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A Muse of One's Own: The Relationship Between Androgyny and Creativity in *Little Women*

Mariacristina Natalia Bertoli

The long-lasting debate about androgyny was stirred up afresh by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* at the beginning of the last century. Yet, this concept has still not been disambiguated, as 20th- and 21st-century critics have interpreted it in manifold and even contradictory ways. This essay seeks to redefine the concept of androgyny in the light of its close connection with creativity. The connection was highlighted by a number of 19th-century authors such as Louisa May Alcott, whose *Little Women* may be interpreted as a *Bildungsroman* in which the concept of androgyny plays a prominent role. By presenting this novel's implicit view of androgyny as grounded in the Transcendentalist *Weltanschauung* and, at the same time, as foreshadowing Woolf's idea of androgyny as the source of creativity, the essay attempts to remove androgyny away from the indeterminacy surrounding it for most of the twentieth century.

Androgyny and Creativity between the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Centuries

In the beginning, there was Plato. In the *Symposium* the Greek philosopher entrusts the playwright Aristophanes with the task of illustrating the origin of love through an etiological tale: the myth of the Androgynous. According to this tale, the original human race was not made up of men and women alone, but included the third sex of the Androgynous, in which the other two coalesced. All human beings were double and complete in themselves and – since in their state was perfection – one day they dared challenge the gods. In consequence, Zeus decided to

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punish their *hubris* by splitting them in two halves: thereafter, each human being thus severed and crippled would be doomed to yearn for his missing half forever, pining for the wholeness he had known in ancestral times (see Plato 22-25).

This narration can be regarded as the starting point of an enduring tradition in Western literature, which – after centuries of neglect and oblivion – went through a resurgence between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries thanks to the interest many authors between Romanticism and Modernism developed in the theme of androgyny. In particular, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote in his *Table Talk*: “The truth is, a great mind must be androgynous” (XIV: 190-191). This statement explicitly pinpoints the androgynous fertilization that characterizes the writer’s mind, from which panoplies of ink worlds and characters spring out of the void of a blank page without the aid of any partner. It is therefore the interplay between inward male and female components that enables the subject to reproduce without any outer assistance: exactly as the Androgynous, its perfection dwells in its completion. The parallel between the mythical figure of the Androgynous and the writer’s mind was later suggested by another nineteenth-century author, James Russell Lowell, who – in his essay “Rousseau and the Sentimentalists” – ascribes sentimental writers’ peculiar creativity to an intrinsically androgynous nature: “If, as some fanciful physiologists have assumed, there be a masculine and a feminine lobe of the brain, it would seem that in men of sentimental turn the masculine half fell in love with and made an idol of the other, obeying and admiring all the pretty whims of this *folle du logis*” (quoted in Stadler 657).

Some sixty years later, one of the leading figures of Modernism, Virginia Woolf, further developed the image of the sexual intercourse between the masculine and the feminine lobes of the writer’s brain, and made it famous. According to Woolf, this intercourse fertilizes the imagination, thus urging the writer to engender literature:

Why do I feel that there are severances and oppositions in the mind, as there are strains from obvious causes on the body?

[. . .] For certainly when I saw the couple get into the taxi-cab the mind felt as if, after being divided, it had come together again in a natural fusion. [. . .] The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two [the female and masculine sides of the mind] live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes places that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all of its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, anymore than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. (Room 95-97)

Woolf wrote *A Room of One's Own* (in 1929) nearly at the same time as she was writing her androgynous novel *Orlando* (in 1928), whose main character goes through a magic-like sex change and can therefore experience the feelings and sensations of both sexes. Such a unique condition enables Orlando to complete the poem "The Oak Tree" after four centuries of compulsive writing and revising – thus, androgyny is once again presented as a source of creativity. The novel was conceived as a mock-biography, for its main character is – contrary to the basic norms of the biography as well as of the realist novel – a fragmented and ambiguous character inspired by Woolf's own friend-lover Vita Sackville-West.¹ With this portrait of Vita, Woolf aimed at giving a life-like description of the multiplicity of each human being's personality, which – in spite of prevailing social norms striving hard to stereotype it – stays elusive and can never be categorized univocally. This conviction is often voiced in the novel by the fictitious persona of the biographer:

How many different people are there not – Heaven help us – all having lodgement at one time or another in the human spirit? Some say two thousand and fifty-two [. . .]. These selves of which we are built up, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own [. . .], so that one will only come if it is raining, another in a room with green curtains, another when Mrs. Jones is not there, another if you can promise a glass of wine – and so on; for everybody can multiply from his own experience the different terms which his different selves have made with him – and some are too wildly ridiculous to be mentioned in print at all. (*Orlando* 293-294)

