moral axiology, and behavioural conventions. This set of shared notions is assumed to be "reality": for most characters, the idea that thisgnoseological and axiological system may not be the only possible one never comes to mind. In other words, the novel presents this

cultural construction as a sort of preliminary agreement between the members of a society – in this case, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century English society⁵ – which is a given and is never mentioned during social intercourse; it is presented as a premise to a role-playing game that states what objects exist in the fictional world, what moves the players can do and what goals they should achieve. Everyone agrees to this premise and acts accordingly, ignoring everything left out of the game as if it did not exist. As these rules pervade the entire culture, however, ignorance of what is not contemplated in the premises is not a game of make-believe: the gamers, i.e. the members of society, truly believe that there is no reality outside the categories they possess to describe it. That is not to say that these characters think that they know everything, of course; rather, that these characters assume that the premises upon which society is built are fundamentally true. In other words, new elements can enter to complicate the role-playing game, but *there is* a set of premises that must be accepted for the game to begin, as they establish how the game works; no element contrasting the premises can be acknowledged in the game.

The concept of “frame” developed by sociologist Erving Goffman can perhaps be useful to better present the novel’s understanding of the societal setting that it establishes. Goffman asserts that when one enters a situation

a “definition of the situation” is almost always to be found, but those who are in the situation ordinarily do not create this definition, even though their society often can be said to do so; ordinarily, all they do is to assess correctly what the situation ought to be for them and then act accordingly. True, we personally negotiate aspects of all the arrangements under which we live, but often once these are negotiated, we continue on mechanically as though the matter had always been settled (Goffman 1986: 1–2).

In other words, a “frame” is an interpretation of a certain situation through the lens of a culturally available model. Once recognised, the frame also becomes a set of instructions for the person involved in it and conditions their performance in the world:

what the individual does in serious life, he does in relationship to cultural standards established for the doing and for the social role that is built up out of such doings. Some of these standards are addressed to the maximally approved, some to the maximally disapproved. The associated lore itself draws from the moral traditions of the community as found in folk tales, characters in novels, [...] and other sources of exemplary representation. [...] Life may not be an imitation of art, but ordinary conduct, in a sense, is an imitation of the proprieties, a gesture at the exemplary forms, and the primal realisation of these ideals belongs more to make-believe than to reality. Moreover, what people understand to be the organisation of their experience, they buttress, and perforce, self-fulfillingly. They develop a corpus of cautionary tales, games, riddles, experiments, newsy stories, and other scenarios which elegantly confirm a frame-relevant view of the

workings of the world. (The young especially are caused to dwell on these manufactured clarities, and it comes to pass that they will later have a natural way to figure the scenes around them.) [...] Indeed, in countless ways and ceaselessly, social life takes up and freezes into itself the understandings we have of it (Goffman 1986: 563).

Goffman focuses on the several frames that one can encounter on a regular day (work, ceremonies, accidents, and so on). I argue that *All Passion Spent* presents the idea that one's entire life in a certain society should be understood as happening in the brackets of a structure similar to a frame, although bigger, as it encompasses the whole ensemble of societal notions, norms and expectations.

Let us now return to the novel. The shared sense of "reality" between the majority of the characters mainly consists of an arbitrary (but undoubted) series of assumptions about people's psychology, goals, and desires; it regulates social interactions on every level, from removing one's hat out of respect to international politics. The characters that do not have any sense of outer reality beyond its cultural construction also embrace its prescriptions (values, conventions, recognised goals) unproblematically, as they cannot see anything else; therefore, they fit in society without any issue. For the cultural construction of reality to work properly, its constructedness must be invisible.

A minor group of characters acknowledges that the cultural construction of reality does not account for everything that exists or that can exist; these characters recognise the constructedness of the socially shared sense of reality and believe that it is just *one* possible way of conceiving reality. Their ability to transcend culture is also necessary for us to see, through their gaze, the delusion of the characters trapped in the cultural construction of the world who, by definition, cannot see anything outside of it. This group includes Lady Slane, her Hampstead friends (FitzGeorge, Bucktrout, Gosheron), her great-granddaughter Deborah and, in part, one of her sons and daughters, Edith. Sometimes the gap between reality and its mainstream cultural construction is explicit, as when, remembering her married life, that everyone would consider perfect, Lady Slane thinks, in free indirect discourse: "Reality she had had in plenty, or what with other women passed for reality" (149).⁶ Lady Slane has checked the boxes of what society expected from her, but this does not mean that she has actually lived the most existentially fulfilling experiences possible: she has just fulfilled her societal role. But even when the gap between the cultural construction of reality and the fields of unimagined possible realities is not explicit, it underlies the narration. Characters in this minor group provide different values and existential patterns than the ones culturally prescribed. This habit of problematising shared beliefs makes them somewhat outsiders. It is worth remarking immediately that, though there are two groups, there is only one cultural world-view, and there are some characters that do not fully believe in it; the novel develops on the assumption that there is a reality that transcends this cultural construction, where one can find authenticity and true feelings that the cultural construction of reality has cut out, but there is not really an alternative system of assumptions that stands against the mainstream one.

Though the ability to see cultural constructions of reality from above is not a new concept and underlies entire fields of knowledge (such as cultural anthropology), for lack of a synthetic and neutral way of referring to it I will introduce a made-up term and say that the characters who are able to transcend the cultural construction of reality that they come from can accede a *metaconstructional perspective*. The narrator does not interfere much with the narration; anyway, when they do, they also assume a metaconstructional perspective (e.g.: “So small is the scale upon which *we arrange* [my italics] our values”, 13).

