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“THE PROPER WRITING OF LIVES”:
BIOGRAPHY AND THE ART OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

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To grandma

“What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck un-expectedly in the dark; here was one.”

Virginia Woolf
To the Lighthouse

“The Proper Writing of Lives”:

Biography and

The Art of Virginia Woolf

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Introduction

Monk's House, Rodmell. On Friday 28th March 1941, a bright, clear, cold day – as Quentin Bell reports in his aunt's biography – Adeline Virginia Woolf went to her studio room in the garden. She wrote two letters, one for her husband Leonard and one for her beloved sister Vanessa. She put Leonard's letter on the mantelpiece of their sitting-room. Then she wore her fur-coat, took her walking-stick, and went out, across the meadow near the house. She reached the River Ouse, left her stick on the bank, and filled her pocket with a large stone. She walked into the river and drowned herself.¹

On the 1st of April, Leonard wrote to the editor of *The Times*, Geoffrey Dawson, telling him what he feared had happened. After two days, *The Times* reported:

We announce with regret that it must now be presumed that Mrs Leonard Woolf (Virginia Woolf, the novelist and essayist), who has been missing since last Friday, has been drowned in the Sussex Ouse at Rodmell, near Lewes. We also

¹ Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (1972), 2 vols., London, Pimlico, 1996, vol. II, p. 226.

regret to announce the death of Lord Rockley, who had a long and distinguished career in Parliament and was well known in the City.²

That night the BBC announced Virginia's death on the evening news. The Brighton *Southern Weekly News* recorded on its front page:

RIVER OUSE DRAGGED FOR MISSING AUTHORESS: Unavailing search has been made of the countryside around Rodmell for Mrs Virginia Woolf, the authoress, who disappeared from her Rodmell home on Friday last, and the River Ouse in the vicinity has been dragged without result. The river is tidal at the point where Mrs Woolf is believed to have disappeared. Mrs Woolf was very fond of walking alongside the Ouse. Her husband told a reporter on Wednesday: 'Mrs Woolf is presumed to be dead. She went for a walk on Friday leaving a letter behind and it is thought she has been drowned.' Her body has, however, not been recovered.³

On the 6th of April, Desmond McCarthy wrote a tribute in the *Sunday Times*. He praised Mrs Woolf's "rare and beautiful mind," and her "intensely subjective" response to life.⁴ Leonard received over two hundreds letters from friends, acquaintances, writers, servants. They all praised Virginia's qualities and wanted to comfort Leonard for his tragic loss. He replied to each of those letters with dedication. Vita Sackville-West went to visit him on the 8th.⁵

² *The Times*, 3rd April 1941, p. 4, quoted in Lee, Hermione, *Virginia Woolf*, (1996), London, Vintage Books, 1997, p. 762.

³ *Brighton Southern Weekly News*, 5th Apr 1941, p. 1, quoted in Lee, Hermione, *Virginia Woolf*, cit., p. 762.

⁴ Lee, Hermione, *Virginia Woolf*, cit., p. 762.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 763-764.

Virginia's body was found after twenty one days from her disappearance, on the 18th of April 1941. Two girls and three boys, on their bikes, stopped for lunch by the River Ouse near Asheham. They saw something they thought was a log. One of the boys got closer to that "log" and he discovered it was a woman's body. They called the police. The police came, got the body out of the river, and took it to Newhaven Mortuary. The watch on the wrist of the body had stopped at 11:45. Leonard went and identified the corpse. The following day he was officially questioned about the events and the "Tuesday suicide note," the letter Virginia left behind on the day of her disappearance. The cause of death which was declared by the coroner was "Immersion in the River on 28 March 1941 by her own act so killing herself while the balance of her mind was disturbed."⁶

Virginia was cremated at the Downs Crematorium in Brighton, on the notes of "The Dance of the Blessed Spirits" from Gluck's *Orpheus*. That day Leonard buried her ashes under one of the two elms in the garden which they had called with their names, together with a tablet, quoting a line of *The Waves*.⁷

The account of Virginia Woolf's death, which sounds like a piece of fiction, is one of the main reasons for which nowadays she is remembered by the general public, together with the issues of her mental illness and of her unconventional sexual behaviour. Indeed, it seems unfair to reduce her personality to these sensational elements. Virginia Woolf actually was not only this, she was much more than this: she was a complex and prismatic woman and artist. And, first of all, despite her final act, Virginia Woolf was not against life, but she rather devoted to its representation all her existence as a writer.

⁶ Lee, Hermione, *Virginia Woolf*, cit., pp. 764-765.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 765-766. The line quoted ends the novel *The Waves*: "Against you I will fling myself unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!" Woolf, Virginia, *The Waves*, (1931), edited with an Introduction and Notes by Kate Flint, London, Penguin Books, 1992, p. 228.

For instance, in *To the Lighthouse*, we read:

There it was before her—life. Life: she thought—but she did not finish her thought. She took a look at life, for she had a clear sense of it there, something real, something private, which she shared neither with her children nor with her husband. A sort of transaction went on between them, in which she was on one side, and life was on another, and she was always trying to get the better of it, as it was of her;⁸

This is the aim of my thesis: to show Woolf's attachment to life – and thus to the genre of biography and life-writing – from three different perspectives.

In the first place, Woolf was personally connected to literary life, from her birth: she was “the daughter of the *Dictionary of National Biography*,” and she was educated by her father Leslie Stephen, who taught her history as well as biography. She grew together with the literary and non-literary lives which her father's library hosted on its shelves. As Alison Light maintains, “Virginia Woolf loved to read biography, memoir and autobiography and she set a high value on all forms of life-writing, genres which in her day were considered the poor relations in the literary family.”⁹

Secondly, Woolf made biography the substance of her fiction. Already in 1908, in a letter addressed to her brother-in-law Clive Bell, she expressed her desire to “write a very subtle work on *the proper writing of lives*. What it is that you can write –

⁸ Woolf, Virginia, *To The Lighthouse*, (1927), edited by Stella McNichol with an Introduction and Notes by Hermione Lee, London, Penguin Books, 1992, p. 66.

⁹ Light, Alison, *Virginia Woolf and the Servants*, London, Penguin, 2007, p. 309.

and what writing is.”¹⁰ Her aim was to overcome the constraints which Victorian tradition was imposing on the genre through a series of remarkable fictional experiments. As Woolf later observed in “The Art of Biography” (1939), “opinions change as the times change,” and one of the biographer’s tasks is to pinpoint “the presence of obsolete conventions.”¹¹

Thirdly, the genre of biography was the topic of several of her critical writings: she dealt with it when reviewing biographies, or when questioning its literary function, meaning and essence in her essays.

This dissertation is organized into four chapters. The first two chapters deal with the genre of biography and its historical development. The second two chapters focus on Virginia Woolf, and on her tribute to biography and to life-writing both in her fiction and criticism.

The first chapter opens with the definition of “biography” and “life-writing,” and their metaphorical connections with autopsy and portraiture, according to Hermione Lee. I have taken into consideration a few twentieth century authors and critics whose work focuses upon the meaning and the value of the biographical art, such as Elizabeth Gaskell, Harold Nicolson, André Maurois and Leon Edel. I have also retraced the development of English biography inception from what is considered its first “modern” interpretation, Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D* (1791), to the twentieth century. Among the biographers Woolf knew and commented upon there are Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, John Gibson Lockhart, James Anthony Froude, Leslie Stephen, Edmund Gosse, and Giles Lytton Strachey. These are the biographers

¹⁰ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols., London, The Hogarth Press, (1975-1980), vol. I, 1975, p. 325. To Clive Bell, Wednesday 15th April 1908.

¹¹ Woolf, Virginia, “The Art of Biography,” (1939), in McNeillie, Andrew, Clarke, Stuart N., eds., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols., London, The Hogarth Press, (1995-2011), vol. VI, 2011, pp. 181-189, p. 186.

on which I have focused my attention.

The second chapter deals more in detail with modern biography, closing with a section devoted to the “daughter of the *DNB*,” namely Virginia Stephen, when yet not Virginia Woolf. This part also analyses the controversial relationship between Virginia and her “eminent Victorian” father Leslie Stephen, a relevant figure both in her personal and professional experience.¹²

In the third chapter, I have considered those literary texts in Woolf’s fictional work which contain valuable hints on the subject of biography. Woolf’s letters and diaries have been of invaluable importance for this kind of investigation. Specifically, I have analysed five works which I judge relevant, for different reasons, to the genre and discourse of biography: *Night and Day* (1919), *Jacob’s Room* (1922), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), and *Flush* (1933). In *Night and Day* fiction and biography mirror each other, but the heroines’ attempt at life-writing will come to a failure. In *Jacob’s Room* the aim is to contrast the “Great Men” of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, with the waste of young lives caused by World War One. *To the Lighthouse* is a form of life-writing which often recalls Woolf’s personal experience, and dwells on memory as life-giver. *Orlando* completely revolutionises the idea of biography and its traditional conception. *Flush* makes a cocker spaniel the subject of a biographical as well as historical attempt in which the life of the owner – the poetess Elizabeth Barrett Browning – is perceived through the biography of her dog.

The last chapter is Woolf’s critical contribution to a theoretical discourse about biography. Before being a novelist, Woolf was a reviewer and essayist, and she

¹² Towards the end of her career, Woolf will read Sigmund Freud and borrow from him the term “ambivalence,” a combination of love and hatred, to describe her relationship with her father in her unfinished autobiography. See Briggs, Julia, “The Proper Writing of Lives’: Biography versus Fiction in Woolf’s Early Work,” in Briggs, Julia, *Reading Virginia Woolf*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2006, pp. 25-41, p. 26.

continued to be so throughout her life. Thus, I have analysed her most relevant reviews about biographies written by contemporary and non-contemporary writers, also examining her most outstanding essays concerning the genre of biography. Among these, “The New Biography” (1927) and “The Art of Biography” (1939) are of great relevance for my discourse. The chapter ends with the analysis of *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940), Woolf’s “classical” biography and her final achievement within the genre she has studied and discussed throughout her life. Concluding remarks and possible directions for future work are presented in the conclusions.

To the works of Julia Briggs and Hermione Lee this dissertation is heavily indebted. They have provided me with scope and inspiration, and with valuable insights into Woolf’s unending critical dialogue with the art of biography. The Università degli Studi di Milano has proved more than helpful, with its library and the opportunities offered by attending the Doctoral School. Last but not least, I cannot avoid remembering the fruitful summer experiences in Cambridge University Library (UK) and in Copenhagen University Library (DK), that have significantly contributed to the writing of this work.

Chapter 1

Biography: definition, metaphors, theory

1.1 A matter of terms: biographia, biography, and life-writing

The writing of lives is an ancient practice: since recorded literature exists, biographies have widely circulated as genealogical, religious, and didactic forms.¹³

The word “biography” derives from the Greek *bios* (life) and *graphein* (to write). Its subject is written life even though the genre also involves an oral dimension, insofar as it contains anecdotes, the recounting of memories, witness-testimony. In England the term *biographist* was used for the first time by Thomas Fuller in 1662; John Dryden used the word *biography* in 1683 in his “Introduction” to Plutarch’s *Lives*; in 1715 Joseph Addison used the word *biographist*. The adjective *biographical* was employed by William Oldys in 1738. Before the word “biography” came into the language in the late seventeenth century, the word “biographia” was fairly common and retained in the eighteenth century, when the use of Latin in titles was still popular.¹⁴

¹³ Jolly, Margareta, ed., *Encyclopedia of Life Writing, Autobiographical and Biographical forms*, 2 vols., London, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001, vol. I, p. ix.

¹⁴ Winslow, Donald J., *Life-Writing: A Glossary of Terms in Biography, Autobiography, and Related Forms*, Hawaii, University of Hawaii Press, 1995, pp. 8-9.

Before the term “biography” appeared, the most frequent terms used to convey this meaning were “history,” “history of the life of,” or, simply, “life.”¹⁵ The term “life-writing,” in its narrower sense, can be considered synonymous with the term “biography,” as it conveys the same meaning. However, it may also include autobiography, memoirs, letters, diaries, journals (written and documentary), anthropological data, oral testimony, and eye-witness accounts. Until the word “autobiography” came into the language in 1797, the word “biography” also included it. “Life-writing” has been used since the eighteenth century, although it has never been as widely current as “biography” or “autobiography.”¹⁶ It is worth however to remark nowadays increasing interest in life-writing, and in the kind of perspective which has stimulated my entire research. The following projects show the centrality of the topic in the latest academic debate, also highlighting the connections of life-writing with cultural, visual and medical studies.

In 1998, The Department of American Studies of the University of Maryland founded “The Life Writing Project.”¹⁷ The Project explored individual lives from a cultural point of view. Of particular concern was the study of the intersection of race, gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and religion.

In London, at King’s College, the interdisciplinary “Centre for Life-Writing Research”¹⁸ was established in 2007 in the School of Arts & Humanities. Beyond King’s College, the Centre has developed working relationships with many local cultural organizations, such as the National Portrait Gallery or the British Museum, and with international networks of Life-Writing experts, such as the International

¹⁵ Winslow, Donald J., *Life-Writing: A Glossary of Terms in Biography, Autobiography, and Related Forms*, cit., p. 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁷ www.amst.umd.edu/About%20Us/Research/lifewriting.htm. (Last access 1st Feb 2013).

¹⁸ www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/ahri/centres/lifewriting/index.aspx. (Last access 1st Feb 2013).

Association of Biography and Autobiography. The Centre has run a series of prestigious lectures: “Life-writing at King’s” (2006-07) featured a talk by Hermione Lee, “Medical Lives” (2007-08) and “Enlightenment Lives” (2008-09). In 2009-10 the Centre held a series of dialogues called “Dissecting the Self” in the Anatomy Museum. In 2011 the emphasis was on life-writing and visual culture, with a series of events called “Picturing the Self,” at the National Portrait Gallery.