This passage presents androgyny not only as a state in which "sex is unconscious of itself" (*Room* 92), but as a symbol standing for the condition of being fully human in all of one's own contradictions. The same idea had already been stated in the essay "The New Biography" (1927), in which Woolf asserts that personality is as flimsy and multifaceted as a rainbow:

On the one hand there is truth; on the other there is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into a seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem

¹ In a diary entry dated 5 October 1927, Woolf first hinted at the idea of writing a biography whose main character would be "Vita: only with a change about from one sex to another" (Bell, Vol. 2: 131). Four days later, in a letter to Vita dated 9 October 1927 Woolf referred once again to the still unwritten *Orlando*, and claimed: "It sprung upon me how I could revolutionise biography in a night" (*Letters*, Vol. 3: 429).

is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it. (*Essays* IV: 473)

Some twenty years before Virginia Woolf wrote this essay in England, in Switzerland Carl Gustav Jung had formulated a psychoanalytic theory of the androgynous mind, and their visions of androgyny overlap in spite of the lack of evidence that Woolf had read Jung.² Just as for Woolf uninhibited creativity is the outcome of the interplay between the male and the female parts of an artist's mind, so for Jung the source from which any energy gushes forth is the reconciliation of dichotomous principles, represented by the concepts of *animus* and *anima*. His theory (which is not illustrated in one single essay, but is scattered and piece-meal in his *opera omnia*) is thus summarized by June Singer:

The writings of Jung are filled with examples from myth and custom that point to the importance and value of recognizing the qualities of the two sexes within each person. Far from being seen as pathological, the fullest human potential of men and women, in Jung's view, could be realized only through a process that included the recognition of the contrasexual aspect. [...] Androgyny begins with our conscious recognition of the masculine and feminine potential in every individual and is realized as we develop our capacity to establish harmonious relations between the two aspects within the single individual.³ (23)

² Although Woolf might not have read Jung, around 1919 (as Barbara Fassler points out) the members of the Bloomsbury group were certainly familiar with Edward Carpenter's and Havelock Ellis's theories, which provided them with "a common belief that to be artistic one must have the unique combination of masculine and feminine elements found in hermaphrodites and homosexuals" (250).

³ According to Jung, the cooperation of *animus* and *anima* has engendered an archetype of androgyny which appears in each of us as an innate sense of primordial unity. An analogous idea of the unconscious as the force reconciling dichotomous principles was later developed by Chilean psychoanalyst Ignacio Matte Blanco in *The Unconscious As Infinite Sets* (1975). In this essay Matte Blanco argues that the unconscious is a system governed by a kind of logic that is completely different from the bivalent logic of rational reasoning, which is based on asymmetric relations in which the terms of an opposition are mutually exclusive (what is high cannot be low, and so forth). Rather, the unconscious follows a symmetrical logic of its own in which the converse of any relation is identical with the relation itself. The example whereby Matte Blanco explains symmetrical logic is the following: "'the arm is part of the body' is identical with 'the body is part of the arm.' In other words, the part is identical with the whole, from which it follows logically that it is also identical with any other part. [...] All these assertions may appear absurd, but according to what we may call the *logic of symmetrical thinking* they are perfectly legitimate" (43; author's italics).

Jung and Woolf's thoughts were not entirely new, but they both sexualized the ancestral idea of the reconciliation of opposites and associated it to the mystery of creativity. In effect, for Woolf being creative meant being androgynous. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that some sixty years before Woolf wrote "A Room of One's Own" and *Orlando*, Louisa May Alcott had already had the same idea (though without formulating any specific theoretical statement on this subject) embodied in the truly Woolfian character of Jo March, who is to some extent Alcott's own alter ego and mouthpiece.

Androgynous Louisa and Androgynous Jo

According to Italo Calvino, "a classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say" (128). This definition perfectly fits Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, written in 1868 at the request of Thomas Niles (representing Roberts Brothers' publishing house), who invited her to write a story for girls. The response to this request has been interpreted in numberless perspectives: as an edifying narration for girls, a *Bildungsroman*, an intertextual reinterpretation of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a fictionalized version of the Victorian "family journal," a utopian novel, and a family romance,⁴ among others. Since I want to focus on the character of Jo March and on her role as the novelist's alter ego, I read *Little Women* as a largely autobiographical *Künstlerroman* in which the idea of androgyny plays a prominent role.