The comparison of the cultural construction of reality with a role-playing game is not as farfetched as it may seem: terminology derived from the semantic fields of game and play appears in the novel. For example, the idea that Lady Slane must take the lead in every decision about her husband’s funeral though having been a passive figure throughout her life, because that is the convention, is summarised in the sentence: “It was like playing a game” (53); about Lady Slane’s conformity to the role of a Viceroy’s life, FitzGeorge comments: “You [...] did your part [...]”(210). Lady Slane herself can detect the dimension of game in social structures (p. 133, stress added):

She [Lady Slane] supposed dutifully that these things were of major importance, since they were clearly the things which kept the world to the move; she supposed that party politics and war and industry, and a high birth-rate (which she had learned to call man-power), and competition and secret diplomacy and suspicion, were all part of a *necessary game*, necessary since the cleverest people she knew made it their business, though to her, *as a game*, unintelligible; she supposed it must be so, though the feeling more frequently seized her of watching figures moving in the delusion of a terrible and ridiculous dream.

Lady Slane is required to believe in this societal game, and she plays her part in society by “dutifully” accepting the norm; but she just “supposes” that these things are important: she does not properly *know*, or *believe*, so. On the contrary, the word used to describe her feeling that the norm is delusional, “seize”, is much stronger: the impression of being in a “ridiculous dream” prevails on her attempt to accept the cultural construction of reality.

As it is easy to imagine, the metaconstructional perspective is presented as better than the mainstream perspective. The reader is supposed to sympathise with it, a task eased by the fact that the protagonist and her friends all share this perspective. Most importantly, the metaconstructional perspective, by including but not being limited to the cultural construction of the world, is inherently superior.

This is true not only from a theoretical point of view but also in the actual competence that the two groups show when they interact with each other: while metaconstructional characters can see right through the mainstream characters’ conventional discourses and acts and can successfully perform ordinariness, the opposite is not true.⁷ Even more than in the character of Lady Slane, this cognitive superiority and social competence shows in the assertions and behaviour of Mr Bucktrout.

Firstly, he makes the most clear-cutting statement that we can find in the novel about the fact that the cultural construction of reality is, indeed, a construction, and not even a particularly good, or comprehensive, one:

At present it feels to me, Lady Slane, that man has founded all his calculations upon a mathematical system fundamentally false. His sums work out right for his own purposes, because he has crammed and constrained his planet into accepting his premises. Judged by other laws, though the answer would remain correct, the premises would appear merely crazy; ingenious enough, but crazy. (121–122).

Bucktrout states what I have attempted to explain with the comparison with a role-playing game. Most people never get out of the cultural construction of reality: they would rather “cram [the] planet” into this construction, that is, deny the evidence that contrasts with it. I will return to this point later in the article.

Bucktrout can also act according to conventions and therefore succeed in society. When both Lady Slane and the reader meet him, he is an old, tranquil man who thinks that “Repose [...] is one of the most important things in life [...]” (98); yet he has been a fierce businessman, though already despising competitiveness: he had

“[...] set a term upon [these principles]; I determined that at sixty-five business properly speaking should know me no more. On my sixty-fifth birthday – or, to put it more correctly, on my sixty-sixth – I woke a free man. For my practice had always been a discipline rather than an inclination.” (123)

After this term, Bucktrout does not usually behave conventionally anymore: for example, he can interrupt a practical conversation to explain his theory about the nigh end of the world, maybe remarking something that, although true, isn't relevant at the moment, as when he points out that “Genoux's shelves could never be truly level, seeing that the whole universe was based upon a curve” (128).⁸ Nonetheless, he can still put up an ordinary face when needed: when Lady Slane's great-granddaughter – assumed to be a conventional character, and that later appears to be a metaconstructional character – shows up, Bucktrout “behave[s] most unexpectedly *as a man of the world*. He made a few remarks about [the weather, spring and flowers]. [...] after the *correct* interval [he] merely rose and took his leave” (280, my italics).

On the other hand, conventional characters neither have any clue of the premises they base their life upon nor are very prompt to get out of conventional patterns when they are not helpful. For example, when Lord Holland dies, the most worldly of his sons and daughters assume that their mother must take the lead about the funeral because that's the convention, even though she has never made a choice in her life. Even when it is obvious that this will not happen, and her son Herbert ends up deciding everything, he is still able to “persuade himself that [his ideas] had originated with his Mother and not with him” (55): as Bucktrout would put it, he has crammed and constrained his planet into accepting his

premises. This pattern reoccurs throughout the book: when Bucktrout, who is Lady Slane's tenant at Hampstead, helps her in every possible way, Lady Slane's daughter Carrie assumes that he is manipulating her for some obscure profit (108), because "agents [a]re such dreadfully grasping people" (104), and no contrasting evidence can change her mind. When FitzGeorge, one of Lady Slane's Hampstead friends and also a friend of her son Kay, leaves her a huge heritage, her other sons assume that Kay must be Lady Slane's and FitzGeorge's son (250), as the idea that FitzGeorge could leave such a treasure to a friend that he hasn't even associated with for that long is too far from conventions to be believed true.

I would like to point out a specific area where the conventional world-view shows its inadequacy: language. As language can be understood to be primarily an attempt to posit a set of conventional signs that refer to reality, it is the perfect area where to find out whether the world's codification of reality is satisfactory. Consistently with its general perspective towards convention, the novel treats language as an untrustworthy artefact, in line with Modernist suspicions towards language: as summarised by Weller,

Alongside the widely held belief that language shapes rather than simply reflects or represents our world, the modern period is also marked by the conviction that the only hope of making contact with reality, be that reality objective or subjective, lies in a vigilant distrust of language, a distrust that can lead either to an attempted renewal of the world or to a commitment to its destruction (Weller 2023: 63).

Weller goes through a series of Modernist texts that mark language as "a screen or veil, wholly unable to map the real" (Weller 2023: 66), tracing the points of contact with various thinkers, starting with de Saussure and his systematic theorisation of the arbitrariness of language and considering Wittgenstein's suggestion that the language available and the understanding of reality are inseparable. As I aim to show, this current of thought finds strict correspondences in *All Passion Spent*.