Recently, in 2012, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of Maastricht University launched a project, “Life Writing: Theory and Practice,”¹⁹ to seek proposals for the writing of biography.²⁰

Finally, “The Oxford Centre for Life-Writing” (OCLW)²¹ at Wolfson College encourages interdisciplinary projects on the writing of biography and memoir, and on the study of existent life-narratives. Recent areas of interest of the Centre also include the relation of biography to scientific discovery, to the Holocaust, genocide, testimony and confession, to gender, and to apartheid.²² Hermione Lee is the President of Wolfson College – she being the writer who over the years has devoted her skill of research to biography and to the life of Virginia Woolf.²³

¹⁹www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/web/Faculties/FASoS/Theme/ResearchPortal/GraduateSchool/ArtsMediaAndCulture/GenderDiversityStudies/LifeWritingTheoryAndPractice.htm. (Last access 1st Feb 2013).

²⁰ The project entails a study of recent theories of life-writing to accompany the writing of biography with a constant critical reflection, asking whether it is possible to find points of exit out of the narrative conventions of historical and contemporary life-writing.

²¹ www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing. (Last access 1st Feb 2013).

²² The college hosts an annual series of life-writing lectures and an annual Life-Stories Day, involving auto/biographical presentations. In the future, the Centre is going to turn its attention to a series of events dedicated to exploring the lives of objects and the relationship between (auto)biography and portraiture.

²³ Hermione Lee has recently written a work devoted to the art of biography, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009. In 1996 she also composed the biography of Virginia Woolf, *Virginia Woolf*, published by Chatto & Windus.

1.2 Definition

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary of 1956 gives at least two definitions of biography. The first definition describes biography as “the history of the lives of individual men, as a branch of literature.”²⁴ The definition, in its attempt to clarify the term, underlines three essential elements: “history,” “individual,” and “literature.” Every life is, first of all, linked to history; it obviously concerns an individual man; and it can be considered a piece of literature as much as a novel of fiction can be.²⁵ As Harold Nicolson remarks in *The Development of English Biography* (1927), the primary characteristic of a “genuine” biography is historical truth: Thomas Carlyle wrote that “the history of the world is but the Biography of its great men.”²⁶ The second characteristic of “pure” biography, according to Nicolson, is that it should be well constructed. Biography is more than a mere record of personality: it should stimulate a deep response, awake curiosity, sympathy and pity, evoke associations so that the reader may not only acquire facts but also experience. This awareness of the creative elements in such a kind of writing makes biography a real work of intelligence. “Pure biography,” according to Nicolson, “is the truthful and deliberate record of an individual’s life written as a work of intelligence.”²⁷ Diaries, memoirs, confessions, self-portraiture certainly stimulate curiosity and psychological interest, but, for Nicolson, they lack in truth and creative intelligence. “Creative biography necessitates something more than a diagnosis (as in autobiography): it necessitates a scientific autopsy; and this sense of rigorous post-mortem is just what the autobiographer has

²⁴ Little, W., Fowler, H. W., Coulson, J., Onions, C. T., eds., *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles, Third Edition Revised with Addenda* (1944), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956, p. 180.

²⁵ Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1927, pp. 7-8.

²⁶ Carlyle, Thomas, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History: Six Lectures, Reported, with Emendations and Additions*, New York, John Wiley, 1861, p. 26.

²⁷ Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., p. 14.

always found impossible to convey.”²⁸

As pointed out above, *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1956) gives a second definition of the term “biography,” that is “[a] written record of the life of an individual.”²⁹ *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* of 1998 instead describes biography as “an account of someone’s life written by someone else.”³⁰ This last definition is questionable because a biography could be written by the person whose story is being told, pretending to be someone else; or it could be written by more than one person; moreover, a biography could be the story of several lives; or could be the story of a city, an object, *an animal*, as Woolf did with her work *Flush: A Biography* (1933), the life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cocker spaniel.

1.3 Metaphors

The already mentioned image of autopsy proposed by Nicolson is suggested also by Hermione Lee in her recent work *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*.

The metaphor of the autopsy invokes biography as a process of posthumous scrutiny, applied to a helpless subject from which life [...] has gone. The process cannot injure the person who is no longer there, but it can certainly change our posthumous view of them, depending on what is ascertained from the examination. And it can cause pain to surviving relatives and friends. The image of biography as a forensic process also suggests its limitations, since an autopsy can have nothing or little to say about the subject’s thoughts, intelligence,

²⁸ Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., p. 15.

²⁹ Little, W., Fowler, H. W., Coulson, J., Onions, C. T., eds., *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles, Third Edition Revised with Addenda*, cit., p. 180.

³⁰ Pearsall, Judith, ed., *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 175.

emotions, temperament, talents, or beliefs. It may not even be able conclusively to prove the cause of death.³¹

Moreover, Lee suggests another kind of metaphor to describe the genre of biography, which is the “metaphor of the portrait:” William Hazlitt, she quotes, said that “portrait-painting is the biography of the pencil.”³² Whereas on the one hand, the autopsy-metaphor suggests death, clinical investigation and even violation, the portrait-metaphor, on the other hand, suggests life, empathy, energy, personality. Yet these two metaphors have some aspects in common. Both make an investigation of the subject; both must pay precise attention to detail; both have a revelatory aim. In addition to these points, Lee maintains that the image of the portrait shows, more than autopsy, what may go wrong with biography, i.e. flattery, distortion, idealization, inaccuracy.³³

In her essay entitled “Portraits in Painting and Photography,” Cynthia Freeland describes the portrait as a philosophical form of art.³⁴ Through the analysis of Rembrandt’s works, and of differences between portrait and photography, she attempts to solve the conflict which lies at the core of the portrait, that is the painter’s necessity of faithfulness to his subject and his life history, and his need to express his own artistic creativity in painting. This tension is also present in the writing of biographies when the biographer, “facing” his subject, has to deal with the absolute truth of the portrayal. This dilemma is essentially also described by Lessing in

³¹ Lee, Hermione, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, cit., p 2.

³² Quoted in Lee, Hermione, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, cit., p. 3. See also Wendorf, Richard, *The Elements of Life: Biography and Portrait-Painting in Stuart and Georgian England*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990, p. 7.

³³ Lee, Hermione, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, cit., pp. 3-4.

³⁴ Freeland, Cynthia, “Portraits in Painting and Photography,” in *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, Vol. 135, No. 1, Proceedings of the Thirty-Seventh Oberlin Colloquium in Philosophy: Aesthetics, (Aug., 2007), pp. 95-109.

Laocoon,³⁵ and it points out the difference between a portrait and the literary deployment of a life. Lessing, in fact, highlights the relationship between painting and poetry, stating that art has to respond to the main principles of expression and truth.

But, as has been already mentioned, art has in modern times been allotted a wider sphere. “Its imitations,” it is said, “extend over the whole of visible nature, of which the beautiful is but a small part: and as nature herself is ever ready to sacrifice beauty to higher aims, so likewise the artist must render it subordinate to his general design, and not pursue it farther than truth and expression permit.”³⁶

Coming back to Freeland, she examines the qualities by which portrait can faithfully represent a subject: by being an accurate likeness, by providing testimony to the presence of an individual person, by evoking the personality, and by capturing the person’s unique essence.³⁷ She derives the idea of “unique essence” from Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*. In his essay Barthes is searching for an image of his deceased mother which may capture her – as Barthes calls it – “air.”³⁸ He initially finds only

³⁵ Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, (1766), translated by E. C. Beasley, London, Longman, 1853. It is interesting to focus the attention on the “Author’s Preface” which clearly explains this kind of comparison: “The first person who compared painting and poetry with one another was a man of fine feeling, who may be supposed to have been conscious that both produced a similar effect upon himself. He felt that through both what is absent seems as if it were present, and appearance takes the form of reality. He felt that both deceive, and that the deception is, in either case, pleasing. A second observer sought to penetrate below the surface of this pleasure, and discovered that in both painting and poetry it flowed from the same source; for beauty, the idea of which we first abstract from bodily objects, possesses general laws, applicable to more than one class of things, to actions and thoughts as well as to forms. A third one reflected upon the value and distribution of these general laws; and discovered that some are of greater force when applied to painting, others when applied to poetry. In the case of the latter laws, poetry will help to explain and illustrate painting, in that of the former, painting will do the same office for poetry. The first was the amateur, the second the philosopher, and the third the critic.” See pp. xiii-xiv.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁷ Freeland, Cynthia, “Portraits in Painting and Photography,” cit., p. 100.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

photographs that represent portions or fragments of his mother. In the end, however, he comes across an old image of hers as a young girl:

All the photographs of my mother which I was looking through were a little like so many masks; at the last, suddenly the mask vanished: there remained a soul, ageless but not timeless, since this air was the person that I used to see, consubstantial with her face, each day of her long life.³⁹

However, in the wake of Ernst Van Alphen's remarks,⁴⁰ Freeland maintains that a camera can only capture the appearance of a person, but not the essence: only the artist has the skill to catch the sitter's "air."⁴¹ According to this statement, photography is automatically considered as an inferior practice, compared to portrait painting, because the former cannot render subjective states and interior life as the latter can do. In her conclusions, Freeland compares the tension between the artist and the subject with the relationship between the viewer and the portrait, remarking that both the painter and the viewer may treat the person as a subject.⁴² By maintaining that the response of the viewer depends on the artist's representation, Hermione Lee also focuses on the viewer's response, on the painter's method and technique; as a matter of fact, a different portrait of the same subject might convey a totally opposite perception. Possible representations of one single subject are indeed countless.⁴³ Freeland, evoking Matisse, concludes her analysis with a relevant remark: "when a

³⁹ Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, London, Vintage, 2000, pp. 109-110.

⁴⁰ Ernst Van Alphen is the author of an essay entitled "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture," collected in Woodall, Joanna, ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997, pp. 239-258.

⁴¹ Freeland, Cynthia, "Portraits in Painting and Photography," cit., p. 106.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁴³ Lee, Hermione, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, cit., pp. 3-4.

painting is finished, it is like a new-born child. The artist himself must have time for understanding it.”⁴⁴ If, according to Freeland, the portrait seems to be alive, as much as biography has to be, Lee remarks instead that the portrait-metaphor has a limit, which lies in its stillness. A portrait, in the end, is the image of a motionless subject, whereas a biography tells progressively in time the life of a dynamic subject who speaks, makes experiences, changes, grows old, and finally dies.⁴⁵

Reflecting upon photography, portrait and biography, Roland Barthes’s essay “The Death of the Author”⁴⁶ suggests a further step in the wake of the previous considerations. Barthes states that when “the author enters in his own death, writing begins.”⁴⁷ In the text the process coincides with the withdrawal of the author from the multiple voices which compose his text. The procedure recalls the practice of photography, in which the camera takes a subject, but does not catch the photographer who is the “author” of the photograph. Barthes maintains that the total existence of writing is revealed in such process:

A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is

⁴⁴ Quoted by Freeland, Cynthia, in “Portraits in Painting and Photography,” cit., p. 108.

⁴⁵ Lee, Hermione, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, cit., p. 4.

⁴⁶ Barthes, Roland, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, London, Fontana, 1977, pp. 142-148.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

constituted. [...] we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.⁴⁸

The reader, thus, may be compared to the viewer of a portrait: they both have their perception of the work, they both interpret it, they both catch its “air,” they both, in the end, play a central role. In this regard, it seems possible to overcome the mutual relationship between artist/portrait or author/text, adding to this dialectical tension a third element which is obviously the reader/viewer. Despite the tradition that subordinates visual portrait to written biography, portraiture remains a metaphor frequently used by biographers, who see the utility of comparing their method to the technique of the visual art. For instance, in *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D* (1791), James Boswell, quoting a conversation with his friend Sir Joshua Reynolds, remarks that Johnson “has a peculiar art of drawing characters, which is as rare as good portrait-painting.”⁴⁹

Moreover, as Marlene Kadar recalls in her *Essays on Life Writing: from Genre to Critical Practice*,⁵⁰ Barthes has to admit that life-writing questions “the Death of the Author [who] still reigns [...] in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs.”⁵¹ One of these men of letters is indeed the biographer.

⁴⁸ Barthes, Roland, “The Death of the Author,” cit., p. 148.

⁴⁹ Boswell, James, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D*, 2 vols., London, Henry Baldwin, 1781, vol. II, p. 252.

⁵⁰ Kadar, Marlene, “Coming to Terms: Life-Writing from Genre to Critical Practice,” in Kadar, Marlene, ed., *Essays on Life Writing: from Genre to Critical Practice*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992, pp. 2-16, p. 9.

⁵¹ From Barthes, Roland, *Image, Music, Text*, quoted in Kadar, Marlene, “Coming to Terms: Life-Writing from Genre to Critical Practice,” cit., p. 9.

Biography like autopsy



Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaas Tulp*, 1632,
oil on canvas, 169.5 x 216.5 cm, The Hague, Mauritshuis.

Biography like portraiture



Jan Vermeer, *The Art of Painting*, c. 1665/6,

oil on canvas, 130 x 110 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

1.4 Reflections upon biography in the twentieth century

During the last two centuries, many scholars have been wondering about the genre of biography and about life-writing, and their studies have allowed the genre to define its form and peculiarities. Reflecting upon biography and making my research, I have come across the work of critics – Virginia Woolf included – who have offered analytical surveys of this genre. Therefore, in this paragraph, I shall take into consideration those authors and critics whose work focuses upon the meaning and the value of the biographical art.

According to what the mid-twentieth century critic André Maurois (1885-1967) said in “The Ethics of Biography” (1943), the figure of the biographer includes both the figure of the historian and of the portrait painter. Maurois poses two basic questions in order to investigate at once the task of the historian as well as of the portrait painter. He wonders what their duty is, and in his answer two key-words, and concepts, clearly emerge: the central search for truth and the necessity to give the work an artistic form.

What is the duty of the portrait painter? (a) To paint a true portrait, because he entered into an engagement to produce a reasonable likeness of a definite individual. (b) To paint a beautiful portrait, because a work of art will give pleasure even to those who never knew the model, and also will add inside truth to the outside likeness.

What is the duty of the historian? (a) To record the true facts because, if his facts are not true, he deceives us, causes us to bear unfair judgments, and may

influence in a regrettable way our future action. (b) To arrange these facts in an intelligible order and to give his work an artistic form.⁵²

Both for the portrait painter and the historian the goal is to achieve truth, even if, in the case of painting, the duty to produce an artistic work is paramount. In the case of history, instead, the first preoccupation is with truth. If a biographer wants to act correctly not only towards the investigated object/subject but also towards his/her reader, honesty is the main ingredient.