From the outset of the novel fifteen-year-old Jo is described as a tomboy who, when scolded by her "niminy piminy" little sister Amy and warned by her elder sister Meg that – being a young lady – she should turn up her hair and adopt lady-like manners, crossly replies:

"I ain't! And if turning up my hair makes me one, I'll wear it in two tails till I'm twenty," cried Jo, pulling off her net, and shaking down a chestnut mane. "[. . .] I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy, and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit like a poky old woman" [. . .].

"Poor Jo, it's too bad! But it can't be helped, so you must try to be contented with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls," said Beth, stroking the rough head at her knee with a hand that all the dish-washing and dusting in the world could not make ungentle in its touch.

(*LW*'9)

⁴ See Lundin, Douglas, Tomasek, and Keyser.

Beth's words about Jo's playing a masculine role with her sisters prefigure its bodily enactment in the play Jo has written, "The Witch's Curse," in which she is to act as both the villain Hugo and Amy-Zara's lover Roderigo. Therefore – from the beginning of the novel to her "surrender" to the love of Professor Bhaer – Jo's behavior sets her apart from the expected norms for femininity, thus characterizing her as androgynous. As Louisa May's elder sister Anna is reported to have said in a letter written by Bessie Holyoke on 8 August 1878, "The description of Jo, she told me, was a real portrait of her sister Louisa 'who was a dreadful girl, always full of wild pranks'" (Myerson and Shealy 114). Such an androgynous portrait of the novelist finds confirmation in a letter to Alf Whitman dated 2 March 1860, in which Alcott herself declared: "I was born with a boys [sic] nature & always had more sympathy for & interest in them than in girls" (*Letters* 51).⁵

Still, it's not boyishness alone that fictitious Jo and actual Louisa shared and that made them both androgynous. Another important clue to Jo's androgyny is to be found in her numberless pleas for self-sufficiency (*LW* 163, 237, 261-62, 316-17), which have been a point of major interest for a number of critics highlighting Jo's agency in trying to defend her matriarchal family against the external assaults of patriarchal order, represented by suitors who want to curtail the March girls' freedom by "luring" them into betrothal. This is the reason why Meg's marriage is presented in terms of a mishap rather than a joyful event, as Nina Auerbach points out:

Meg's marriage is placed alongside a series of calamities that darken it irreparably: Mr. March's illness, Marmee's hurried departure for Washington, Beth's near-fatal illness, and father's return as a befuddledly noble center of reverence that deflects family intimacy. The inclusion of young love among these upheavals implicitly defines it as more of a destroyer of sisterhood than an emotional progression beyond it; and the equation between the departures of marriage and of death continues in the last half of the book, where Beth's wasting illness and death run parallel to the marriages of the rest of the sisters. Both stress the loss of the childhood circle rather than the coming into an inheritance of fulfillment. (15)

⁵ See also the famous interview given to Louisa Chandler Moulton on January 18, 1883: "I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man's soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman's body [. . .] because I have fallen in love in my life with so many pretty girls and never once the least bit with any man" (Showalter xiii).

Jo's despair at the news that Meg has accepted John Brooke's proposal ("I knew there was mischief brewing; I felt it; and now it's worse than I imagined. I just wish I could marry Meg myself, and keep her safe in the family" [LW 212]) echoes Louisa's own mournful letter upon her sister Anna's marriage to John Pratt: "After the bridal train had departed, the mourners withdrew to their respective homes; and the bereaved family solaced their woe" (*Journals* 132).

It is precisely for the sake of her freedom and independence that Jo turns Laurie down – to the discontent of the great majority of readers. Many critics agree that the relationship between Laurie and Jo owes its uniqueness to their androgyny, which bestows equality on this rapport;⁶ by contrast, the institution of marriage would pervert this egalitarian relationship into a hierarchy compliant with the gender norms of the Victorian Age.⁷ The decision not to marry Jo to Laurie was something Alcott could not compromise over, as she wrote in a journal entry dated 1 November 1868: "Girls write to ask who the little women are going to marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life. I *won't* marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone" (*Journals* 201; author's italics). In effect,

Jo should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, *or* somebody, that I didnt [sic] dare to refuse & out of perversity went & made a funny match for her. I expect vials of wrath to be poured upon my head, but I rather enjoy the prospect." (*Letters* 125; author's italics)

This passage unequivocally brings to the foreground the idea that – if she is to fulfill her literary skills – Jo needs to be a spinster "paddling her own canoe" (*Journals* 122) as Louisa herself was. Since this was impossible, Alcott married her to Prof. Bhaer, with whom she can construct an unconventional relationship far from the perfect match she would have made with Laurie, the beautiful and rich youth any girl of

⁶ As Kathryn Manson Tomasek explains, Jo and Laurie inhabit "a space between the binaries of nineteenth-century gender norms." In effect, "It is Laurie – the boy with a girl's name – who accepts Jo as a 'good fellow' (121). [...] But it is not only Jo's boyishness that marks their intermediary gender position: Laurie also exhibits qualities that locate him between masculinity and femininity" (253).