We find clues of the inadequacy of language to give back an image of reality in Edith's reflections on her incapacity to reduce events into words: "great gouts of meaning and implication invariably ran over and slopped about and were lost [...]" (19).

The issue regards words themselves, not Edith. This becomes clear later in the novel, once Lady Slane has a chance to reflect upon her life as the Vicereine of India and as submitted to conventions. She finds that her experience does not fit into words:

[Other people] would say she had been happy. But what was happiness? Had she been happy? That was a strange, clicking word to have coined [...] to express in two syllables a whole summary of life. Happy. But one was happy at one moment, unhappy two minutes later, and neither for any good reason. [Attempting to apply the concept of happiness to an entire life is] trying to do something impossible, in fact, like compressing the waters of a lake into a tight, hard ball. (167–168)

Lady Slane uses the same comparison with water that was implied in Edith's expression "gouts of meaning"; but this time it is clear that the problem is the haphazardous constructedness of words (Lady Slane thinks that "happy" is a strange word *to have coined*), not people's relative abilities to use them. Lady Slane finds herself unable to access her inner reality through words:

The very words which clothed her thoughts were but another falsification; no word could stand alone, like a column of stone or the trunk of a tree, but must riot instantly into a tropical tangle of associations; the fact, it seemed was as elusive and as luxuriant as the self. Only in a wordless trance did any true apprehension become possible, a wordless trance of sheer feeling, an extra-physical state, in which nothing but the tingling of the finger-tips recalled the existence of the body, and a series of images floated across the mind, unnamed, unrelated to language. That state, she supposed, was the state in which she approached most closely to the self concealed within her, but it was a state having nothing to do with Henry. (175)

The net of word associations creates a "tangle" where each word is connected to other words and none to reality; a net into which one gets trapped, unable to reach the objects beyond the words. It is the same thing that Bucktrout says about man's constraints on the world: the sums work out, but the entire system of premises is inadequate. Reality rests beyond words, and one must set oneself free from words to access it.⁹ Again, *All Passion Spent* works on the premise that an outer reality does exist beyond words, and just needs to be found; culture – words, but also social norms, expected patterns of life, socially recognisable desires and feelings – acts as a limitation to all of the existential and gnoseological possibilities whose existence it does not acknowledge.

This section also discloses a suggestion that we have not encountered yet: the idea that social conventions – in this case, language – do not just cut out some parts of reality, but also create a new sense of "reality" that has nothing to do with *actual* reality. Henry, Lady Slane's husband with whom she was very much in love, does not find any place in a "wordless trance of sheer feelings": words *have built* the reality of Lady Slane's love for Henry in which she has lived until her husband's death.

So, we have a twofold function of language in the cultural construction of the world, that becomes clear in one of the rare statements amenable to the narrator: "Say a thing often enough and it becomes true; by hammering in sufficient stakes of similar pattern they erected a stockade between themselves and the wild dangers of life" (107). Both the function of separating the common sense of reality from "the wild dangers of life" and the function of building a new truth are stated to be inherent to language.

Coercion and hypocrisy

The idea that language is manipulative brings us to the next point that I will attempt to prove: that is, that the novel presents the metaconstructional approach as morally superior to the mainstream approach. Thinking about how economic competitiveness works, Lady Slane realises that

[...] it was chance which had men turn strife into their principle, rather than amity. That the planet might have got on better with stones [as currency, instead of gold] and amity – a simple solution – had apparently never occurred to its inhabitants. (133)

This passage reveals the same relativist perspective that we have encountered so far, as Lady Slane sees the current socio-economic system as just one possible system among the others; but it also includes a judgement about one system (the kind one) being better than the other (the one based on competitiveness). This does imply that, as well as an “actual” reality outside the cultural construction of the world, an “actual” good exists outside the moral axiology of a society. However, though some specific aspects of society (its competitiveness, people’s hypocrisy) are condemned in favour of the opposite values (amity, being true to oneself), most of the “actual” morality can be summarised in the withdrawal from forcing one’s values upon others. Lady Slane can be happy that youth is over, as she finds it to be a tiring age, and yet recall that “when one was young, one enjoyed living dangerously – one desired it – one wasn’t appalled” (99), and think that “one should not wrong the young by circumscribing them with one sole set of notions” (147); in another occasion, she acknowledges that foreign traditions that she finds funny (such as “the wails drawn from a Tibetan thigh-bone”, 76) are not ridicule but simply unfamiliar.

Conversely, the convention is coercive. The very terms used by Bucktrout about the construction of the world are “crammed”, “constrained”: they are not neutral, but convey the idea of violence.

The cultural construction of the world is shared by the collectivity, and, as we have anticipated, it does not have a positive, recognisable alternative in another group of people, even a minority. As Lady Slane’s homonymous great-granddaughter Deborah puts it,

[...] there seems to be a kind of solidarity between Grandfather and Great-aunt Carrie and the people that Grandfather and Great-aunt Carrie approve of. As though cement had been poured over the whole lot. But the people *I* like always seem to be scattered, lonely people – only they recognise each other as soon as they come together.” (286)

So, there is not an alternative system to the cultural construction of the world; there is just the individual trouble about conventions felt by individuals that, occasionally, happen to meet. The cultural construction of the world remains pervasive and not contrasted by any positive set of values: this is what makes it

impossible to escape. The best example of how assumptions based on common sense can be trapping is probably the circumstances of Deborah Slane's engagement to Henry. She does not want to marry him, as doing so would make nothing but a wife out of her and it would crush her dream of becoming a painter; but the assumption that she must want to marry him works automatically:

she had turned upon him the glance of a startled fawn. Instantly interpreting that glance according to his desires, Mr. Holland had clasped her in his arms and kissed her with ardour but with restraint upon the lips.