An honest biographer should sit in front of his documents as an honest painter sits in front of his model, thinking only: 'What do I see, and which is the best way to convey my vision to others?' His first duty is to produce a true portrait. Why is it his duty? Because he announces a portrait of Lincoln, or Churchill, or Napoleon, and not merely an imaginary character. This makes him responsible to us for the image we shall form of Lincoln, or Churchill, or Napoleon. He has no right to force upon us, under false pretences, his personal prejudices against, or in favour of his hero.⁵³

[...] read the life of Roger Fry by Virginia Woolf. She has a few pages about the Quakers, their creed, their habits, and she is right. Roger Fry belonged to a Quaker family, and it is quite impossible to understand him if one does not know the outlook on life given him by his education.⁵⁴

⁵² Maurois, André, "The Ethics of Biography," *English Institute Annual, 1942* (1943), pp. 5-28, in Clifford, James L., ed., *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1506-1960*, London, Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 162. André Maurois is the author of *Ariel, or the Life of Shelley*, 1924.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

André Maurois maintains that a biographer has to accumulate all the available materials concerning his/her hero: anecdotes, letters, diaries. Then, having done such preliminary work, the biographer has to follow the procedure Maurois suggests, through the formulation of five main rules. These rules can be summarized as follows. First, “a biographer has a right to suppress all duplicate evidence:” if there are many documents about the same fact, only the most significant one has to be chosen. Secondly, for what concerns letters, a biographer has two possibilities: to “give a letter in full if it is a masterpiece of writing or analysis, or if it is a revealing document; in all other cases, quote well-chosen extracts.” Third: even small and trivial facts are important to highlight the personality of the hero. Maurois adds that “Plutarch knew this as well as Harold Nicolson or Virginia Woolf.” Fourth: a biographer must not suppress a fact only because it is not in line with his ideas of the hero. The risk is to create an unfaithful, useless portrait. Fifth: sometimes “a biographer may have to suppress a fact for ethical reasons.” This may happen when the hero is a contemporary of the biographer, and the publication of a certain fact could injury someone or denigrate the hero himself: these are the dangers, when a biographer chooses to write the life of someone who is still alive.⁵⁵ And this is the case of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, published in 1857.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Maurois, André, “The Ethics of Biography,” cit., p. 166.

⁵⁶ This was the case of Virginia Woolf herself, when she was working to Frederic William Maitland’s *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (1906). Maitland asked her to do a work of selection in her father and mother’s corpus of letters. Concerning the biographer’s principle of selection, there is an interesting and colourful letter Virginia wrote to Violet Dickinson in November 1904, while she was in Cambridge. See Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. I, 1975, pp. 151-152. To Violet Dickinson, November 1904: “Then I have all Fathers (*sic*) and Mothers (*sic*) and Minny’s [Harriet Thackeray] letters to read, select, and copy, which will be the hardest job of the lot. It is not made easier by the excellent Jack Hills: I told him casually that I was going to do this, whereupon he wrote an emphatic solictorial letter beginning ‘Whatever you do, *dont* (*sic*) publish anything too intimate’ etc etc etc. [...] So I wrote another and better explanation pointing out that I probably cared 10,000 times more for delicacy and reserve where my own Father and Mother are concerned than he could;”

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) and Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) not only were part of the community of women writers, but they were also friends. In fact, Gaskell was asked to write the biography of Brontë directly by Charlotte's father, Reverend Patrick Brontë. Gaskell declared that she wanted to achieve "a right understanding of the life of my dear friend."⁵⁷ And again, "I will publish what I know of her, and make the world (if I am but strong enough in expression) honour the woman as much as they admired the writer."⁵⁸

After the death of Charlotte, Gaskell began her research of materials, and, in order to discuss the project, she met Patrick Brontë and Mr. Nicholls, Charlotte's husband, whose "feeling was against its being written, but he yielded to Mr. Brontë's impetuous wish."⁵⁹ It is interesting to remark that Ellen Nussey, one of the closest friends of Charlotte, gave Gaskell a correspondence of more than three hundred and fifty letters, which she and Charlotte wrote to each other during their life-long friendship. In these letters, Nussey effaced whole passages or simply the names of persons and places that might be inconvenient.⁶⁰

In order to shield this friend [Ellen Nussey], however, from any blame or misconstruction, it is only right to state that, before granting me this privilege, she throughout most carefully and completely effaced the names of persons and places which occurred in them; and also that such information as I have obtained

⁵⁷ Gaskell, Elizabeth, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, (1857), London, Penguin Classics, 1985, p. 60.

⁵⁸ Letter written by Elizabeth Gaskell to George Smith, Brontë's publisher, in 1855, quoted in Pollard, Arthur, *Mrs. Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1965, p. 143.

⁵⁹ Shelton, Alan, "Introduction" to Gaskell, Elizabeth, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, cit., p. 20.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22.

from her bears reference solely to Miss Brontë and her sisters, and not to any individuals whom I may find it necessary to allude to in connection with them.⁶¹

Notwithstanding this, three elements indeed proved a problem after the publication of the *Life* in 1857: “its presentation of Patrick Brontë, the account of Branwell’s decline and, less melodramatically, the references to the Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge to which Charlotte and Emily has been sent as children.”⁶² Because of threats of legal actions, a new “revised and corrected”⁶³ edition was published later in the same year.

Here is an example of the re-writing of a passage which Gaskell was compelled to modify. It deals with the decline of Patrick Branwell Brontë, Charlotte’s brother. In the 1840s, Patrick was the private tutor of Lady Scott, the wife of Reverend Edmund Robinson. Gaskell told that:

Branwell had obtained a situation as a private tutor. Full of available talent, a brilliant talker, a good writer, apt at drawing, ready of appreciation, and with a not unhandsome person, he took the fancy of a married woman, nearly twenty years older than himself. It is not excuse for him to say that she began the first advances, and “made love” to him [...] He was so beguiled by this mature and wicked woman, that he went home for his holidays reluctantly, stayed there as short a time as possible, perplexing and distressing them all by his extraordinary conduct – at one time in the highest spirits, at another, in the deepest depression - accusing himself of blackest guilt and treachery, without specifying what they were; and altogether evincing an irritability of disposition bordering on insanity

⁶¹ Gaskell, Elizabeth, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, cit., note 1, p. 577.

⁶² Shelton, Alan, “Introduction” to Gaskell, Elizabeth, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, cit., p. 26.

⁶³ Gaskell, Elizabeth, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, cit., Appendix A, p. 528.

[...] They began to lose all hope in his future career. He was no longer the family pride; an indistinct dread was creeping over their minds that he may turn out their deep disgrace.⁶⁴

To avoid any complaint, Gaskell rewrote this passage as follows, effacing every reference to the affair:

Branwell obtained the situation of a private tutor. Anne was also engaged as a governess in the same family, and was thus a miserable witness to her brother's deterioration of character in this period. Of the causes of this deterioration I cannot speak [...] Charlotte and Emily suffered acutely from his mysterious behaviour. He expressed himself more than satisfied with his situation; he was remaining in it for a longer time than he had ever done in any kind of employment before; so that for some time they could not conjecture that anything there made him so willful, and restless, and full of both levity and misery.⁶⁵

This case, on which I have dwelt at length, is a very good instance of what André Maurois defines as the fifth rule for a biographer. He also reflects on the possibility that an author, having completed a biography, may discover some new material which changes the finished portrait, such as new letters or new pieces of information. In that case, Maurois suggests to rewrite, if possible, the whole life in order to make the portrait as accurate as possible. The aptest example is his *Ariel: Life of Shelley* (1924). Maurois rewrote his biography after having heard about the discovery of Shelley's lost letters, made by Leslie Hotson and Professor Newman White in 1931. The new material found proved some facts wrong and, as a consequence, Maurois felt the duty

⁶⁴ Gaskell, Elizabeth, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, cit., Appendix A, p. 273.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 547.

to modify his work, according to the main principle of biography: the search for truth.⁶⁶

Even if Maurois affirms that a biography has to adhere to truth as well as to an artistic aim, he classifies biography according to two different ways of conceiving it: biography as a work of art, and biography as a scholarly work. In the first case, the sake of proportion and composition has more significance than any other aspect. In the second case, on the contrary, form is sacrificed in favour of complete information.⁶⁷

Another rule Maurois adds to his critical discourse concerns the invention of facts. As he maintains,

under no account has the biographer a right to invent a single fact. He is writing a history, not fiction, and witnessing under oath. [...] never indulge in imagination. Once you cross the line between biography and fiction, you will never be able to retrace your steps.⁶⁸

The biographer can interpret the facts when he has got the required awareness: becoming an expert in the same field as his hero is a central condition to completely understand his hero's reactions and, as a consequence, draw the correct conclusions.⁶⁹ All these reflections lead Maurois to another central question: "to what extent is it legitimate to make use of one's own experiences to write other people's lives?" Maurois maintains that it would be absurd to neglect, while writing a life, the lessons of life: "the scholar who reads these documents, this diary, is a man; he once suffered,

⁶⁶ Maurois, André, "The Ethics of Biography," cit., p. 167.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

wondered, despaired.”⁷⁰

Here are some of his suggestions:

If the hero has been a writer, the interpretation of his writings, as sources for his biography, is a very thorny problem. What right have we to make use of his novels, when we attempt to understand his outlook on life, and his character? It is self-evident that a writer of fiction or poetry always puts something of himself in his works. [...] Having written fiction myself, I know how inextricably mixed are, in a novel, memories of my own life, stories I have been told, reminiscences, inventions. How could an outsider find his way in this labyrinth when we writers ourselves, after a year, would be at a loss to say whether we actually heard this sentence or invented it? All one can say is that, when a writer comes back to the same themes and repeats the same character under different names, there is very good ground to infer that he is obsessed by such themes and characters, and that they may be a clue to his most secret nature.⁷¹

Furthermore, Maurois affirms that another form of interpretation is inherent in the choice of the biographer when grouping facts: this aspect indeed amounts to a kind of personal interpretation of facts. As far as the arrangement of facts is concerned, Maurois formulates five more rules, which can be summed up as follows. First, he suggests that it would be better to present events following a chronological order for, in this way, the development of personality is more clearly shown. Second, the biographer should give evidence that the facts he describes are authentic. Third, the biographer has to discover the recurrent themes in a life, comparing them with the passing of time in order to notice whether the perception of the same thing or person

⁷⁰ Maurois, André, “The Ethics of Biography,” cit., p. 170.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 170-171.

is influenced by the flowing stream of time. Fourth, the description of the environment surrounding the hero, whether it be a park, a garden or whether a house, is a significant element to be considered. Fifth, if a biographer is composing the life of a poet, he may analyse his works, but only as far as they bear upon the life of the hero: biography, indeed, is not a literary study.⁷²

The last question Maurois intends to answer is about the moral lesson a biography should, or should not, convey to the reader. According to what modern biographers think, the true story of a man always contains a moral lesson, and the reader is given the task to discover the meaning for himself/herself.

What do most lives prove? That to be a man is at the same time very difficult and very easy – very difficult because nothing, in human affairs, is ever simple. Because our wisest schemes will always be partly wrong, because there is no end in life's struggle, because 'the life of a man is but a span', because 'life is too short to be little', because most of the choices are made for us by the Fates. Great lives show that, in spite of all, it is possible for a man to act with dignity and to achieve internal peace. That is true of saints, of philosophers, of poets, of artists; it is even true of men of action. Napoleon at Saint-Helena, Byron at Missolonghi, Washington at Valley Forge are human lessons in resignation, courage, and patience. It is the part of the biographer, not to make these lessons pedantic and stale by writing a sermon about them, but to tell such noble stories with reverence and simplicity. If the writer respects his hero, the reader will respect the writer.⁷³

⁷² Maurois, André, "The Ethics of Biography," cit., pp. 171-173.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

From the previous remarks, it seems clear that André Maurois is one of the most influent theorists of twentieth century biography, a genre in which, as the next chapter indicates, also Virginia Woolf has a place both as a critic and a biographer.

In this context, it is also worth mentioning another critic, Leon Edel (1907-1997), whose reflections on modern biography are of a great importance and usefulness to define the genre. In his *Literary Biography*,⁷⁴ an investigation derived from his “Alexander Lectures” (1955-56), Edel reflects about the writing of modern biography, trying to derive a theory as well. He notices that Harold Nicolson and André Maurois have offered the liveliest discussions on biography during the 1920s, the former considering biography as a work of science, the latter, instead, as a work of art.⁷⁵ But Edel himself identifies biography as a process made up of these two aspects: it is scientific when it asks the support of science “to elucidate whatever it can about the human being,” and it is artistic when it uses language “to capture human experience.”⁷⁶ And, reflecting upon the task of the biographer, Edel argues that the biographer may only rely upon his/her own resources. The biographer, in fact, has to create a book which has to express his/her own vision. For Edel, all biography is a “re-projection into words (literary, semi scientific, historical) of the inert materials re-assembled” through the work of the biographer himself/herself.⁷⁷ André Maurois and Lytton Strachey, in effect, recognize that the writing of biography is nothing but a way to better understand oneself. Edel, moreover, divides biographers into two categories: there are biographers who simply write from the documents they possess,

⁷⁴ Edel, Leon, *Literary Biography: The Alexander Lectures 1955-56*, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

and biographers who instead have personally met their subject.⁷⁸ For Edel, the best biographers are those who have known their subjects, such as Boswell, Lockhart, Froude, or Forster. However, he remarks that those who work from documents gain greater objectivity from their wider perspective and distance in time.⁷⁹ Edel defines the biographer as “a kind of Sherlock Holmes of the library, interested in the life itself” and in relation with a “visitable past.”⁸⁰ As the critic suggests, curiosity is indeed a central element, providing the stimuli for the biographer’s activity. He maintains that answering the question “what sort of man is addressing us and how and why did he come to say the things he is saying”⁸¹ represents the starting point of the biographer’s work. In fact, Edel has in mind the biographies of poets and writers. Therefore he recommends the reading and the evaluation of their literary work. The biographer of a literary life has to enter into the heart of each piece of writing in order to have a complete knowledge of his/her subject.⁸² In a similar vein, in *Orlando: A Biography*, Virginia Woolf, maintains that “in short, every secret of a writer’s soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind is written large in his works, yet we require critics to explain the one and biographers to expound the other.”⁸³

The second step of the biographer’s task, according to Edel, consists in exercising a judicial criticism upon the heterogeneous mass of assembled materials and facts, in order to impose a certain coherence to them. Also Virginia Woolf speaks about this process, warning the writer against the “riot and confusion of the passions

⁷⁸ Edel, Leon, *Literary Biography: The Alexander Lectures 1955-56*, cit., p. 11.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 41-43.