⁷ As Roberta Seelinger Trites maintains: "At first, Jo and Laurie's relationship is androgynous. [...] Once Laurie begins to eschew his androgyny and enact his masculinity [...] Jo and Laurie cannot frolic together without Jo having to worry about Laurie's sexuality. After this, whenever Laurie flirts with Jo, he is trying to force her into the inherently subjugated role of playing belle to his beau, inflicting on her inequality necessitated by the norms of Victorian heterosexuality. Jo refuses to marry Laurie precisely because she cannot yet play the role of dominated heterosexual *hausfrau*" (152-153).

their society would aspire to marry. Besides the significant difference in age that separates Jo from Prof. Bhaer (a situation that was pretty common at that time), Bhaer is antipodal to Laurie in any respect: poor, foreign and unsophisticated, he is definitely not the man an ambitious WASP middle-class Victorian father would have dreamt to see his daughter marry. By marrying Jo to Prof. Bhaer, Alcott bars from her the comfortable life of a well-off mistress and “condemns” her to a life of hard work. Yet, it is precisely the hardships Jo has to endure that enable her to develop her androgynous literary creativity.

Androgyny and Creativity: When the Queer Genius Burns

In order to elucidate the close connection between androgyny and creativity in Alcott’s career – as well as in that of her literary persona Jo March – it is necessary to call attention to the inception of Alcott’s first novel, *Moods* (1864):

Another turn at *Moods*, which I remodelled. From the 2nd to the 25th I sat writing, with a run at dusk; could not sleep and for these days was so full of it I could not stop to get up. [. . .]

It was very *pleasant* and *queer* while it lasted; but after three weeks of it I found that my mind was too rampant for my body, as my head was dizzy, legs shaky and no sleep would come. So I dropped the pen, and took long walks, cold baths, and had Nan up to frolic with me.

(*Journals* 125; my italics)

Any attentive reader of *Little Women* would easily recognize in this passage the source of inspiration for the chapter “Literary Lessons”:

Every few weeks she [Jo] would shut herself up in her room, put on her scribbling suit, and “fall into a vortex,” as she expressed it, writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul, for till that was finished she could find no peace. [. . .]

Sleep forsook her eyes, meals stood untested, day and night were all too short to enjoy the happiness which blessed her only at such times, and made these hours worth living, even if they bore no other fruit. (LW 281)

The adjectives Alcott uses in her journal for describing the *libido scribendi* she experienced while writing *Moods* are particularly relevant for my argument. This is presented as both “pleasant” and “queer,” thus pointing out that the pleasure she used to draw from writing was odd, unconventional and deviating from the expected norms of her times. Roberta Seelinger Trites has underscored the frequent occurrence of the adjectives

tive “queer” in *Little Women*, for the most part referring to Jo’s nonconformist behavior. Roberta S. Trites has compiled a tabular overview of the term “Queer” in the novel. There are 34 occurrences of the adjective “queer” (and the adverb “queerly”) in the novel: 10 times it refers to things (smell, pictures, specimens of art, tables, drawers, lockets, things [2], hats, darns), 5 times to feelings, 5 to behaviors, 4 to looks, 2 to smiles, 2 to situations, 2 to girls, 1 to Jo’s expression, 1 to Laurie’s voice, 1 to time (spoken by Jo), and 1 to Jo’s mistakes. The word is used by the narrator 21 times; as for the characters:

	<i>Said BY the character</i>	<i>Said ABOUT the character</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Jo</i>	2	5	7
<i>Meg</i>	3	2	5
<i>Amy</i>	3	1	4
<i>Beth</i>	2	2	4
<i>Laurie</i>	1	2	3
<i>Brooke</i>	1	1	2
<i>Belle</i>	-	1	1
<i>Hannah</i>	1	-	1
<i>Marmee</i>	-	1	1
<i>Mr. Scott</i>	-	1	1
<i>The March Sisters</i>	-	1	1