What was a poor girl to do? Before she well knew what was happening, there was her mother smiling through tears, her father putting his hand on Mr. Holland's shoulder, her sisters asking if they might all be bridesmaids, and Mr. Holland himself standing very upright, very proud, very silent, smiling a little, bowing, and looking at her with an expression that even her inexperience could only define as proprietary. (144)

The assumptions work so quickly, and without any need for Deborah's confirmation, because they have already been written by the generations. Sackville-West's prose conveys the sense of finding oneself trapped in the net of assumptions; in fact, they are not only *predictive* of Deborah's mind about the matter, but *prescriptive*.¹⁰ These assumptions migrate between people as a form of knowledge about how the world works; and as it happens with most forms of knowledge, a large part of its transmission is made possible by language. We have already seen that language is deceptive, as, while other people "would say [Lady Slane] had been happy" in her married life, the construct of happiness does not really make sense once applied to a whole life. Now I would like to point out a passage that highlights how this cultural idea of a happy marriage, besides being inaccurate, works as a form of power upon her:

she was made to feel that in becoming engaged to Mr. Holland she had performed an act of exceeding though joyful virtue, had in fact done that which had always been expected of her; had fulfilled herself, besides giving enormous satisfaction to other people. She found herself suddenly surrounded by a host of assumptions. It was assumed that she trembled for joy in his presence, languished in his absence, [and so on]. Such was the unanimity of these assumptions that she was almost persuaded into believing them true. (155-156)

Assumptions appear to be prescriptive in two ways: on one hand, they (almost) succeed in convincing Deborah to embrace her pre-written script willingly, by changing her perception of herself; on the other hand, they come from expectations that Deborah was supposed to meet, sooner or later. Though what happens to those who do not meet these expectations is not described, it is clear that Deborah's family would not support any other lifestyle, and that this seventeen-year-old girl would find herself either constantly pressured to accomplish her feminine goals or compelled to run away from her family, lacking any (emotional as well as

economical) support. The coincidence of the descriptive side of assumptions with the prescriptive side appears even more clearly when she is gifted bedsheets with an embroidered “monogram, not at first sight decipherable, but which on closer inspection Deborah disentangled into the letters D.H. [standing for Deborah Holland]. After that, she was lost” (157). The monogram functions in a way that is similar to how language works in the novel: while it is supposed to neutrally represent reality, it actually marks the point of non-return, the moment when Deborah understands to be irredeemably trapped.

Foucault

The issue of power in *All Passion Spent* has usually been read in terms of a difference in power between men and women in a patriarchal society.¹¹ Though the element of gender is present in the novel, it does not exhaust it.

Foucault deals with the issue of power throughout his life. Though interested in the commonsensical notion of power, that is, in how societies tend to be split into a dominating group and a submitted group, Foucault thinks of power more as a binding agent of societies that perpetuates itself through discourse:

The term “power” designates relationships between partners (and by that I am not thinking of a zero-sum game but simply, and for the moment staying in the most general terms, of an ensemble of actions which induce others and follow from one another). [...] Which is to say, of course, that something called Power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. [...] power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted “above” society as a supplementary structure [...]. In any case, to live in society is to live in such a way that action upon other actions is possible – and in fact ongoing. A society without power relations can only be an abstraction. (Foucault 1982: 786–791)

In the above quote, Foucault describes power as every action able to condition other people’s actions; once power is intended in this way, it becomes clear that it is everywhere.

Power also precedes interactions, as it shapes the reality in which they take place. In *The Will of Knowledge* (Foucault 1978), Foucault proposes the idea that studies about sexuality from the eighteenth century onward, rather than accessing knowledge to its previously existing, but repressed, reality, have *created* the reality of sexuality through extensive discourses about it. This discourse-generated truth is a means of power because it creates the “nature” of man as a subject of sexuality, therefore producing the subject itself; in a later article, Foucault states this concept in the following terms: “There are two meanings of the word ‘subject’: subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjuggates and makes subject to” (Foucault 1982: 781).

This mechanism makes power and knowledge inseparable. Knowledge, i.e. arbitrary constructions of reality, shapes individuals and actions; that is, it exerts power upon them. Meanwhile, as it is knowledge, it perpetuates itself in a society through discourse, so that subjects shape each other; and, because it is perceived as the truth, its controlling nature is concealed.

If power were never anything but repressive [...] do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault 1980: 119)

We can read the mechanisms at work in *All Passion Spent* as mechanisms of power-knowledge. To be fair, there is not an exact match between the novel's underlying concepts and Foucault. *All Passion Spent* stresses the importance of being "true to oneself"¹², of rediscovering one's authenticity and feelings castrated by society: a concept that does not find any place in Foucault, as he does not think that any reality exists outside discourse/power.¹³ Apart from that, the correspondences are impressive: the novel describes a society that shares some notions about the world as if they were descriptive, but that actually imposes them upon people so that they become "subjects", in both the sense of building their subjectivity according to that shared knowledge and, simultaneously, of becoming subjects of power that act through pre-defined models of subjectivity. Conventional characters accept this state of things as the norm; it is failed attempts at imposing power that make power detectable. Deborah Slane being "almost", but not quite, "persuaded into believing [the assumptions about her feelings] true" is a perfect example of a failed attempt to create a subject of power.

Introducing Foucault is useful not only because it gives us the word "power" to define the mechanisms underlying the novel, or because it allows us to see how the novel anticipated Foucault's concepts by implying them, though it does not describe them. It also allows us to adopt the idea that every action that has effects on other people's actions is a form of power; that is, a limitation upon the self and the field of knowledge and collusion with a coercive set of values.

As Foucault does not believe in either a reality or a morality that precedes power structures, resistance to power is unproblematic. In *All Passion Spent* the issue is a bit more complicated, as reality, authenticity, being "true to oneself" are not just impossible fantasies. Reality exists outside power and any form of power(-knowledge) erases access to a part of it. For a person who can understand this, resisting power through acts that influence other people's lives, i.e. with other power, is not a morally acceptable solution; in fact, not imposing one's world-view upon others, i.e. not exerting power, is the main moral value of the metaconstruc-tional perspective. And yet, once the cultural construction of the world appears to be neither necessary nor morally satisfying, embracing it is impossible.