⁸³ Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando: A Biography*, (1928), edited by Brenda Lyons, with an Introduction and Notes by Sandra M. Gilbert London, Penguin Books, 1993, pp. 145-146.

and emotions which every good biographer detests.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, Edel states that the disciplines of psychology and psycho-analysis may offer interesting suggestions for a better comprehension of a biographical subject. Thus, in the end, he recognizes in the biographer three different figures mingled together: the literary investigator, the critic, and the psychologist. All these figures become standard ingredients in the recipe of a good biography.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando: A Biography*, cit., p. 13.

⁸⁵ Edel, Leon, *Literary Biography: The Alexander Lectures 1955-56*, cit., p. 81.

Historical background

1.5 Plutarch, the “father” of biography

The figure of Plutarch (c. 46 - 120 AD), who is considered the “father” of biography, and a model for many biographers in the following ages, is relevant to this survey and deserves to be mentioned in the first place.

A Greek historian, an essayist and biographer, Plutarch is the author of the famous *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* dating back to the I century. His popularity in Britain dates from 1579, when Thomas North translated Plutarch’s *Lives*. This text was used by William Shakespeare as a source for his Roman histories.⁸⁶

In his *Lives*, Plutarch constantly points out the moral lesson arising from the individual lives he describes. A character, he argues, can change and improve even through accidents, and catastrophes. Hence Plutarch can be considered as a writer with a moral purpose, whose aim is to bring characters vividly to life. Indeed, also Dryden recognized Plutarch’s ability to make his great men “human” In fact, at the beginning of his “Life of Alexander the Great,” Plutarch states his purpose in clear terms:

I am not writing history but biography, and the most outstanding exploits do not always have the property of revealing the goodness or badness of the agent; often, in fact, a casual action, the odd phrase, or a jest reveals character better than battles involving the loss of thousands upon thousands of lives [...] Just as a

⁸⁶ On this subject, see Velz, John W., “The Ancient World in Shakespeare: Authenticity or Anachronism? A Retrospect,” in Muir, Kenneth, ed., *Shakespeare Survey. An Annual Survey of Shakespearian Study and Production*, 64 vols., (1948-2011), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978, vol. XXXI, pp. 1-12.

painter reproduces his subject's likeness by concentrating on the face and the expression of the eyes [...] I must be allowed to devote more time to those aspects which indicate a person's mind.⁸⁷

In this passage, Plutarch makes a distinction between the art of biography and history. He also indicates the importance of the “casual action,” the “odd phrase,” and the “jest” as elements which add truth to the depiction of a character: for the Greek biographer, these are central aspects in the writing of a life. As Boswell and Johnson will point out later, a detail is often more revealing than a much-celebrated feat. Moreover, Plutarch makes an interesting comparison between biography and painting, already indicating a possible relationship between them.

Plutarch can be considered not only a forerunner, but the real father of the genre of biography: he clearly states the very purpose of the genre and offers a brilliant example of what life-writing should be.

The history of English biography is, apart from the renown of Plutarch's *Lives*, very recent. Its legitimacy in England was fully recognized in 1791, when Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D* was published. As many scholars have argued, English biography is “a perfectly respectable branch of literature, with a name and dignity of its own.”⁸⁸ Actually, Nicolson, in his study of the development of English Biography, traces its ancestry back to the ancient runic inscriptions which celebrated the lives of heroes and recorded the feats of legendary warriors. English biography indeed can be equally traced back to the old sagas and epics, within the Anglo-Saxon tradition of *Beowulf* (VIII c.) and the *Widsith* fragment (IX c.), while later it seems to

⁸⁷ Quoted in Lee, Hermione, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, cit., p. 24.

⁸⁸ Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., p. 16.

flourish with the genre of hagiography (VII c.).⁸⁹

A complete excursus of the history of English biography would be a hard task to accomplish. Scholars have offered excellent surveys of this genre, and my study is indebted to the works of Harold Nicolson, André Maurois, Leon Edel, A. O. J. Cockshut, Robert Gittings, Margaretta Jolly, and Hermione Lee. In the context of this dissertation, I will take into consideration those biographers whose relevance is pointed out by Virginia Woolf in her essays “The New Biography” (1927) and “The Art of Biography” (1939).⁹⁰ Woolf identifies them as the greatest biographers in the literary history of England. They are Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), James Boswell (1740-1795), John Gibson Lockhart (1794-1854), James Anthony Froude (1818-1894), Edmund Gosse (1849-1928), Giles Lytton Strachey (1880-1932), and Harold Nicolson (1886-1968). Among them the figure of Sir Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), Virginia’s father and intellectual guide, cannot be omitted.

1.6 Samuel Johnson and his lesson concerning biography

According to Harold Nicolson, Samuel Johnson was the first to proclaim that biography is a distinct branch of creative literature:

[Samuel Johnson’s] terror of death, his incredulity about life after death, gave him a deeply personal interest in mundane life, in the personal, and in the humane. Evidences of his constant preoccupation with the theory of biography can be

⁸⁹ Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., p. 17.

⁹⁰ Woolf, Virginia, “The New Biography,” (1927) and “The Art of Biography,” (1939), in McNeillie, Andrew, Clarke, Stuart N., eds., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1994, pp. 473-480 and vol. VI, 2011, pp. 181-189.

found in many of his writings and remarks. His observations, if collected together, constitute perhaps the best definition of biography as an art yet formulated.⁹¹

Samuel Johnson contributed to the development of English biography with two works, the *Life of Richard Savage* (1744) and the *Lives of the Poets* (1781). Moreover, Johnson discussed biography from a critical point of view in *The Rambler* (1750-1752) with an essay devoted to the art of biography.⁹² Finally, he expressed his opinions about the genre in several conversations recorded by his friend and biographer James Boswell in *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, published in 1791, and in *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785), a lively diary conceived by Boswell as a preliminary study for the *Life*.

Johnson's Lives of the Poets appeared between 1779 and 1781. This work, composed of fifty-two essays, deals with poets of the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, from Abraham Cowley to George Lyttelton.⁹³ Johnson provides biographical information, details about the cultural context of each poet, and offers passages of literary criticism, full of his acute observations.

As Arthur Waugh maintains in his "Introduction:"

The task which [Johnson] originally set himself was, as he himself expressed it, "not very extensive or difficult." He proposed to prefix to the work of each poet a

⁹¹ Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., p. 80.

⁹² Johnson, Samuel, *The Rambler*, No. 60, (Saturday, October 13th, 1750), in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 10 vols., (1958-1977), *The Rambler*, vol. III, edited by W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1969, pp. 318-323.

⁹³ Johnson, Samuel, *Johnson's Lives of the Poets*, (1781), 6 vols., London, Paul, Trench, Trübner & CO, 1896.

brief biographical note, with perhaps a few terse and epigrammatic sentences of judgment.⁹⁴

As Waugh suggests, the *Lives* provide two different elements: on the one hand, they show a “biographical side,” as “a collection of facts and a living portrait of the dead;” and, on the other hand, they can be perceived “in their critical character.”⁹⁵ With this work, Johnson accomplishes his main purpose, that is to tell the truth, which he considers as the main principle of biography. He insists on realistic details, and even dwells upon the subject’s defects in order to reveal, as much as possible, human nature. For Johnson not even Shakespeare can be excused from his “errors:”

His first defect is that to which may be imputed most of the evil in books or in men. He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose.⁹⁶

As Nicolson points out, Johnson brings to his compositions what Lytton Strachey would define his “immovable independence of thought – his searching sense of actuality.”⁹⁷ Moreover, Nicolson argues that it is in the *Rambler* No. 60 (1750) that it is possible to read the first extended statement of Dr Johnson’s views.⁹⁸ Dr Johnson begins by affirming that the interest of biography lies in “those parallel circumstances, and kindred images:”

⁹⁴ Waugh, Arthur, “Introduction” to Johnson, Samuel, *Johnson’s Lives of the Poets*, cit., p. xiii.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

⁹⁶ Johnson, Samuel, *Preface to Shakespeare e altri scritti shakespeareiani*, a cura di Agostino Lombardo, Bari, Adriatica Editrice, 1967, p. 244.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., pp. 83-84.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

Those parallel circumstances, and kindred images to which we readily conform our minds, are, above all other writings, to be found in the narratives of the lives of particular persons; and therefore no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition.⁹⁹

Johnson is convinced that, in writing a life, there are “invisible circumstances” which may prove more important than “public occurrences.”¹⁰⁰ He then describes the task of the biographer, whose art has “to pass slightly over those performances and incidents which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestick privacies, and to display the minute details of daily life.”¹⁰¹ He criticizes those biographers who seem “very little acquainted with the nature of their task:”

But biography has often be allotted to writers who seem very little acquainted with the nature of their task, or very negligent about the performance. They rarely afford any other account than might be collected from public papers, but imagine themselves writing a life when they exhibit a chronological series of actions or preferments; and so little regard the manners or behavior of their heroes, that more knowledge may be gained of a man’s real character, by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree, and ended with his funeral.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Johnson, Samuel, *The Rambler*, No. 60, cit., p. 319.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 322.

Johnson urges the biographer not to hide the faults or failings of his/her hero because the risk would be to have “whole ranks of characters adorned with uniform panegyric, and not to be known from one another.”¹⁰³ He only requires adherence to three central elements, that are truth, vivid detail, and psychological insight. He concludes his lesson by offering a moral suggestion: “If we owe regard to the memory of the dead, there is yet more respect to be paid to knowledge, to virtue, and to truth.”¹⁰⁴

The Rambler No. 60 is supplemented by another essay written nine years later in *The Idler and the Adventurer*, *The Idler* No. 84.¹⁰⁵ In this article Johnson, by considering biography as lying between the “falsehood” of fiction and the “truth” of history, maintains that biography is one “of the various kinds of narrative writing, which is most eagerly read, and more easily applied to the purposes of life.”¹⁰⁶ The essential element of biography is useful truth, and for Johnson the whole interest of the genre centers in this: “the value of every story depends on its being true. A story is a picture either of an individual or of human nature in general. If it is false, it is a picture of nothing.”¹⁰⁷ Moreover, Johnson seems genuinely interested in human life and in the different behaviors of men and women. He declares, in fact, to Mrs Thrale that “a blade of grass, is always a blade of grass: men and women are my subjects of inquiry.”¹⁰⁸ Several years later, Boswell will recall that Johnson compares biography

¹⁰³ Johnson, Samuel, *The Rambler*, No. 60, cit., p. 323.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

¹⁰⁵ The essay dates 24th November 1759.

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, Samuel, *The Idler*, No. 84, (Saturday, November 24th, 1759), in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, cit., *The Idler and the Adventurer*, vol. II, edited by W. J., Bate, John M., Bullitt, L. F., Powell, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1963, pp. 261-264, p. 261.

¹⁰⁷ Boswell, James, *Boswell's Life of Johnson; Together with Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, and Johnson's Diary of a Journey into North Wales*, 6 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, (1934-1950), vol. II, 1934, p. 433.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 401. Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs Thrale) offers herself a biography of Samuel Johnson entitled *Anecdotes of Doctor Johnson, LL.D. During the Last Twenty Years of His Life* (1786).

with history adding: “I esteem biography as giving us what comes near to ourselves, what we can turn to use.”¹⁰⁹ The value of instruction was thus extended from history – *magistra vitae* – to biography, and its useful office. Boswell also relates that:

Talking of Biography, [Johnson] said, he did not think that the life of any literary man in England had been well written. Beside the common incidents of life, it should tell us his studies, his mode of living, the means by which he attained to excellence, and his opinion of his own works.¹¹⁰

His curiosity for such details was – according to Boswell – insatiable, his observation and analysis accurate and acute. As a matter of fact, Johnson said to Boswell: “besides, I love anecdotes.”¹¹¹

In his *Life of Johnson*, Boswell records another interesting conversation with Johnson concerning the importance of peculiar aspects in a man’s life:

in writing a life, a man’s peculiarities should be mentioned, because they mark his character. JOHNSON. ‘Sir, there is no doubt as to peculiarities: the question is, whether a man’s vices should be mentioned; [...] for when Lord Hailes and he sat one morning calmly conversing in my house at Edinburgh, I well remember that Dr. Johnson maintained, that ‘If a man is to write *A Panegyrick*, he may keep vices out of sight; but if he professes to write *A Life*, he must represent it really as it

¹⁰⁹ Boswell, James, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1785), with an Introduction by L. F. Powell, London, J. M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1958, p. 44. This was a reply to Lord Monboddo in a recorded conversation dating Saturday 21st August 1773. Lord Monboddo, James Burnett (1714–1799), was a Scottish judge, scholar of linguistic evolution, philosopher and deist. He adopted an honorary title based on his father's estate, Monboddo House. Monboddo was one of a number of scholars involved in the development of the early concepts of evolution, anticipating the idea of natural selection which was later developed into a scientific theory by Charles Darwin.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161. Wednesday, 22^d September, 1773.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., p. 84.

was': and when I objected to the danger of telling that Parnell drank to excess, he said, that 'it would produce an instructive caution to avoid drinking, when it was seen, that even the learning and genius of Parnell could be debased by it.' And in the Hebrides he maintained, as appears from my *Journal*, that a man's intimate friend should mention his faults, if he writes his life.¹¹²

In another passage taken from Boswell's *Life*, Johnson recalls an experience of his youth, when he was determined to write a life of Dryden:

Talking about the great difficulty of obtaining authentic information for biography, Johnson told us, "When I was a young fellow I wanted to write the 'Life of Dryden', and in order to get materials, I applied to the only two persons then alive who had seen him; these were old Swinney, and old Cibber. Swinney's information was no more than this, 'That at Will's coffee-house Dryden had a particular chair for himself, which was set by the fire in winter, and was then called his winter-chair; and that it was carried out for him to the balcony in summer, and was then called his summer-chair.' Cibber could tell no more but 'That he remembered him a decent old man, arbiter of critical disputes at Will's.'"¹¹³

Johnson remarks that the information given by Swinney was more relevant in order to understand the personality of Dryden than the other given by Cibber. And this is so because, to quote again from Johnson, "nobody can write the life of a man, but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him."¹¹⁴

¹¹² Boswell, James, *Boswell's Life of Johnson, LL.D.*, cit., vol. III, pp. 154-155. 17th September 1777.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. III, pp. 71-72. 15th May 1776.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 166. 31st March 1772.