According to Trites, the contemporary reader is allowed to interpret this word as an adumbration of the meaning Judith Butler would attach to it in her theorization of the social and performative nature of gender (136). In this perspective, “Jo’s most blatant act of nonconformism is her rejection of socially inscribed heterosexual gender roles; the text often describes her ‘performances’ in masculine terms to express her androgynous nonconformity” (Trites 139). Insofar as in the passage above Alcott applies this adjective to the description of the heat of her literary activity, we can argue that it was precisely in her writing that the androgynous queerness of both Alcott and Jo was rooted and, at once, expressed. This claim finds endorsement in Phyllis Rose’s analysis of Virginia Woolf’s fear that writing might “unsex” and isolate her (212), thus clearly connecting writing to the breaking of gender norms. This fear was foisted on her by the repressive gender norms of pre-sexual liberation Western society, which saw writing as intimately connected to experience and this, in turn, as a masculine privilege. This situation was denounced by Elizabeth Hardwick in the essay “The Subjection of Women,” in which she asserts that if female writing was somewhat chargeable of limitedness, this should not have been ascribed to

women's psychological failings,⁸ but to women's (especially from the upper and middle classes) lack of experience, precluded to them by restrictive social conventions:

Women have much less experience of life than a man, as everyone knows. [. . .] *Ulysses* is not just a work of genius, it is Dublin pubs, gross depravity, obscenity, brawls, Stendhal as a soldier in Napoleon's army, Tolstoy on his Cossack campaigns, Dostoevsky before the firing squad, Proust's obviously first-hand knowledge of vice, Conrad and Melville as sailors, Michelangelo's tortures on the scaffolding in the Sistine Chapel, Ben Jonson's drinking bouts, dueling, his ear burnt by the authorities because of a political indiscretion in a play – these horrors and the capacity to endure them are *experience*. (180; author's italics)

Analogously, in *Little Women* Jo's efforts to gain experience are often intrinsically masculine, for she struggles for completion through combining masculine and feminine aspects. So, unlike her sisters, she doesn't content herself with the roles of housewife and lady's companion (such is her job in Aunt March's house) traditionally assigned to women by the middle-class Victorian stereotype of "the angel in the house," but yearns for a harsher experience of the world, which at those times was seen as suitable to men only. This is the reason why she wants to fight side by side with her father in the Civil War (*LW* 9), or else to participate in it as a nurse (*LW* 14), thus fantasizing about meddling in what at that time was viewed as the masculine matter *par excellence*, war. We cannot figure her in such a place as the Moffats' vanity fair, flirting and parading a borrowed dress like Meg does, for the activities she favors are skating, rowing and rambling with lads. She has a natural penchant for masculine comradeship (a dream she will finally make true at Plumfield), and this is the reason behind her attachment to Laurie, whom she never thinks of as her sweetheart, but as her fellow. Through this fellowship Jo tries to gain that experience denied to her as a woman of the Victorian age, but her efforts turn out to be useless when he falls in love with her and thus tries to force her into the purely feminine role of fiancée. Sensing what is brewing in her friend's mind – and having been deprived of the chance of accompanying Aunt Carrol to Europe – Jo finally resolves to take her most androgynous step: she moves, unchaperoned, to New York, where she is to work as a governess/seamstress and a writer. Such an act of self-possession was decidedly unusual for the behavioral conventions imposed on Victorian middle-class women and,

⁸ This theory was championed, for example, by Otto Weininger.

with respect to this choice, Jo seems to embody Feminist scholar Carolyn Heilbrun's ideal of androgyny:

I believe that our future salvation lies in a movement away from sexual polarization and the prison of gender toward a world in which individual roles and the modes of personal behavior can be freely chosen. The ideal toward which I believe we should move is best described by the term "androgyny." This ancient Greek word – from *andro[n]* (male) and *gyn[ex]* (female) – defines a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women, are not rigidly assigned. Androgyny seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate. (ix-x)

Her decision to go to New York is the crossroads of Jo's life, since it's her sister Amy who takes the chances she has missed and thus becomes what Jo *might* have been. Jo herself proves to be aware of this when – after Beth has passed away – she falls prey to both regret ("it was not fair, for she tried more than Amy to be good, but never got any reward, – only disappointment, trouble, and hard work") and envy ("a sorrowfully patient wonder why one sister should have all she asked, the other nothing" [LW 458, 464]). By taking Jo's place in Aunt Carrol's tour of Europe Amy refines her manners, gets the opportunity to see more of Laurie (who has fled there after being turned down by Jo), falls in love with him and marries him, thus earning a blissful and wealthy life. By contrast, by refusing Laurie Jo bars her own chances of "strolling on the velvet carpets" of richness, and commits herself to a life spent "plodding in the mud" of hard work – to put it in Alcott's words (LW 493). This choice – rather *outré* for the standards of her times – is what makes Jo androgynous in spite of her marriage, and – still more important – what turns her into a writer. It is therefore inevitable to make a comparison between the antipodal choices of the two sisters, especially since these choices affect their artistic careers as well.