So, what forms of resistance are possible? "What was a poor girl to do?"

Passivity

Passivity constitutes the topic that connects the two parts of the novel as a unity, but it changes connotation throughout the novel. As Milczarek (2010: 99) puts it, Lady Slane goes through “two kinds of passivity: from that of confinement, stemming from the social constraints on women, to the liberating passivity that allows contemplation and escape from external pressures”.

I argue that passivity also becomes the only possible form of resistance to power.¹⁴

Lady Slane has never wanted to exert power. But, since people are born in a society, they are already involved in a net of relationships that gives them power. This is why, faced with the responsibility of whose lives she should change by leaving them FitzGeorge’s heritage, Lady Slane happens to say: “I never wanted anything, Mr. Bucktrout,” she said, “but stand aside. One of the things, it appears, that the world doesn’t allow!” (256).

Lady Slane finds herself tangled in a net of relationships that compels her to exert power until the Viceroy’s death. Therefore, until then, her best option is to annihilate her protesting self, to not partake in any active power role in society; this is her first, tame kind of passivity, that preludes to the passivity she will embrace after Henry’s death. During the engagement, Deborah “hastily restored the decision[s] into the hands of others. By this method she felt that she might delay the moment when she must definitely and irrevocably become that other person” (145), i.e., the person described by the assumptions that surround her. She keeps this habit for the rest of her married life, never actually becoming “that other person”.

This way of living is as much a form of resistance against society – Lady Slane avoids “becom[ing] that other person” – as much as a form of collusion with power; but again, there is no way of living in a society without interacting with power structures. Lady Slane avoids *exerting* power actively, but she cannot avoid being a *tool* of societal power.

During her marriage, Lady Slane happens to be put in a position where she has to choose over people’s lives, and in these circumstances she finds herself very uneasy. For example, when she has her sixth son, she is asked how he should be named, and she suggests Kay. Soon after, she starts questioning her choice:

she had realised the responsibility of launching the little creature labelled by a name not of his own choosing [...]. Was it fair to call a child Kay? A name, a label, exerted an unseen though continuous pressure. People were said to grow up in accordance with their names. (179)

Besides reinforcing the idea that language is prescriptive, this section openly condemns the legitimacy of exerting power on people. As one can imagine, this involves not only naming children but also begetting them. In fact, when she finds out that it is expected of her to like their helplessness and dependency on her, i.e. her power over children, she regrets having them.

“How amused we shall be [...] when [Herbert] starts writing us letters from school.” Henry had not liked that remark; [...] Henry thought that all real women ought to prefer their children helpless, and to deplore the day when they would begin to grow up. [...]. She had always been aware that the self of her children was as far removed from her as the self of Henry, or, indeed, her own. Shocking, unnatural thoughts had floated into her mind. “If only I had never married ... if only I had never had any children”. (181–182)

This topic reappears later in the novel: “Lady Slane sighed to think that she was responsible, though indirectly, for [the] existence [of her great-granddaughters]. The long, weary serpent of posterity streamed away from her.” (266). Having the main positive character reject one of the most universally acknowledged social values, motherhood, is one of the strongest stances of the novel; but it makes perfect sense when one considers that generating a creature is the foremost way of conditioning their life, by creating it.

On the other hand, when her husband dies, Lady Slane finds herself suddenly free, able to pursue the goal of having as little effect on the world as possible. This time she can embrace passivity fully, instead of just distancing herself from the effects of the actions that she is compelled to do. Lady Slane placidly but firmly objects to her children’s plans for her widowed life, choosing to go live in Hampstead against their will. As DeSalvo (1984: 110) points out,

[i]t is no accident that Lady Slane’s house is located in the boundary between the city and the country, in the borderland which is neither city nor country, within which she can, at long last, make of herself an invincible island.

Hampstead is eligible because it somewhat defeats the categories that culture offers to define spaces. It stands symbolically for what exceeds the cultural construction of reality, and it is the perfect place for Lady Slane to turn her back on this construction; it is the place where she can think and act outside of cultural prescriptions. Furthermore, in the novel Hampstead is indicated as the place where old people go to live their last years; that is, where people retired from their role in society, due to their advanced age, go as a first step towards leaving the human consortium for good. By moving to Hampstead, Lady Slane symbolically posits herself outside of that net of relationships that constitutes the space of power. In Hampstead, Lady Slane experiments the realities that are outside of the social definition of reality, both on a psychological level (a “wordless trance of sheer feelings”) and on a relational level (the characters in Hampstead do not act towards each other as the proper members of society do: Bucktrout is a landlord not driven by money, FitzGeorge leaves his heritage to a woman he has no socially recognisable relation with, and so on).

The act of moving to Hampstead is marked by passivity from the very choice of the house. It has a “ripened and detached” atmosphere that Bucktrout tries to “safeguard [...] against disturbance” by not renting it easily. Lady Slane under-

stands and respects this atmosphere; she has chosen the house exactly because its decadence seems to offer the ideal conditions for a passive life:

She wanted to merge with the things that drifted into an empty house, though unlike the spider she would weave no webs. She would be content to stir with the breeze and grow green in the light of sun, and to drift down the passage of years, until death pushed her gently out and shut the door behind her. She wanted nothing but passivity while these outward things worked their will upon her. (92)

Hampstead is not only the place where people cannot make Lady Slane do things; it is also, and foremost, the place where she abdicates her own, undesired, power, allowing things to “[work] their will upon her” instead. This is not a contradiction: Lady Slane does not really care about asserting her will, she cares about not having her range of reality limited by social constructions. Things, that is, reality and the natural cycle, are more than welcome. From the moment Lady Slane starts living in the house, she gives herself entirely to passivity: Part Two of the novel, which marks the beginning of Lady Slane’s life at Hampstead, significantly opens with the word “Sitting” (141).