1.7 James Boswell and the voice of Dr Johnson

James Boswell invented a new method of writing biography, which Harold Nicolson calls “the Boswell formula:”

James Boswell invented actuality. He discovered and perfected a biographical formula in which the narrative could be fused with the pictorial, in which the pictorial in its turn could be rendered in a series of photographs so vividly, and above all, so rapidly, projected as to convey an impression of continuity, of progression, of life. Previous biographers had composed a studio portrait, a succession of lantern-slides. Boswell’s method was that of the cinematograph. He well deserves the central position he and his formula must always occupy.¹¹⁵

Boswell met Samuel Johnson in 1769, when he moved from Edinburgh to London. In 1773 he persuaded Johnson to join him on a tour of the Highlands and the Hebrides. Out of this entertaining experience Boswell realized a lively diary, approved by Johnson himself, the *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785). Boswell is also the author of the *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D* (1791), which is, according to his own remarks, “the most entertaining book that ever appeared.”¹¹⁶ He began to write this biography four years after Johnson’s death, with the encouragement of the Shakespearian scholar Edmond Malone (1741-1812). Boswell had an overwhelming amount of material to deal with: journals, letters, Johnson’s writings, pieces of information from Johnson’s friends, and above all his own memories. Thus, he started

¹¹⁵ Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., pp. 83-84.

¹¹⁶ Quoted Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., p. 88. Johnson’s life was also the subject of other works, such as the already mentioned Hester Lynch Piozzi’s *Anecdotes of Doctor Johnson, LL.D, During the Last Twenty Years of his Life* (1786), which offers a vivid representation of the image of Johnson, and Sir John Hawkins’s *Life of Johnson* (1787), a complete portrait of the character. See Harold Nicolson, pp. 95-97.

writing down Johnson's conversations, with the help of his great visual memory, and of his taste for circumstantial detail. He composed all these materials into a unity and, thanks to his strong power of observation and psychological insight, he managed to re-create and vividly preserve every scene in Dr Johnson's *Life*. All these ingredients make Boswell's *Life of Johnson* a great work of art, according to modern biographers and according to Virginia Woolf.¹¹⁷

As Boswell illustrates in his "Introduction" to the *Life*, his formula responds to a conscious plan of action, which follows the lesson of Dr Johnson:

Instead of melting down my materials into one mass, and constantly speaking in my own person, by which I might have appeared to have more merit in the execution of the work, I have resolved to adopt and enlarge upon the excellent plan of Mr. Mason, in his *Memoirs of Gray*. Wherever narrative is necessary to explain, connect, and supply, I furnish it the best of my abilities; but in the chronological series of Johnson's life, which I trace as distinctly as I can, year by year, I produce, wherever it is in my power, his own minutes, letters, or conversation, being convinced that this mode is more lively, and will make my readers better acquainted with him, than even most of those were who actually knew him, but could know him only partially; [...] Indeed I cannot conceive a more perfect mode of writing any man's life, than not only relating all the most important events of it in their order, but interweaving what he privately wrote, and said, and thought; by which mankind are enabled as it were to see him live, and to 'live o'er each scene' with him, as he actually advanced through the several stages of his life. [...] And he will be seen as he really was; for I profess to write, not his panegyric, which must be all praise, but his Life; which, great and good as he was, must not be supposed to be entirely perfect. To be as he was, is indeed

¹¹⁷ Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., pp. 99-101.

subject of panegyric enough to any man in this state of being; but in every picture there should be shade as well as light, and when I delineate him without reserve, I do what he himself recommended, both by his precept and his example.¹¹⁸

The *Life of Samuel Johnson* is written without divisions or chapters, so that the unity of impression is well preserved. Moreover, Boswell gives his reader a central role. He writes to Bishop Thomas Percy, on the 9th of February 1788:

It appears to me that mine is the best plan of biography that can be conceived; for my readers will as near as may be accompany Johnson in his progress, and, as it were, see each scene as it happened.¹¹⁹

Boswell's great achievement in the development of the genre of biography is his ability to put together all the new elements introduced by his predecessors. In fact, even if Johnson himself had invented the method of truthful portraiture and realistic biography, even if Eadmer¹²⁰ had introduced the device of original letters and documents, then perfected by Mason,¹²¹ and even if the introduction of anecdotes and

¹¹⁸ Boswell, James, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, cit., vol. I, pp. 29-30.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Oates, Stephen B., *Biography as High Adventure: Life-Writers Speak on their Art*, Massachusetts, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986, p. 40; and in Clifford, James L., ed., *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560-1960*, cit., p. 51.

¹²⁰ Eadmer (d. 1124?), historian, was the monk of Canterbury at the end of the eleventh century and the beginning of the twelfth century. The notes which follow are taken from *The Development of English Literature* by Harold Nicolson, cit., p. 22. "Eadamer is the author of *Historia Novarum* and *Vita Anselmi*. A part from his simple and direct use of Latin, his greatest merit is the introduction of letters inside his biographies. This new technique anticipates the later method, used by Mason and Boswell, [...]. Another important characteristic of Eadamer's innovative way of writing is the ability to record in his biographies real conversations, or dramatic incidents, proposed in such a vivid and powerful style. His whole work can be considered the first pure biography ever realized in England. William of Malmesbury maintained that Eadamer 'has told everything so lucidly that he seems somehow to have placed events before our very eyes.'"

¹²¹ William Mason (1724-1797) was an English poet. The notes which follow are taken from Lee, Sidney, Stephen, Leslie, eds., *The Dictionary of National Biography 1885-1900*, cit., vol. XII

actual conversations had been already employed by the French, it was Boswell who combined them into a single whole. Here lies his originality.¹²²

As Boswell wrote to William Temple, on the 25th of February 1778:

Mason's *Life of Gray* is excellent, because it is interspersed with letters which show us the *man*. His *Life of Whitehead* is not a life at all; for there is neither a letter nor a saying from first to last. I am absolutely certain that *my* mode of biography, which gives not only a *history* of Johnson's *visible* progress through the world, and of his publications, but a *view* of his mind, in his letters and conversations is the most perfect that can be conceived, and will be *more* of a *Life* than any work that has ever yet appeared.¹²³

Furthermore, in his *Life*, Boswell maintains: “what I consider as the peculiar value of the following work is the quantity that it contains of Johnson's conversation; which is universally acknowledged to have been eminently instructive and entertaining.”¹²⁴ And he proceeds by referring to Plutarch, “the father of biography,” who, in his “Life of Alexander the Great,” affirms that:

(LLWYD—MASON), 1959-1960, p. 1324. “Mason published Gray's ‘Life and Letters’ in 1774. His plan of printing the letters as part of the life, said to have been suggested by Middleton's ‘Cicero,’ was followed by later writers, including Boswell. Johnson himself had thought meanly of the ‘Life,’ describing it as ‘fit for the second table,’ but he was doubtless not uninfluenced by Mason's whiggism in politics. Mason took great liberties with the letters, considering them less as biographical documents than as literary material to be edited and combined. [...] The book, however, is in other respects well done. It brought him into a long correspondence with Horace Walpole, who supplied him with materials, and whom he consulted throughout. The correspondence continued after the publication of the life, and was published by Mitford in 1851.”

¹²² Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., pp. 104-107.

¹²³ Boswell, James, from *General Correspondence*, in Clifford, James L., ed., *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560-1960*, cit., pp. 51-52. To William Temple, 25th February 1778.

¹²⁴ Boswell, James, *The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D.*, cit., vol. I, p. 31.

Nor is it always in the most distinguished achievements that men's virtues or vices may be best discerned; but very often an action of a small note, a short saying, or a jest, shall distinguish a person's real character more than the greatest sieges, or the most important battles.¹²⁵

Boswell firmly believes that highlighting the manners and behaviour of a character is the best way to make his actual acquaintance. This information has to be gathered, using Johnson's words, "by a short conversation with one of his servants, [rather] than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree, and ended with his funeral."¹²⁶

Nicolson, in *The Development of English Biography*, concludes his remarks about Boswell, stating that:

He [Boswell] was able to project his detached photographs with such continuity and speed that the effect produced is that of motion and of life. It is this that I mean with "the Boswell formula". For this combination of methods, this fruitful formula, Boswell's claim to be the greatest of English biographers is thus justified.¹²⁷

Virginia Woolf would share the very same opinion.

¹²⁵ Quoted in Boswell, James, *The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D*, cit., vol. I, p. 32.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 32.

¹²⁷ Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., p. 107.

1.8 The third among the great: John Gibson Lockhart

If it is true that there have been only three great biographers – Johnson, Boswell, and Lockhart – the reason [...] is that the time was short; and his plea, that the art of biography has had but little time to establish itself and develop itself, is certainly borne out by the textbooks.¹²⁸

Woolf, in this passage, mentions Lockhart in connection with Johnson and Boswell. Actually, she refers to what was considered in her time the traditional canon of biography, probably as viewed by her father Leslie Stephen. She states that, even if biography is a young art without a long tradition, these three writers are the greatest biographers in England.

John Gibson Lockhart was a classical scholar, lawyer, poet, essayist, satirist, but, above all, the biographer of Sir Walter Scott. He married Scott's eldest daughter, Sophia, in 1820, and settled with her at the Chiefswood cottage, on Scott's estate. Scott often spent the day with them. Lockhart had excellent material, such as letters and journals of his father-in-law. He published seven volumes of the *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1837-38). The *Dictionary of National Biography* considered Lockhart's *Life of Scott* "next to Boswell's *Johnson*, the best in the language."¹²⁹ Despite that, Lockhart conceived his way "to write" biography differently from the "Boswell's formula:"

¹²⁸ Woolf, Virginia, "The Art of Biography," (1939) in McNeillie, Andrew, Clarke, Stuart N., eds., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. VI, 2011, p. 181.

¹²⁹ Lee, Sidney, Stephen, Leslie, eds., *The Dictionary of National Biography 1885-1900*, cit., vol. XII (LLWYD—MASON), 1959-1960, pp. 47-49.

I never thought it lawful to keep a journal of what passes in private society, so that no one need expect from the sequel of this narrative any detailed record of Scott's familiar talk. What fragments of it have happened to adhere to a tolerably retentive memory, and may be put into black and white without wounding any feelings which my friend, were he alive, would have wished to spare, I shall introduce as the occasion suggests or serves; [...] and I also wish to enter a protest once for all against the general fidelity of several literary gentlemen who have kindly forwarded to me private lucubrations of theirs, designed to Boswellize Scott, and which they may probably publish hereafter.¹³⁰

In another relevant passage, taken from his review of Croker's edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (*Quarterly Review*, November 1831), Lockhart again reveals himself hostile to the "Boswell's method:"

Surely the lamentable circumstance is, not that the Boswellian style should have been applied to the history of one great man, but that there should be so few even of the greatest men whose lives could be so dealt with without serious injury to their fame.¹³¹

Lockhart's engagement in the art of biography and his promise to his readers can be then summed up as follows:

¹³⁰ Lockhart, John, extract from *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1838), in Clifford, James L., ed., *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560-1960*, cit., p. 76-77.

¹³¹ Lockhart, John, review of Croker's edition of Boswell, James, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, in *Quarterly Review*, November 1831, pp. 20-24, in Clifford, James L., ed., *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560-1960*, cit., p. 75-76.

I considered it as my duty to tell the story truly and intelligibly; but I trust I have avoided unnecessary disclosures;—and after all, there was nothing to disclose that could have attached blame to any of the parties concerned.¹³²

1.9 James Anthony Froude and the *Life of Carlyle* controversy

James Anthony Froude was an historian¹³³ and a man of letters. In 1844, the Cardinal John Henry Newman invited him to contribute with the life of St. Neot to his *Lives of the English Saints*. The life of the Saint was published anonymously, like the rest of the series. The *Dictionary of National Biography* as well as Harold Nicolson remark that Froude described the whole work as a “nonsense.” Afterwards, he devoted himself entirely to the study of English history and literature.¹³⁴

Froude became famous as the biographer of Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). The two writers met in 1849, thanks to James Spedding (1808-1881), the editor of Francis Bacon’s works, and became good friends. Froude was a frequent visitor of the Carlyles in Chelsea. Leslie Stephen’s *Dictionary* relates that their meeting was a turning point in Froude’s career. In his *Carlyle in London*, Froude wrote:

The practice of submission to the authority of one whom one recognises as greater than one’s self outweighs the chance of occasional mistake. If I wrote

¹³² Lockhart, John, “Preface” to his *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott*, (1838), Edinburgh, Robert Cadell, 1850, p. iii.

¹³³ James Anthony Froude wrote the *History of England, from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada*, published from 1856 to 1870. The twelve volumes were issued in one edition by Cambridge University Press in 2011.