Amy involuntarily steals Jo's long-cherished opportunity of traveling to Europe. Thus, she experiences the traditional Grand Tour, a travel in which young aristocrats and bourgeois used to spend their time frolicking with the international *beau monde* as well as visiting the monuments of Greece, France and Italy. It is precisely in Italy that Amy gives up her dream of being a painter, as she explains to Laurie:

"Rome took all the vanity out of me, for after seeing the wonders there, I felt too insignificant to live, and gave up all my foolish hopes in despair."
"Why should you, with so much energy and talent?"

"That's just why, because talent isn't genius, and no amount of energy can make it so. I want to be great, or nothing. I won't be a common-place dauber, so I don't intend to try any more."

"And what are you going to do with yourself now, if I may ask?"

"Polish up my other talents, and be an ornament to society, if I get the chance." (LW 431)

Amy actually gets the chance of polishing her other talents – namely her taste – by marrying Laurie: thenceforth, she becomes herself a masterpiece to stare at, and her art will forever dwell in her grace.⁹ But what is the reason behind so sudden a twist in her ambitions? It might be argued that it is a version of "nothing ventured, nothing gained": Amy is fated to stay a dilettante – whose paintings are at best graceful, but certainly not meaningful – because she has taken no risk and has striven for no experience. The very word "experience" conveys the idea of the risk connected with artistic creation, for it derives from the Latin verb *experi* *iri* (to try, prove, test), which is in turn related to *periculum* (trial, experiment, risk, danger). Etymology also illuminates the sharp contrast between "gracefulness" – from the Latin noun *gratia*, which means a favor shown to another, kindness, loveliness, charm, thanks, thankfulness, gratitude – and "meaningfulness" – from the Old Saxon *menian*, which means "to have in mind, intend, signify." This word is a synonym of "significant," whose root is the Latin noun *signum* (mark, token, indication, symbol) which, in turn, has probably derived from the verb *secare*. Literally, this verb means "to cut off, cleave, divide," but by extension it has also come to mean "to wound, injure, hurt," thus tying up with the same idea of risk and pain which is in the word "experience." As this brief etymological excursus proves, unlike gracefulness (a word that is often associated with Amy throughout the novel¹⁰) significance does not issue from aesthetic harmony, but comes from experience, which is rooted in pain and sorrow.¹¹

⁹ See, for instance, the "artistic" description of her toilette at the ball in Nice: "It must be confessed that the artist sometimes got possession of the woman, and indulged in antique coiffures, statuesque attitudes, and classic draperies. [...] 'I do want him [Laurie] to think I look well, and tell them so at home,' said Amy to herself, as she put on Flo's old white silk ball dress, and covered it with a cloud of fresh illusion, out of which her white shoulders and golden head emerged with a most artistic effect" (LW 406).

¹⁰ Out of the thirty-six occurrences of the adjective "graceful" (and related words) in the novel, twenty-four are associated with Amy.

¹¹ The intimate connection between sorrow and knowledge is a classic *topos* of Western literature, rooted in the archetypal figure of the over-reacher such as Prometheus. The interest towards this figure was boosted by Romantic and Victorian authors such as Goethe (*Faust*, 1808), Byron (*Manfred*, 1817), Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*, 1818), Percy

So, Amy is doomed to stay an unfulfilled artist as long as she is safely kept in the bubble of the princess-like existence Laurie has granted her; this becomes apparent in her reaction to Beth's death. For Amy, this blow is cushioned by distance as well as by Laurie's soothing presence, and therefore she doesn't go through the same harsh experience of loss and mourning as Jo does when Beth deserts her to complete loneliness. This way, not only does Amy shun pain; she also eschews the experience brought about by such a loss, an experience which might have provided her with the catharsis she needed for becoming an artist. It can't be mere coincidence, then, that Amy's artistic embers are stoked again only when she is finally forced to cope with sorrow by the delicate health of her daughter – aptly named after her departed sister (who in her lifetime had likewise been in poor health):

"My castle is very different from what I planned, but I would not alter it, though, like Jo, I don't relinquish all my artistic hopes, or confine myself to helping others fulfill their dreams of beauty. I've begun to model a figure of a baby, and Laurie says it is the best thing I've ever done. I think so myself, and mean to do it in marble, so that whatever happens, I may at least keep the image of my little angel."