To summarise, moving to Hampstead means abandoning society and embracing passivity. I believe that the two aspects of the choice are necessary to one another. If we accept the Foucauldian definition of power as anything acting on other people’s actions, and at the same time we admit (as the novel does) that reality exists outside power-knowledge structures, then no alternative cultural construction of the world can be created without reproducing the same, old mechanism of power-knowledge. On one hand, this implies the necessity of abdicating the net of relationships in which power-knowledge is created and perpetuated. But, on the other hand, this also posits passivity as the only form of resistance against power relationships: *because it is ineffective*, that is, because it does not work as an attempt to have effects on the world and to modify the structures of power-knowledge, passivity is the only tool of resistance that does not replicate the mechanisms of power.

Lady Slane passes from being a reluctant tool of power to embracing her freedom from having any effect on the world. But it is a much less radical choice than becoming a painter at seventeen, as Lady Slane is somehow already out of the social tissue, due to her old age. Her lack of function is clear in Carrie’s assumption that her mother is in the “last sad years of her life – for sad they must be, deprived of the one thing she lived for.” From this assumption derives that old age, by making Lady Slane a useless member of society, has put her in a privileged position. She can desert society without any consequence, not even ideological: she finds herself in the position of not needing to explain her reasons. When her children point out that it will seem odd that she goes to live alone while they could take care of her, Lady Slane says: “Lots of old ladies live in retirement at Hampstead. Besides, I have considered the eyes of the world for so long that I think it is time I had a little holiday from them” (66–67). At the end of the novel the reader has it very clear that the second part of the explanation,

thrown there as if it was something to comfort her relatives, is the real reason for her choice; but Lady Slane phrases the issue this way, hiding that her motivations have to do with her dissatisfaction with the cultural foundations of society. She does not want confrontation, nor having it would make sense, as the idea that the cultural construction of reality is unsatisfactory would be incomprehensible, or at the very best crazy, to someone who believes it the only possible reality. So, while it is true that Lady Slane asserts her will over her children's, it should also be noted that she moves in the moment of her life when this choice has the least consequences on the children's lives and reputation and that she phrases her choice in the way that is the least disturbing for their set of convictions.

The same explanation can apply to the woman's refusal to have young people around. She justifies her choice by affirming that young people are tiring, but the words she uses to express her will also point to a different direction: "I want no strenuous young people, who are not content with doing a thing, but must needs know why they do it" (67–68). Lady Slane does not want to give answers: it is possible that she does not want either to confirm a conventional world-view that she doesn't approve of or to convert youth to her own unsociable set of convictions (i.e., to reproduce the structures of power-knowledge by acting over people's lives).

A niche solution

Lady Slane's refusal to attempt to modify young people's world-views is coherent with her ideal of non-interfering passivity, but it also reveals an issue: the fact that she bases her freed life upon the refusal of responsibilities. It would be all well, after all, if it meant only, as Lady Slane's great-granddaughter says, that meta-constructural people must be "scattered, lonely people – only [able to] recognise each other as soon as they come together", and they cannot constitute a society.

But the novel also implies that responsibilities simply fall on someone else, though it tries not to make us take too much notice of that. For example, Lady Slane happily renounces to understand the things that she is not interested in and people like Bucktrout and Gosheron will solve her issues out of kindness, without her asking:

She could tell Mr. Bucktrout without embarrassment that she was unable to distinguish rates from taxes. She could tell Mr. Gosheron that she was unable to distinguish between a volt and an ampère. Neither of them tried to explain. They gave up at once, and simply said, leave it to me. She left it, and knew that her trust would not be misplaced.

Strange, the relief and release that this company brought her! Was it due to the weariness of old age, or to the long-awaited return of childhood, when all decisions and responsibilities might again be left in the hands of others, and one might be free to dream in a world of whose sunshine and benignity one was convinced? (135–136)

The chance of this passage being readable as a power relationship between Lady Slane and the two men is avoided by describing the situation as a “return of childhood”, that is, to a condition of powerlessness. But it is still true that Lady Slane is counting on the useful members of society to solve her problems: she can reject responsibilities because someone else will take them.

However, the biggest contradiction to Lady Slane’s refusal of power is represented by Genoux, Lady Slane’s maid whose life is spent completely at her service, to the point where she is no longer her own being: “Genoux was no intrusion, being as much a part of Lady Slane as her boots or her hot-water bottle, or as the cat John, who sat bunched with incomparable neatness and dignity before the fire” (268).¹⁵ Moreover, Genoux is convinced of the fundamental correctness of mundane values, but she needs to leave them aside for Lady Slane’s sake. She is no less annihilated than Lady Slane as a wife.

The Vicereine had been assigned a personal maid right after her marriage, so Genoux’s condition is mostly not her fault; Genoux was appallingly poor before becoming Lady Slane’s maid, therefore her service to the Vicereine is entirely beneficial to her; and the lady realises Genoux’s annihilation very late in the novel, when it is too late to make it up to her.

These narrative choices serve the purpose of justifying Lady Slane having a maid with the fact that she was oblivious to the oppression she was exerting; at the same time, the existence of the character of Genoux completes the ideological frame of the novel. As I have previously stated, no society can exist without power; and being “useless members of society” (287), as the great-granddaughter Deborah calls outsiders, is a luxury. Bucktrout says that kindness, i.e. acting outside of competition, is “a luxury that only poets can afford, or people advanced in age”; but this is true of any form of detachment from society. Being a poet, being old, or even going to live in Hampstead, where old people retire when they are no longer of use to the world, are all conditions that are not available to everyone. Bucktrout himself has been a fierce businessman till sixty-five to afford his late kindness; Genoux could never afford her freedom.