¹³⁴ Lee, Sidney, Stephen, Leslie, eds., *The Dictionary of National Biography*, cit., vol. XXII, Supplement, 1959-1960, p. 680. In the *Dictionary*, it is explained that “Froude’s faith was unequal to the strain put upon [Newman’s *Lives of the English Saints*] by the miraculous stories he read.” Harold Nicolson underlines the same concept in *The Development of English Literature*, cit., p. 128, maintaining that Froude did not care for hagiography, in fact, he took a favourable view for Protestantism.

anything, I fancied myself writing it to [Carlyle], reflecting at each word on what he would think of it, as a check on affectations.¹³⁵

After the death of Carlyle's wife, Jane Welsh, in 1871 Carlyle gave Froude all his wife's letters and private materials, together with "Reminiscences," written by Carlyle after his wife's loss, and "The Letters and Memorials" by Mrs. Carlyle.¹³⁶ When Carlyle died, in 1881, Froude was designed as his sole literary executor.¹³⁷ He was asked not to publish all that private material without a "fit editing." In his will of 1883, Carlyle even wrote that he did not want a biography at all, and that he submitted the question of the publication of his literary materials to his friend's discretion. Thus, Froude proceeded to publish Carlyle's intimate biography with a wealth of private documents. He published the *Reminiscences* in two volumes in 1881 and the *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle* in three volumes in 1883. Meanwhile, he was composing a full-length biography of Carlyle, later published as the *History of the First Forty Years of Carlyle's Life* in two volumes (1882) and as the *History of Carlyle's Life in London* in two volumes (1884).¹³⁸

Froude's exposure of his subject's weaknesses caused great indignation among Victorian men of letters, scholars and readers: he was accused of misreading Carlyle's documents and of disregard for the principle of truth. Moreover, he had outraged Victorian public opinion by suggesting that Carlyle had been an imperfect husband.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Lee, Sidney, Stephen, Leslie, eds., *The Dictionary of National Biography*, cit., vol. XXII, 1959-1960, Supplement, p. 681.

¹³⁶ Jolly, Margareta, *Encyclopedia of Life Writing, Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, cit., vol. I, p. 349.

¹³⁷ Lee, Sidney, Stephen, Leslie, eds., *The Dictionary of National Biography*, cit., vol. XXII, 1959-1960, Supplement, p. 684.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 684.

¹³⁹ Broughton, Trev Lynn, "Impotence, Biography, and the Froude-Carlyle Controversy: "Revelations on Ticklish Topics," in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 7, No. 4, (Apr., 1997), pp. 502-536, p. 502.

Froude defended himself from these charges in *Carlyle's Life in London* (1884) and *My Relation with Carlyle*, published in 1903.¹⁴⁰ John Ruskin was convinced of the truth of Froude's volumes; Harold Nicolson asserts without hesitation that Froude "published nine fat volumes in which he honestly represented Carlyle, following the principle of truth."¹⁴¹

The Carlyles occupied most of Froude's time, even if, in 1884, he also published *Luther: a Short Biography*.¹⁴² Froude's contribution to the genre of biography is indeed huge. Nevertheless, his literary output had to face the indignation of many Victorians who accused the biographer of disloyalty towards all those secrets that should have remained in Carlyle's grave.¹⁴³ In the long perspective of this study, Froude looks like a kind of precursor of an attitude which would be endorsed by twentieth century biographers.

1.10 Sir Leslie Stephen and his commitment to national biography

Leslie Stephen, the father of Virginia Woolf, was born in 1832, from Scottish ancestry. In 1850 he matriculated at Trinity Hall, in Cambridge. Frederic William Maitland, his biographer, asserts that long before the university, "he had conceived his lifelong delight in Boswell's *Johnson*, which he read 'from cover to cover, backward and

¹⁴⁰ Lee, Sidney, Stephen, Leslie, eds., *The Dictionary of National Biography*, cit., vol. XXII, 1959-1960, Supplement, p. 684.

¹⁴¹ Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., p. 129.

¹⁴² Lee, Sidney, Stephen, Leslie, eds., *The Dictionary of National Biography*, cit., vol. XXII, 1959-1960, Supplement, p. 685.

¹⁴³ On this subject, many scholars such as Fish, Gilbert, Trela, and Broughton have written interesting articles. See: Fish, Andrew, "The Reputation of James Anthony Froude," in *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Jun., 1932), pp. 179-192. Gilbert, Elliot L., "Rescuing Reality: Carlyle, Froude, and Biographical Truth-Telling," in *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3, (Spring, 1991), pp. 295-314. D.J. Trela, "Margaret Oliphant, James Anthony Froude and the Carlyles' Reputations: Defending the Dead," in *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3, (Fall, 1996), pp. 199-215. Broughton, Trev Lynn, "Impotence, Biography, and the Froude-Carlyle Controversy: "Revelations on Ticklish Topics," in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 7, No. 4, (Apr., 1997), pp. 502-536.

forward, over and over, through and through.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, Stephen manifested very early his passion for biography. In her life of Virginia Woolf (1996), Hermione Lee remarks that Stephen’s intellectual milieu knew him for his radical thoughts, his agnosticism, his scholarly passion for the eighteenth century, but also for his commitment to biography as exemplary for critics and historians. As a matter of fact, Stephen was the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*,¹⁴⁵ published from 1885 to 1900 in sixty-three volumes, for which he also wrote many of the entries himself. Moreover, he composed the biographies of his friend Henry Fawcett in 1885, and ten years later, of his brother Fitzjames Stephen, a notable criminal jurist.¹⁴⁶

In 1871, Stephen became editor of the *Cornhill Magazine* and he began the long series of biographies and literary studies which are collected as *Hours in a Library* (1874–1879) and *Studies of a Biographer* (1898–1902). He also wrote four biographies for *The English Men of Letters Series*:¹⁴⁷ *Samuel Johnson* (1878), *Alexander Pope* (1880),

¹⁴⁴ Greenslet, Ferris, review of Maitland, Frederic W., *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, (New York, G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1906), in the *North American Review*, Vol. 184, No. 607, (Jan. 18th, 1907), pp. 195–198, pp. 195–196.

¹⁴⁵ In 1882 the publisher George Smith (1824–1901), of Smith, Elder & Co., planned a universal dictionary which would include biographical entries on individuals from world history. He approached Leslie Stephen to become editor. Stephen persuaded Smith that the work should focus on subjects from the UK and its present. The first volume of the *Dictionary of National Biography* appeared on 1st January 1885. In May 1891, Leslie Stephen resigned the editorship. Sidney Lee, Stephen’s assistant editor from the beginning of the project, succeeded him. Volumes appeared with complete punctuality until midsummer 1900, when the series closed with volume LXIII. Concerning the *Dictionary*, Virginia Woolf, in her diary, wrote that it had been produced at the expense of the children’s well-being: “the D.N.B. crushed [Adrian’s] life out before he was born. It gave me a twist of the head too. I shouldn’t have been so clever, but I should have been more stable, without that contribution to the History of England.” (Monday 3rd December 1923). See Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 5 vols., London, The Hogarth Press, (1975–1980), vol. II, 1976, p. 277.

¹⁴⁶ Lee, Hermione, *Virginia Woolf*, cit., p. 70.

¹⁴⁷ *The English Men of Letters* was a series of literary biographies written by leading literary figures and published by Macmillan, under the general editorship of John Morley (1838–1923). The original series was launched in 1878, with Leslie Stephen’s biography of Samuel Johnson, and ran until 1892. A second series, again under the general editorship of Morley, was published between 1902 and 1919. James Anthony Froude and Edmund Gosse also contributed to this series, respectively with *John Bunyan* (1879) and *Thomas Gray* (1882).

Jonathan Swift (1882), and *George Eliot* (1902).¹⁴⁸

As Ferris Greenslet maintains in his review of Maitland's *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*,

The quality of [Stephen's] work is of a piece with the whole nature of the man. [...] Yet, after all, his least corruptible monument amid the dust and drift of the libraries of the future is likely to be the great "Dictionary of National Biography," of which he was the first editor and chief contributor. Anthony à Wood has his immortality no less than Milton, and Stephen will have his no less than his more glorious contemporaries, the Victorian poets. In the literary free-for-all, some fly to the goal; some run; some walk, steadily, observantly; in literature as in life, Leslie Stephen will be remembered as the Great Pedestrian.¹⁴⁹

In his work *Truth to Life: the Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century* (1974), A.O.J. Cockshut remarks that Stephen was largely influenced by the spirit of his age: not disregarding Victorian conventions, in his biographical work he exhibited "a kind of petulant docility in the face of the public demand of decency at any cost."¹⁵⁰ Despite his worthy work, Stephen's approach illustrates the difficulty in dealing with a kind of biography which, responding to a necessity of "decency at any cost," omits, alters, distorts information and documents, and therefore does not respect the very principle of life-writing, that is the unquestionable search for truth.

¹⁴⁸ Greenslet, Ferris, review of Maitland, Frederic W., *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, cit., p. 197.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁵⁰ Cockshut, A.O.J., *Truth to Life: the Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century*, London, Collins, 1974, pp. 38-39.

Chapter 2

The “new biography”

2.1 The twentieth century

As Harold Nicolson maintains: “No branch of literature is more sensitive than [biography] to the ‘spirit of the age’”.¹⁵¹ The spirit of the twentieth century insists on absolute detachment from ethics or sentimentalism, and the new aim of the biographer is to combine his scientific material with a dignified literary form. During this period, the scientific interest in the genre of biography becomes more and more central, but, at the same time, it turns towards “the open fields of fiction.”¹⁵²

According to Nicolson, between 1900 and 1915, around five hundred biographies were annually published in Great Britain. He describes them as “life-and-times” biographies, memoirs and diaries, cheap editions: the genre is, by his time, consolidated.¹⁵³ Two writers however need specific attention, for their innovative way of writing biography: Sir Edmund Gosse and Giles Lytton Strachey.

¹⁵¹ Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., p. 142.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

2.2 Sir Edmund Gosse and “The Ethics of Biography”

Cervantes wittily says, in one of his ‘Exemplary Novels’, that you cannot catch trout, and yet keep your breeches dry. The adventurer in biography has to make up his mind to the commission of certain sins of indiscretion. [...] his [of the biographer] anxiety should be, not how to avoid all indiscretion, but how to be as indiscreet as possible within the boundaries of good taste and kind feeling.¹⁵⁴

Edmund Gosse’s concept of biography places him among the leading figures of the early twentieth century. He also paves the way, to some extent, to Lytton Strachey’s career.¹⁵⁵ In “The Art of Biography,” Virginia Woolf remarks their relationship, noticing that: “following Edmund Gosse in the early years of the present century came Lytton Strachey.”¹⁵⁶

Gosse’s aim in the biographical investigation is mostly criticism. In his contribution to the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1910-1911),¹⁵⁷ he provides a lucid definition of what biography is, i.e. “the faithful portrait of a soul in its adventures through life.” In the *Britannica*, the entry “Standard biography” explains that:

This third, and central, category of biography, balanced between the objective and the subjective, represents the mainstream of biographical literature, the practice of biography as an art. From antiquity until the present—within the limits of the psychological awareness of the particular age and the availability of materials—

¹⁵⁴ Gosse, Edmund, “The Ethics of Biography,” *The Cosmopolitan*, (July 1903), pp. 317-323, in Clifford, James L., ed., *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560-1960*, cit., pp. 113-114.

¹⁵⁵ Woolf, James D., *Sir Edmund Gosse*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1972, p. 1.

¹⁵⁶ Woolf, Virginia, “The Art of Biography,” cit., p. 182.

¹⁵⁷ The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is the oldest English-language encyclopaedia still being produced. It was first published between 1768 and 1771 in Edinburgh, Scotland.

this kind of biographical literature has had as its objective what Sir Edmund Gosse called “the faithful portrait of a soul in its adventures through life.” It seeks to transform, by literary methods that do not distort or falsify, the truthful record of fact into the truthful effect of a life being lived.¹⁵⁸

For Gosse, biography “presupposes our observation of life not unduly clouded by moral passion or prejudice.”¹⁵⁹

In “The Ethics of Biography” (1903), Gosse insists on individuality, stating that “the aim of all portraiture ought to be the emphasising of what makes the man different from, not like, other men.” He explains that it is “the specific, the individual view” that the biographer has to catch.¹⁶⁰ In the same article, and in the wake of Johnson and Boswell, Gosse relates an episode concerning the importance of trivial details:

When I was a young man, and frequented the Pre-Raphaelites, I used to notice that Rossetti had a very curious way of tilting a glass or cup out of which he was drinking, and gulping down the last drops in a great hurry. I have never heard or seen this trick noticed by anyone else, and it is so trivial that I have never thought of recording it myself. But there it is, in my memory; the feverish, swarthy face turned upward in profile, and the large lips eagerly supping down the stream of liquid. I don’t know why, but in that trifle I see Rossetti again after all these years; there is something, to me, characteristic, personal, unique, in the habitual

¹⁵⁸<http://www.britannica.com/pros.lib.unimi.it/EBchecked/topic/65924/biography/51200/Standard-biography>. (Last access 1st Feb 2013).

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., p. 143.

¹⁶⁰ Gosse, Edmund, “The Ethics of Biography,” cit., p. 114.

gesture. [...] I cannot tell why it is that the modern biographer is so afraid of letting us into these little picturesque secrets.¹⁶¹

It is worth noticing that, after having told his anecdote, Gosse wonders why the modern biographers are “so afraid of letting us into these little picturesque secrets.” This sentence highlights how biography, by that time, was evolving. In the article, he also shows the changes that had occurred in the ethics of biography. Through an imaginary example, Gosse supposes that a biographer of a “very eminent man,” a certain Mr. A, is placed in possession of all the documents concerning him, and becomes aware of “certain matters which are not so agreeable:”

Mr. A. was very witty, but he could not restrain himself from saying things that gave pain to others, or, being repeated, produced great offence. He was habitually selfish in his dealings with people younger than himself.¹⁶²

Gosse maintains that a modern biographer would treat this fact differently, suggesting that Mr. A.:

though such a conversational sparkler, held his tongue ever in restraint lest it might unconsciously wound a friend; and that he was always eagerly looking out for merit in those younger than himself – “the generation knocking at the door!” as he would often playfully exclaim.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Gosse, Edmund, “The Ethics of Biography,” cit., p. 115.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

Gosse, at this point, offers his interpretation, proposing how he would have used the piece of information:

I am of the opinion that it is not a matter of choice with the biographer, but a matter of duty, to expose, without rancour, without emphasis, but unmistakably, this fault, which was a direct outcome of a certain sensitiveness, a certain want of balance, inextricably connected with [Mr. A.'s] peculiar genius, whatever it was. If a man possessed splendid talents, and gets the full credit of them, it is immoral to conceal defects which were the corollary of his genius and the result of its excessive qualities. It is wrong, as well as absurd, to paint a man of disagreeably intense egotistic force as though he were a sister of mercy on wheels.¹⁶⁴

In conclusion, it is possible to assert that Gosse wants the biographer to obey truth at any cost: defects and faults must be exposed because a human being has to be depicted exactly as he is.