As Amy spoke, a great tear dropped on the golden hair of the sleeping child in her arms; for her one well-beloved daughter was a frail little creature, and the dread of losing her was the shadow over Amy's sunshine. (*LW* 515)

The other way around is true for Jo, who thanks to her crucial decision to go to New York marks a turning point in her life as well as in her artistic career. Still, unlike Amy's, hers will prove to be an uphill struggle. This struggle begins in New York, where – as she wants to build a nest egg for Beth's convalescence at the seaside – she takes up writing sensation stories for the sensational magazine *Weekly Volcano*. Despite the intrinsic wrongness of such an enterprise – as Prof. Bhaer points out in his reproach to Jo – it proves nonetheless to be of some use both because it enables her to brave the male world of publishing (another androgynous feather in Jo's cap: she personally meets the editor of the journal, Mr. Dashwood, thus proving to be as business-like as men only were supposed to be in those times) and because it is an attempt to quench the thirst for experience she is vexed by:

But Mr. Dashwood rejected any but thrilling tales; and, as thrills could not be produced except by harrowing up the souls of the readers, history and romance, land and sea, science and art, police records and lunatic asylums,

Bysshe Shelley (*Prometheus Unbound*, 1820) and Tennyson (*Ulysses*, 1833), who made it into a major strand of nineteenth-century literature.

had to be ransacked for the purpose. Jo soon found that her innocent experience had given her but few glimpses of the tragic world which underlies society; so, regarding it in a business light, she set about supplying her deficiencies with characteristic energy. Eager to find material for stories, [. . .] she searched newspapers for accidents, incidents, and crimes; she excited the suspicions of public librarians by asking for works on poisons; she studied faces in the streets [. . .] and introduced herself to folly, sin, and misery, as well as her limited opportunities allowed. She thought she was prospering finely; but, unconsciously, she was beginning to desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character. She was living in bad society; and, imaginary though it was, its influence affected her, for she was feeding heart and fancy on dangerous and unsubstantial food [. . .]. (LW 371)

As Professor Bhaer points out in his admonition to Jo, this kind of “trash” is not an effective means for attaining knowledge, but – although this first attempt fails badly – it has paved the way for other experiences to come.

As time goes by, experience comes to Jo in the form of sorrowful events such as the renunciation of Laurie's love and – in a crescendo of grief – Beth's illness and death. It is she who mainly nurses her sister and accompanies her during her final days: this experience – though the toughest – turns out to be the most decisive to her life, as she writes in her poem dedicated to Beth: “Thus our parting daily loseth / Something of its bitter pain, / And while learning this hard lesson, / My great loss becomes my gain. / For the touch of grief will render / My wild nature more serene, / Give to life new aspirations – / A new trust in the unseen” (LW 443). After this loss, Jo experiences loneliness and regret (“I am lonely, and perhaps if Teddy had tried again, I might have said 'Yes,' not because I love him any more, but because I care more to be loved, than when he went away” (LW 463)), which finally endows her with wisdom: “I'm not the scatter-brain I was; you may trust me, I'm sober and sensible enough for any one's *confidante* now” (LW 463). So, after roaming the whole spectrum of human experience starting from the masculine extreme of her tomboyish companionship with Laurie, she is finally ready to reach the feminine extreme of this range, represented by love, marriage and motherhood with her beloved Professor.

In this perspective, it would be reductive to interpret this pseudo-romantic happy ending – for romance stays (at least partly) unfulfilled thanks to the funny pair Jo and Bhaer make – as the gist of the novel. I would argue that the most meaningful change brought about by the hardships Jo has endured *and* the love she has experienced is the ripening of her literary inspiration. After writing about fake experiences of wickedness and depravity, she has finally got over so many troubles as to have gained *real* experience. Accordingly, the true facts of her life be-

come the source art springs from, as the poem dedicated to Beth, “In the Garret” and the story written after Beth’s death prove:

Jo never knew how it happened, but something got into that story that went straight to the heart of those who read it; for, when her family had laughed and cried over it, her father sent it, much against her will, to one of the popular magazines, and to her utter surprise, it was not only paid for, but others requested. [. . .] For a small thing, it was a great success; and Jo was more astonished than when her novel was commended and condemned all at once.