When at the end of the novel young Deborah goes to visit her great-grandmother, Lady Slane, the latter tells her that “more people are really of the same mind than you would believe. They take a great deal of trouble to conceal it, and only a crisis calls it out” (287). A lot of people who would be happy to embrace the life of the outsider cannot do so; in fact, society itself cannot exist without the game that is so unintelligible to Lady Slane, and the refusal of social structures in a metaconstructional perspective makes it unsuitable to grant people’s survival. Genoux serves as a constant reminder that Lady Slane’s choice, though valid in ideal terms, is also privileged and that Lady Slane is parasitising other people’s work.

When Lady Slane decides to get rid of FitzGeorge’s legacy, therefore depriving her children of it when she dies, it would be incorrect to state that she changes their situation, but rather she prevents their situation from changing; in any case, she refuses it out of spite for responsibilities:

“I don’t want all these valuable things, beautiful though they may be. It would worry me to think that I had upon my mantelpiece a terra-cotta

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Cellini, which Genoux would certainly break, dusting one morning before breakfast.” (258)

But getting rid of FitzGeorge’s heredity does not discontent only her children. Genoux goes in equal, if not worse, despair:

Genoux, however, was struck with horror [as she had hoped] that she might now venture to ask Lady Slane for the charwoman three times a week instead of twice. Hitherto, in the interests of economy, she had not spared herself even when her rheumatism made her stiffer than usual. She had simply doubled her coverings of brown paper, had put on an extra petticoat, and gone about her business hoping for relief. She knew miladi was not rich, and would rather suffer herself than add to miladi’s expenses. (260–261)

While one may say that, as she has prevented her sons’ and daughters’ situation from changing, Lady Slane is preventing Genoux’s situation from changing, Genoux depends economically on Lady Slane, while her children do not anymore. Lady Slane is not abdicating her power on Genoux (she exerts it anyway, though obliviously): she is just forgetting about her well-being and preventing her from having a part in a choice that involves her as well. The widow tries to escape social structures and achieve her freedom; Genoux comes as a reminder that escaping power structures is easier said than done, and that not everyone is in the position of achieving freedom. Passivity, while being an attempt to resist power structures, actually still implies its exertion, however unwilling, indirect, and well-intentioned it may be, as it still works on a principle of privilege; and as soon as the outsiders of the novel do not live alone, but start creating new relationships, the power mechanisms intrinsic to any interpersonal relationships inevitably re-emerge.

The novel does not solve this impasse. Lady Slane dies listening to her great-granddaughter, who acts as a prolongation of her identity and explains that she plans to escape the barriers of society and become the artist that Lady Slane has never been. In other words, Lady Slane’s great-granddaughter does not choose passivity as her way of life. However, as the novel ends before she achieves (or even starts working towards) her goals, the reader can enjoy the vision of her freedom without thinking too much of its practical consequences on the world and its effects in terms of power. The novel ends on a very satisfactory emotional note, but it does not deal with the visible elitism inherent to the possibility of avoiding confrontation with society. Power structures remain substantially untouched.

Conclusions

I have attempted to show that *All Passion Spent* pivots around contraposition between a mainstream cultural construction of the world and an approach that transcends this construction and distances itself from it. I have tried to account

for both the ideal preferability of the latter on a theoretical basis and the actual inescapability of the former. My reading of the novel, by connecting to Foucault's concept of power-knowledge, presents passivity as the only coherent, but still elitist, way of escaping social structures. Foucault considers resistance as a part of power, as it tries to reform the power-knowledge structures; *All Passion Spent* proposes a paradoxical form of resistance, passivity, that, by withdrawing from modifying society, and therefore by being silent and useless, is the only coherent one; the novel does not solve this paradox, but it ends with passivity still constituting a possibility of relief, though a selfish one, from the responsibility of being part of the social structure.

Notes

- ¹ In fact, the Woolfs owe much of their Hogarth Press's profits to Sackville-West's availability to publish almost exclusively with them (Barkway 2010).
- ² A reading of *All Passion Spent* in the perspective of age studies is in Renk (2016).
- ³ Both Medalie and Keddy refer to a feminist tradition that takes into account gender issues in modernist works with traditional prose, therefore dismissing the primacy of style.
- ⁴ I have first worked on this novel for my bachelor thesis. While most of the research and the hermeneutic tools that I present in this article are original to it, the core idea stayed the same. I would like to thank Carmen Dell'Aversano, my advisor at the time, for the immense impact that her help on that occasion has had on the present project. I would also like to thank fellow researcher and friend Giulia Bigongiari for her help in revising this article.
- ⁵ In actuality, the turn of the century notoriously marked significant changes in English (and Western) society and culture; however, the novel does not engage with such changes, notwithstanding the fact that there are a couple of references to modern concepts. A notable example of this refusal to seriously engage with cultural changes is contextual to the occurrence of the word "feminist" – the word is relatively recent, first attested in 1895 (Caine 1997: xv). Sackville-West's novel could not exist without an understanding of gender imbalance on the author's part: Deborah Slane notices that women love marriages because "marriage – and its consequences – is the only thing that women have to make a potter about in the whole of their lives" and that marriage will revolutionise her own life while leaving her husband's one almost unvaried (159–162). Besides, in the same year as Sackville-West's publication of *All Passion Spent*, a collection of letters by working-class women, *Life as We Have Known It by Co-Operative Working Women*, was published by Hogarth Press with an "Introductory Letter" by Virginia Woolf (Woolf 2008: 146–159) concerning her ability to relate to the gender and class conscience that working-class women were developing from 1913 onward. And yet, while Vita Sackville-West had a gendered conceptualisation of power imbalances available, *All Passion Spent* refuses to adhere to it: the novel states that Lady Slane "was no feminist. She was too wise a woman to indulge in such luxuries as an imagined martyrdom" (164). In the book, said power imbalance is framed otherwise, as I attempt to show in this article. The novel's cultural setting appears to be mostly stable, to the point that Deborah's homonymous great-granddaughter's ability to live out her dreams instead of marrying is completely divorced from any discourse about the opening of new roles for women in society. In fact, young Deborah notices: "there seems to be a kind of solidarity between [conventional people]. But the people *I* like always seem to be