The development of Gosse's method may be found in his works *John Donne* (1899), *Coventry Patmore* (1905), and *Father and Son* (1907). The latter is considered, according to critics, his masterpiece. In *Father and Son* Gosse performs with three major genres: biography, autobiography, and criticism. In the life of his father, Gosse makes some significant innovations: he limits the study to the crucial years between 1850 and 1865 which he examines in detail, and he heightens the psychological portrait of his subject, making him the climatic culmination of his previous

¹⁶⁴ Gosse, Edmund, “The Ethics of Biography,” cit., p. 118.

experiments in *John Donne* and *Coventry Patmore*.¹⁶⁵ Here Gosse’s interest in the psychological discourse clearly emerges.¹⁶⁶

With his *Life of Swinburne* (1917), Gosse concludes his career as a full-length critical biographer. From 1896 to 1928, he then publishes twelve books which contain portraits of literary acquaintances, biographico-critical essays, and literary essays in general, ranging from *Critical Kit-Kats* (1896) to *Leaves and Fruit* (1928).¹⁶⁷

In *Critical Kit-Kats*, Gosse offers his portraits of Walt Whitman, Christina Rossetti, Walter Pater, and Robert Louis Stevenson. With *French Profile* (1904), he writes four essays on literary acquaintances, such as Alphonse Daudet, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Albert Saiman. These essays record impressions of their subjects and their work, together with Gosse’s personal observations:

In an age when studies multiply, and our shelves groan with books, it is not every interesting and original figure to whom the space of a full-length or even a half-length portrait can be spared. [...] I have ventured to borrow from the graphic art this title for my little volume, since these are condensed portraits¹⁶⁸, each less than half-length, and each accommodated to suit limited leisure and a crowded space. They are essays in a class of literature which it is strange to find somewhat neglected in this country, since, if it can be only be executed with tolerable skill, none should be more directly interesting and pleasing. We are familiar with pure criticism and with pure biography, but what I have here tried to produce is a

¹⁶⁵ Woolf, James D., *Sir Edmund Gosse*, cit., p. 117.

¹⁶⁶ On this subject, see Di Michele, Laura, “L’ombra di Darwin fra Edmund and Philip Henry Gosse,” in Pagetti, Carlo, ed., *Darwin nel tempo. Modernità letteraria e immaginario scientifico*, Milano, Cisalpino Istituto Editoriale Universitario, 2011, pp. 201-220.

¹⁶⁷ Woolf, James D., *Sir Edmund Gosse*, cit., p. 120.

¹⁶⁸ These “condensed portraits” recall a previous work by Walter Pater in which Pater offers four picturesque portraits of imaginary men. See Pater, Walter, *Imaginary Portraits*, (1887), London, Macmillan, 1929.

combination of the two, the life illustrated by the work, the work relieved by the life.¹⁶⁹

Gosse also writes *Portraits and Sketches* (1912), which opens with the imposing portrait of the late Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, and collects the portraits of a number of widely known-writers, such as Alfred Tennyson, John Greenleaf Whittier, Andrew Lang, Eugène de Vogüé, and André Gide.¹⁷⁰ Some minor, but intriguing figures also appear in the collection.¹⁷¹

Aspects and Impressions (1922), the last of Gosse’s collections of essays, contains the portrait of “George Eliot,” “Henry James,” a lively essay on “Two French Critics: Emile Faguet – Remy de Gourmont;” a half-dozen snapshots of Norwegian writers of the 1870s in “A Visit to the Friends of Ibsen;” and a vivid portrait of Lord Wolseley in “Some Recollections of Lord Wolseley.”¹⁷²

Gosse also contributes to the weekly column of *The Sunday Times* with several review essays, among them “Matthew Arnold” and “Leslie Stephen,”¹⁷³ then collected

¹⁶⁹ Gosse, Edmund, “Preface” to *Critical Kit-Kats*, New York, Dodd, Mead and company, 1903, pp. ix-x.

¹⁷⁰ Woolf, James D., *Sir Edmund Gosse*, cit., pp. 134-136.

¹⁷¹ Among the minor portraits, it is worth mentioning Richard Hengist Horne. Richard Hengist Horne (1802-1884) is the author of *Memoirs of a London Doll, written by herself, edited by Mrs. Fairstair*, published in 1846. For further information about this work, see Meddemmen, John, *Enciclopedia, isole deserte, bambole. La formazione dei giovani inglesi (1780-1905)*, Milano, Arcipelago Edizioni, 2010, pp. 125-131. It is interesting to notice that the subject of the work mentioned above is a doll, and not a human being. This is to say that biographies and autobiographies can be written even upon inanimate objects, cities, or animals. See, as examples, Kilner, Mary Ann, Bewick, John, *The Adventures of a Pincushion: Designed Chiefly for the Use of Young Ladies; In Two Volumes*, (c. 1783), Charleston, Nabu Press, 2010; Ackroyd, Peter, *London: The Biography*, (2000), London, Chatto & Windus, 2000; and Woolf, Virginia, *Flush: A Biography*, (1933), London, The Hogarth press, 1958.

¹⁷² Woolf, James D., *Sir Edmund Gosse*, cit., p. 143.

¹⁷³ “Leslie Stephen” is Gosse’s review of Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s edition of Leslie Stephen’s *Some Early Impressions* (1924), to which he adds his personal description of Virginia’s father.

respectively in *More Books on the Table* (1923)¹⁷⁴ and in *Silhouettes* (1925). These essays are of valuable importance for the genre of personal portraiture.¹⁷⁵

It is easy to assert that Edmund Gosse was a very prolific writer. In the formative stages of his career, he had taken as a model the writings of French authors such as Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Hyppolite Taine, Théophile Gautier: “my object [...] is to pass on to others the pleasure which I have experienced.” In the end, “the only method which these swallow-flights [essays] can pretend to adopt is based upon curiosity and delight in all manifestations of literature.”¹⁷⁶ Sir Edmund Gosse shows his originality in setting out not a life, but “a genuine slice of life,” as Harold Nicolson maintains. Gosse’s new formula consists in “a clinical examination of states of mind over a limited period.”¹⁷⁷ It is with *Father and Son* that Gosse was able to “combine the maximum of scientific interest with the maximum of literary form.”¹⁷⁸ Limiting the field of inquiry in time and space, the whole development of the character occurs in the psychology of the reader: this was Gosse’s great achievement in the development of biography.¹⁷⁹

2.3 Lytton Strachey and the “new biography”

The figure of Lytton Strachey is so important a figure in the history of biography that it compels a pause. For his three famous books, *Eminent Victorians*, *Queen Victoria*, and *Elizabeth and Essex*, are of a stature to show both what biography can

¹⁷⁴ In this collection, Gosse also inserts a brief review of the portrait of Thomas Arnold contained in Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918).

¹⁷⁵ Woolf, James D., *Sir Edmund Gosse*, cit., pp. 146-147.

¹⁷⁶ Quoted in Woolf, James D., *Sir Edmund Gosse*, cit., p. 148.

¹⁷⁷ Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, cit., p.146.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148

do and what biography cannot do. Thus they suggest many possible answers to the question whether biography is an art, and if not, why it fails.¹⁸⁰

This is what Virginia Woolf, in 1939, wrote about Lytton Strachey, one of the main “theorists” of the “new biography,” a formula which developed in the early twentieth century. Strachey is remembered mostly for three works: *Eminent Victorians*, *Queen Victoria*, and *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History*, respectively published in 1918, 1921 and 1928.

André Maurois maintains that Strachey chose the Victorian Age as the “setting” for several of his works not by chance, but because he was in strong reaction against it.¹⁸¹ As a matter of fact, Strachey’s biographical method is critical of and thus different from the Victorian tradition. Strachey was trying to get rid of the Victorian dogma about biography, namely that a biography must display a virtuous subject at all costs. In his opinion, the moral perspective the form of biography had to express, was simply the reflection of the biographer. The modern biographer has to write about men and women in action, combining the ability of the artist with elements of truth and action, and conveying eventually his own judgment.¹⁸² Victorian biography indeed reflected Victorian sensibility: in a period of religious doubt, people needed the support of exemplary lives, excelling both in private virtue and in public achievement. With the World War One, a loss of faith in official values caused a new response to life and experience and, as a consequence, a new concept of biography. Lytton Strachey’s

¹⁸⁰ Woolf, Virginia, “The Art of Biography,” (1939), cit., p. 182.

¹⁸¹ Maurois, André, *Aspects of Biography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1929, p. 17.

¹⁸² Skidelsky, Robert, “Only Connect: Biography and Truth,” in Homberger, Eric, ed., *The Troubled Face of Biography*, Houndmills, Macmillan Press, 1988, pp. 1-16, p. 6.

Eminent Victorians works as a turning-point towards an innovative procedure of life-writing, insofar as his aim is to break away with false values and hero-worship.¹⁸³

The principles of Strachey’s method are expounded in his “Preface” to *Eminent Victorians*, which can be considered as a “manifesto” of the “new biography”.

It has been my purpose to illustrate rather than to explain. [...] I hope, however, that the following pages may prove to be of interest from the strictly biographical, no less than from the historical point of view. Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past. They have a value which is independent of any temporal processes - which is eternal, and must be felt for its own sake. [...] But it is hardly necessary to particularise. To preserve, for instance, a becoming brevity – a brevity which excludes everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant – that, surely, it is the first duty of the biographer. The second, no less surely, is to maintain his own freedom of spirit. [...] to lay bare the facts of some cases, as he understands them, dispassionately, impartially, and without ulterior intentions. To quote the words of a Master – “Je n’impose rien; je ne propose rien; j’expose.”¹⁸⁴

The French quotation that concludes the “Preface” – according to scholars presumably inspired by Voltaire – represents the creed on which Strachey’s method is based. Strachey’s purpose was to make biography a work of art in which the biographer holds freedom of judgement, is loyal to facts, but also selective and brief. The biographer’s business is not “to be complimentary,” nor to use “ill-digested masses of material,” in a “tone of tedious panegyric,” lacking “selection,” “detachment” and

¹⁸³ Skidelsky, Robert, “Only Connect: Biography and Truth,” cit., p. 5.

¹⁸⁴ Strachey, Lytton, Preface to *Eminent Victorians*, (1918), in Clifford, James L., ed., *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560-1960*, cit., pp. 121-122.

“design.”¹⁸⁵ He/she has instead to “examine and elucidate certain fragments of the truth which took [his/her] fancy and lay to [his/her] hand.”¹⁸⁶

According to Maurois, Strachey’s most remarkable experiment in the “new biography” is achieved in *Queen Victoria*. Here, Strachey revolutionizes the art of biography by creating a warm, humorous, and very human portrait of the iconic queen. Victoria indeed is portrayed as a child with temper, as an 18-year-old girl queen, as a monarch, wife, mother, and widow. By depicting the queen as an ordinary woman, he demonstrates that an ordinary human being can become a hero or a heroine. Strachey shares the principle by whom the biographer should not alter his subject’s defects, nor omit any of his or her weaknesses: this attitude would eventually mutilate the hero. In this sense, the first rule the biographer has to follow is the search for truth at all costs, a truth influenced by the progress of modern physics and biology.¹⁸⁷

But what does Strachey imply with the expression “modern biography?” As Sanders maintains in “Lytton Strachey’s Conception of Biography,” the modern biographer – according to Strachey – has the gift of discerning the secret that each individual human being carries within him or her, and the biographer’s interest must indeed focus upon this secret. Losing interest in human beings was, for Strachey, a sure sign of literary decadence. Thus the biographer has to exercise his art by showing his ability to catch all the nuances of a character and, subsequently, to make them vital: “no study of a man can be successful unless it is vital; a portrait-painter who cannot

¹⁸⁵ Strachey, Lytton, Preface to *Eminent Victorians*, cit., p. 122.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁸⁷ Maurois, André, *Aspects of Biography*, cit., pp. 22-23.

make his subject alive has very little reason for putting brush to canvas.”¹⁸⁸ But it is the French tradition which exercises the strongest influence on the work of Strachey:

The art of biography seems to have fallen on evil times in England. We have had, it is true, a few masterpieces, but we have never had, like the French, a great biographical tradition; we have had no Fontanelles, and Condorcets, with their incomparable *éloges*; compressing into a few shining pages the manifold existences of men.¹⁸⁹

As Sanders asserts in his essay, Strachey’s study of Racine, published in *The New Quarterly* in June 1908, is of great importance in enabling him to become a biographer. Sanders remarks that in Racine’s plays Strachey finds three aspects which he considers fundamental for his own idea of biography: the sense of reality, the ability to select the collected material in accordance with true judgment, and the presence of psychological insight. To respect these three rules is to realize a good biography.¹⁹⁰ Nevertheless – as Sanders illustrates – Strachey also admires many English biographers, such as Clarendon, Aubrey, Johnson, Boswell, Lockhart, Carlyle and Gosse: in each of them he discovers one quality *à la* Racine. It is remarkable, however, that Russian literature and Dostoevsky’s art of fiction, are included by Sanders in Strachey’s horizon, as prominent models of what he intends to achieve. Dostoevsky struck Strachey because wonderful intensity and subtle psychological insight play a significant fascination upon the author.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Strachey, Lytton, “The Italian Renaissance,” *Spectator*, CI, (21st Nov. 1908), p. 838 quoted in Sanders, Charles Richard, “Lytton Strachey’s Conception of Biography,” *PMLA*, Vol. 66, No. 4, (Jun., 1951), pp. 295-315, p. 297.

¹⁸⁹ Strachey, Lytton, “Preface” to *Eminent Victorians*, cit., p. 122.

¹⁹⁰ Sanders, Charles Richard, “Lytton Strachey’s Conception of Biography,” cit., p. 301.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 302-303.