“I don’t understand it; what *can* there be in a simple little story like that, to make people praise it so?” she said, quite bewildered.

“There is truth in it, Jo – that’s the secret; humor and pathos make it alive, and you have found your style at last. You wrote with no thought of fame or money, and put your heart into it, my daughter; you have had the bitter, now comes the sweet; do your best, and grow as happy as we are in your success.”

[. . .] So, *taught by love and sorrow*, Jo wrote her little stories, and sent them away to make friends for themselves and her [. . .]. (LW 462; my italics)

This interpretation of Jo’s evolution as a *Künstlerroman* within the *Bildungsroman* of *Little Women* seems to find endorsement in Alcott’s own biography, which served as a source of inspiration for the novel. It is important to highlight that any experience – be it masculine or feminine, according to the standards of those times – Jo longs for or actually goes through is the same as Alcott’s own (serving as a nurse in the Civil War, having male fellows, working as a tutor/writer/seamstress, taking care of her dying sister Lizzie), which resulted in her writing such a successful autobiographical novel as *Little Women* after giving up sensation stories and after the harsh criticism encountered by *Moods*.

Louisa/Jo as Figures of the Nineteenth-Century Queer Genius

Experience has turned out to be a key word for Alcott’s (as well as for her alter ego Jo’s) literary career. In this perspective, it is of particular relevance to find out that the prompt for writing *Moods* – whose inception, as we have seen, plays a central role in the literary fiction of *Little Women* – was a passage in one of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays whose title happens to be precisely “Experience”:

Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows

only what lies in its focus. From the mountain you see the mountain. We animate what we can, and we only see what we animate. Nature and books belong to the eyes that see them. It depends on the mood of the man whether he shall see the sunset or the fine poem. There are always sunsets, and there is always genius; but only a few hours so serene that we can relish nature or criticism. The more or less depends on structure or temperament. Temperament is the iron wire on which the beads are strung. (233)

The multicolored and changing hues of Emerson's beads seem to foreshadow Woolf's "rainbow-like intangibility" (*Essays* IV 473) used for describing the multifaceted nature of human soul, which – in spite of its ostensible multi-sided nature – is uniquely one. This conviction is the bedrock of Emersonian philosophy as well, which hinges on the idea of the coexistence between accidental/contingent elements and the necessary/universal reality underlying them. This idea is expressed in a number of essays, but "Experience" is riveted on human beings' craving for wholeness with peculiar insistence: men and women are born to a whole, but everything surrounding them is only a particular (236); hence that unavoidable existential want Plato tries to account for in his *Symposium*.

For nineteenth-century authors like Emerson and Alcott, this wholeness could be attained through experience, i.e. through risk and sorrow. So – as Emerson maintains in "The Poet" – if the writer is to create something *meaningful* ("for we do not speak now of men of poetical talents, or of industry and skill in metre, but of the true poet" [319]), he/she needs to "see[s] and handle[s] that which others dream of, traverse[s] the whole scale of experience, and be [is] representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart" (318). Such a large power derives precisely from experience, which cannot be limited to the expectations imposed on each individual by social and cultural gender standards, but needs be as comprehensive as possible; that is to say, it needs be androgynous. This is the reason why the nineteenth-century collective imagination depicted the artist as essentially androgynous, as Coleridge wrote in his *Table Talk* and as Gustavus Stadler has recently pointed out:

For one of the most notable aspects of nineteenth-century definitions of genius is how queer they are: that is to say, how frequently they attempt to contain gender qualities that would otherwise be seen as highly contradictory, how they eroticize – often without regard to normatively gendered patterns of eroticism – experiences of reading and writing. In the figure of the genius, nineteenth-century writers create a subject position whose oddness and peculiarity seem to challenge the standards of normativity even as

they help to perpetuate the normative's sense of its cultural self-worth."
(659)

Interestingly, in a review of *Moods* – which, in the chapters above, has played an important role in the ascertainment of the “queerness” of Jo and Louisa’s writing – Henry James complained precisely about the lack of experience and knowledge of the human nature the novel suffered from, and at the same time presciently wrote of a forthcoming novel based on Alcott’s own personal experience – a book that, as we know, would be *Little Women* (*Literary Criticism* 194-5). Thus, Jo’s literary career mirrors Alcott’s own, for they were both enabled to write by roaming the whole range of human experience regardless of gender norms and expectations. It is precisely this complete – and, therefore, androgynous – knowledge of human nature that constitutes the source of literary inspiration, thus making any genius somewhat “queer.”

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