scattered, lonely people” (286). Unconventional characters do not form a new social movement that opposes the old order, but stay scattered. Instead, young Deborah’s freedom is entirely attributed to the protagonist’s refusal of a significant legacy and it is to be understood as Lady Slane’s wish-fulfilment by proxy, in a finale that fuses the two women’s identities and overlooks generational differences. New, disarming notions, although referenced, are not embraced. In this sense, the actual historical evolution of English culture and values can be ignored for the sake of this novel’s analysis: the novel itself keeps its axiological and cultural background artificially stable. This is, however, only true of the novel and not to be intended as a statement on the author, who engages more seriously with societal changes elsewhere. For example, her 1930 novel *The Edwardians* is “riven with critique about the aristocracy – and about the change coming to their post-Victorian world”, to the point that the “uncompromising” character of Viola “decides she must be a Socialist. The young see what the adults do not” (Williams 2016: ix–x).

6 Quotes from the novel and the relative page numbers come from Vita Sackville-West, *All Passion Spent* (London: Virago Press, 1995).

7 Though not using it extensively in this article, I owe the idea that “being ordinary” is a performance to Sacks 1984. Sacks thinks of “an ordinary person [not] as a nonexceptional person on some statistical basis, but as something that is the way somebody constitutes oneself, and, in effect, a job that persons and the people around them may be coordinatively engaged in, to achieve that each of them, together, are ordinary persons”. Sacks clarifies that “being ordinary” is a continuous practice of self-adjustment to other people’s behaviours and expectations; for example, “all you have to do to be an ordinary person in the evening is turn on the TV set. Now, the trick is to see that it is not that it happens that you are doing what lots of ordinary people are doing, but that you know that the way to do ‘having a usual evening,’ for anybody, is to do that” (Sacks 1984: 415). He then proposes the idea that “being ordinary” entails perceiving one’s experiences and attributing them a certain level of importance according to how other people think it’s normal to experience things, and that doing otherwise provokes some level of social outcasting. Sacks also notices that for most people the workload regarding the regulation of experiencing is invisible (“They are seeing the scene in some organisation. And to tell them that they are imagining it [...] is to put them in a position where they could not really come to understand what you are talking about” (Sacks 1984: 421). *All Passion Spent* seems to take a similar stance, as can be seen in some of the excerpts that I quote in this article. See in particular the quote from p. 280, that stresses how ordinariness can be achieved through conscious imitation (behaving like “a man of the world”), and the quote from p. 287, that clarifies that even people who seem inherently ordinary, and who are unable to look at the world without simultaneously interpreting it according to socially shared constructs, actually “take a great deal of trouble to conceal” the fact that they “are really of the same mind” as outcasts, although “only a crisis calls it out”; in other words, they do the job of being ordinary, but this job is invisible to them most of the time.

8 This passage also exemplifies Bucktrout’s metaconstructional perspective on a gnoseological level: Bucktrout points out that the shelves can be straight only if one refuses to take into account that reality exceeds what naked eyes can see; that is, they can be straight in a commonsensical, ordinary approach to reality, but they cannot be actually straight.

9 Metaconstructional characters distance themselves from words as they don’t find them to be satisfactory representations of their own experience. When Lady Slane asks her friend Bucktrout if he is fond of her son Kay, he answers: “I *suppose* you *might* say I was fond” (255, stress added); when Lady Slane says to her grand-daughter Deborah that outsiders “act as a leaven” to society, she answers: “I never know how

- to pronounce that word” (287), because she does not either believe in, or care about, this function of leaven; and so on.
- ¹⁰ Harvey Sacks’s theory about ordinariness (see note 7) would be suitable to discuss this topic. Working on Sacks’s theory, Alessandro Grilli clarifies the function of normality of “providing an ontological foundation of reality that is rooted in intersubjective consistency”, as well as its “descriptive and prescriptive” twofoldness that makes it so that “whatever transcends it [...] cannot be real” (Grilli 2018: 112). I have chosen Foucault as my main hermeneutic tool, as it is the fittest to deal with the issue of power; since the descriptive and prescriptive twofoldness of language is similar to Foucault’s concept of power-knowledge, I have decided to skip the Sacksian analysis. See for instance Medalie (2004: 18); or DeSalvo (1984: 108).
- ¹¹ The expression “true to” is present at both pp. 275–276 (“FitzGeorge had tempted her with this fortune [...] in order that she should find the strength to reject it. He had offered not so much a fortune as a chance to be true to herself”) and p. 286 (“As though [outsiders] were determined at all costs to be true to the things that they think matter”).
- ¹² This point is uncertain. Judith Butler (1999: 123) analyses how Foucault himself oscillates between the two models: “On the one hand, Foucault wants to argue that there is no ‘sex’ in itself which is not produced by complex interactions of discourse and power, and yet [in *Herculine Barbin*] Foucault invokes a trope of prediscursive libidinal multiplicity that effectively presupposes a sexuality ‘before the law’”.
- ¹³ Keddy (2019: 22) uses the somewhat similar concept of Halberstamian “failure” as a tool of resistance to social expectations: “By failing social standards [...] these protagonists carve out their own liveable spaces within oppressive structures”. Keddy, however, sees the failure/resistance only after Lady Slane abandons society, explaining the passivity she shows during her married life as a critic of femininity on Sackville-West’s part, instead of connecting it with the passivity of Lady Slane’s later years; furthermore, because they take into account Halberstam but not Foucault, they read the entire parenthesis of her married life as a proof of wrongness of a specific set of (misogynistic) social expectations and values, rather than as a more radical refusal of every possible societal shape. This is most evident in the fact that Keddy does not really take into account the characters that I call “metaconstructional” who still refuse social structures but who are not women.
- ¹⁴ Though Sackville-West did have a maid named Genoux (Dennison 2015: 207), the fact that the word means “knees” remarks her being more a part of Lady Slane than her own being.

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