Sanders summarizes in a very effective way what good biography, according to Strachey, should be:

[Good biography] should be based on the facts. It should be art, with judicious selection, good structure, and good style. It should make its subject live again before the eyes of the reader. It should be written from a definite point of view. It must be the product of a free mind, bound only by considerations of impartiality and justice. And, as to length, it must be either long or short; it must either use the Boswellian art which produced a life-size portrait, or it must use the art of brevity, the art of the profile. The two arts must be kept separate: to try to find the halfway ground between the two was to court disaster.¹⁹²

Lytton Strachey’s search for truth, liveliness, freedom in judgment, and selection, together with his achievement in making biography a literary art, makes him, as Virginia Woolf maintains, “so important a figure in the history”¹⁹³ of the genre.

¹⁹² Sanders, Charles Richard, “Lytton Strachey’s Conception of Biography,” cit., pp. 304–305.

¹⁹³ Woolf, Virginia, “The Art of Biography,” (1939), cit., p. 182.

Virginia Stephen

2.4 Being the daughter of Leslie Stephen

Who was I then? Adeline Virginia Stephen, the second daughter of Leslie and Julia Prinsep Stephen, born on 25th January 1882, descended from a great many people, some famous, others obscure; born into a large connection, born not of rich parents, but of well-to-do parents, born into a very communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate, late nineteenth century world;¹⁹⁴

This is Virginia Woolf's description of herself in "A Sketch of the Past," a memoir she wrote when she was nearly sixty. The words above evoke a time when Virginia Woolf was still Virginia Stephen, the daughter of the famous Victorian biographer Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), and the heiress of a great literary tradition. Virginia Stephen was given the opportunity to write by her father, who seemed determined to make the young woman his literary and intellectual heir.¹⁹⁵ To this purpose, Leslie Stephen trained his daughter in history and biography.¹⁹⁶ As Katherine C. Hill asserts in her

¹⁹⁴ Woolf, Virginia, "A Sketch of the Past," (1939), in Woolf, Virginia, *Moments of Being. Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Jeanne Schulkind, London, Sussex University Press, 1976, pp. 64-137, p. 65.

¹⁹⁵ Hill, Katherine C., "Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution," in *PMLA*, Vol. 96, No. 3, (May, 1981), pp. 351-362, p. 351.

¹⁹⁶ Quentin Bell, in his biography, relates that: "Leslie and Julia had decided, whether from motives of economy or from a belief in their own pedagogic attainments, to educate their children themselves. That is to say that the boys would have their elementary teaching and the girls the main part of their schooling at home. There were indeed governesses, both Swiss and French (including one who was thrown under a table by Vanessa and Thoby), but the main part of the teaching seems to have been done by Julia and Leslie. Before Virginia was seven, Julia was trying to teach her Latin, history and French, while Leslie took the children in mathematics; [...] The best lessons were probably given out of school hours. When he was

essay “Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution,” the main evidence of Stephen’s plan to educate Virginia in history is a diary that she kept at Hyde Park Gate from 4th January 1897 to 1st January 1898, a small book recording mundane and family events in daily entries.¹⁹⁷ From the pages of her diary, we realize that during that period, Virginia read many books her father chose for her, she also read novels and memoirs taken from the family library. She read aloud to her sister Vanessa, while she painted, or before turning the lights off at night. Many entries illuminate these episodes. For instance, on the 10th of January 1897, Virginia wrote: “Read all the morning – got the 2nd volume of Carlyle, which is to be read slowly; and then I am to reread all the books father has lent me.”¹⁹⁸ Moreover, on the 25th of January of the same year, she recorded:

Father is going to give me Lockhart Life of Scott – Cousin Mia gave me a diary and another pocket book. Thoby writes to say that he has ordered films for me. Got Carlyle’s Reminiscences, which I have read before. Reading four books at once – The Newcomes, Carlyle, Old Curiosity Shop, and Queen Elizabeth –¹⁹⁹

not teaching, Leslie could be an enchanting father; he had a talent for drawing [...] he could cover sheets with pencilled animals or cut creatures out of paper with magical precision. He could tell stories of dizzy alpine adventures, sometimes he would recite poetry and in the evenings he might read aloud, often from the novels of Sir Walter Scott, and call on his children to discuss what they had heard.” Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, cit., vol. I, pp. 26-27. In Maitland’s *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, London, Duckworth and Co, 1906, Virginia adds that: “At the end of a volume my father always asked our opinion as to its merits, and we are required to say which of the characters we liked best and why. I can remember his indignation when one of us preferred the hero to the far more life-like villain.” See p. 474.

¹⁹⁷ Hill, Katherine C., “Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution,” cit., p. 353. When children, Virginia Woolf, her sister Vanessa, and her brother Thoby joined in producing their own family newspaper. The collaborative family journal of the Stephen children covers the years 1891-92 (when Virginia Stephen was 10) and part of 1895. See Bell, Vanessa, Stephen, Thoby, Woolf, Virginia, *Hyde Park Gate News: The Stephen Family Newspaper (1895)*, foreword by Hermione Lee, London, Hesperus Press, 2006.

¹⁹⁸ Woolf, Virginia, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909*, edited by Mitchell A. Leaska, London, The Hogarth Press, 1992, p. 10.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

And again, “Father gave me Coleridges (*sic*) Life by Mr Dykes Campbell to read;”²⁰⁰ five days later: “Nessa went to her drawing – Father and I walked in the gardens, and he gave me the Life of Sterling to read – I gave back the Coleridge.”²⁰¹

Not only biography, but also history was the subject to which Leslie Stephen committed his daughter: in fact, he suggested “Macaulay’s History as a good solid work for Brighton;”²⁰² furthermore, he gave her “Arnold’s History of Rome”²⁰³ and “he lent [her] 12 vols. Of Froude’s History of England.”²⁰⁴ It is impressive that Virginia is only a fifteen years old “passionate apprentice.” In her essay, Katherine C. Hill lists all the works Virginia was reading at that time, according to her diary entries. This great amount of works includes masterpieces like Froude’s *Carlyle*, Creighton’s *Queen Elizabeth*, Lockhart’s *Life of Scott*, Carlyle’s *Reminiscences*, James Stephen’s *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, J. R. Lowell’s *Poems*, Campbell’s *Life of Coleridge*, Carlyle’s *Life of Sterling*, Pepys’s *Diary*, Macaulay’s *History*, Carlyle’s *French Revolution*, Carlyle’s *Cromwell*, Arnold’s *History of Rome*, Froude’s *History of England*, and Leslie Stephen’s *Life of Farwett*.²⁰⁵

When Stephen tutored Virginia in his Hyde Park Gate studio, he wanted her not only to practise writing historical essays, but also to train herself in poetry, novels and intellectual thinking.²⁰⁶ It is no accident that Virginia herself declared, at the beginning of her career as a critic, that she saw English literature through Stephen’s eyes. She also affirmed that “many of the great English poems now seem to me

²⁰⁰ Woolf, Virginia, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909*, cit., p. 57. Friday 19th March 1897.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59. Wednesday 24th March 1897.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 69. Tuesday 13th April 1897.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 105. Wednesday 23rd June 1897.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109. Wednesday 30th June 1897.

²⁰⁵ Hill, Katherine C., “Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution,” cit., p. 353.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 353-354.

inseparable from my father; I hear in them not only his voice, but in some sort his teaching and belief.”²⁰⁷ Stephen’s influence on Virginia’s education was indeed relevant, and Virginia developed a complex and ambiguous relationship with her father throughout the years. Even if, in 1939, she affirmed that “yet if freedom means the right to think one’s own thoughts and to follow one’s own pursuits, then no one respected and indeed insisted upon freedom more completely than [Leslie Stephen] did,”²⁰⁸ it is interesting to quote her 1928 diary entry, written a quarter of a century after her father’s death, in which she remarked that if Leslie Stephen had lived longer, “his life would entirely ended mine.”²⁰⁹

Father’s birthday. He would have been 1928 96, yes, today; & could have been

1832

96

96 like other people one has known; but mercifully was not. His life would entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books;—inconceivable. I used to think of him & mother daily; but writing *The Lighthouse* laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this to be true – that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; & writing of them was a necessary act.) He comes back now more as a

²⁰⁷ Maitland, Frederic W., *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, London, cit., p. 476.

²⁰⁸ Woolf, Virginia, “Leslie Stephen,” (1932), in Woolf, Virginia, *Collected Essays*, 4 vols., edited by Leonard Woolf, London, The Hogarth Press, (1967-1971), vol. IV, 1967, pp. 76-80, p. 79.

²⁰⁹ Woolf, in fact, felt hatred for her father since when she was a little girl. In *Moments of Being* she writes that he was: “the tyrant with inconceivable selfishness,” whose lamentations “passed the normal limits of sorrow.” Virginia describes Leslie as a “tyrant father – the exacting, the violent, the histrionic, the demonstrative, the self-centred, the self-pitying, the deaf, the appealing, the alternately loved and hated father – that dominated me then. It was like being shut in the same cage with a wild beast.” See Woolf, Virginia, “A Sketch of the Past,” in Woolf, Virginia, *Moments of Being. Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, cit., p. 69.

contemporary. I must read him some day. I wonder if I can feel again, I hear his voice, I know this by heart?²¹⁰

These two attitudes are in clear opposition. From their ambivalence, one may infer that the more Virginia became an adult, the more she freed herself from the imposing figure of her father and thus recaptured a kind feeling towards him. On the 3rd of September of the same year, 1928, in a page of her diary, Virginia used a possessive adjective which suggests a step towards a kind reconciliation. In the dining room of Talland House, at St Ives, on September 3rd, Virginia and Leslie evoked: “The battle of Dunbar, the Battle of Worcester, and the death of Cromwell” and she remembered: “how often it seems to me I said that to my father (“my” father, not ‘father’ any more) at St Ives.”²¹¹

However if, on the one hand, Stephen gave his daughter the books of history or biography he wanted her to read, on the other hand, he also allowed her a moderate intellectual freedom. In an essay written in 1832, on the occasion of the centenary of the birth of her father, Virginia affirmed that:

Even today there may be parents who would doubt the wisdom of allowing a girl of fifteen the free run of a large and quiet unexpurgated library. But my father

²¹⁰ Woolf, Leonard, ed., *A Writer's Diary, Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1959, p. 138. See also Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1984, p. 208. Wednesday 28th Novembre 1928. Several years later, in 1938, in *Three Guineas*, Woolf will even affirm that: “To depend upon a profession is a less odious form of slavery than to depend upon a father.” See Woolf, Virginia, “Three Guineas,” (1938), in Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own; Three Guineas*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Michèle Barrett, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 131.

²¹¹ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1984, p. 194.

allowed it. [...] To read what one liked because one liked it, never to pretend to admire what one did not – that was his only lesson in the art of reading.²¹²

Nevertheless, scholars have expressed different opinions concerning Leslie and Virginia's relationship, in particular about the issue of her education. Louise A. De Salvo, in an article dated 1982, confutes Katherine C. Hill's thesis, according to which, Virginia's 1897 diary provides evidence that Leslie Stephen "carried out his plan to educate Virginia in history."²¹³ De Salvo affirms that there is no confirmation of this in the journal, but instead:

contrary to the charming fiction of a doting father interested in his brilliant daughter's education [...], the 1897 journal portrays a father who did not provide his daughter with a continuing sense of her own worth or capacity.²¹⁴

Hill's reply to this criticism is worth noticing. She accuses De Salvo of oversimplifying the complicated relationship between father and daughter. Indeed, Leslie Stephen limited Virginia, but, at the same time, he supported and strengthened her character, providing her with books and intellectual stimuli. Hill concludes that "the truth lies in some complicated human amalgam:" Stephen was an oppressive figure, but, without him it is impossible to understand "the full force" of Virginia.²¹⁵ Another source

²¹² Woolf, Virginia, "Leslie Stephen," cit., vol. IV, 1967, pp. 79-80.

²¹³ De Salvo, Louise A., Fox, Alice, Hill, Katherine C., "Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen," *PMLA*, Vol. 97, No. 1, (Jan. 1982), pp. 103-106. See also Hill, Katherine C., "Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution," cit., p. 353.

²¹⁴ De Salvo, Louise A., Fox, Alice, Hill, Katherine C., "Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen," cit., p. 104.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

supporting this position can be traced in the words of Quentin Bell²¹⁶ who, in 1972, writes a life of his aunt. Bell dwells on the first books Virginia read, her home tutorials in Greek with Walter Pater's sister, and even the subsequent use of her father's library, but, above all, he confirms the existence of an educational plan for her:

Leslie and Julia had decided, whether from motives of economy or from a belief in their own pedagogic attainments, to educate their children themselves. That is to say that the boys would have their elementary teaching and the girls the main part of their schooling at home. There were indeed governesses, both Swiss and French (including one who was thrown under a table by Vanessa and Thoby), but the main part of the teaching seems to have been done by Julia and Leslie. Before Virginia was seven, Julia was trying to teach her Latin, history and French, while Leslie took the children in mathematics; [...] The best lessons were probably given out of school hours. When he was not teaching, Leslie could be an enchanting father.²¹⁷

Thomas Lewis, in his essay "Virginia Woolf's Sense of the Past,"²¹⁸ maintains that "despite the obvious social limitations of her education, it was with her father's guidance that Virginia Woolf developed the deep sense of history that informed her writing and thinking."²¹⁹ Nevertheless, her father's tutelage "came at a price:" Virginia and Vanessa had to sacrifice themselves to the comfort of "the most Victorian of

²¹⁶ Quentin Bell (1910-1996) is the son of Vanessa Stephen and Clive Bell and the nephew of Virginia. In 1972, he wrote a fitting tribute to her aunt. His work was judged by Ray Monk (*Sunday Telegraph*) "a model of the biographer's art, combining as it does diligent research, abundant quotations and a judicious and self-effacing narrative written in attractive and readable prose... One of the really great biographies of recent times."

²¹⁷ Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, cit., vol. I, p. 26.

²¹⁸ Lewis, Thomas S. W., "Virginia Woolf's Sense of the Past," in *Salmagundi*, No. 68/69, *The Literary Imagination and the Sense of the Past*, (Fall 1985 - Winter 1986), pp. 186-205.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189.

Victorian men.”²²⁰ Virginia actually described her complex relationship with her father as “a passionate affection [...] alternating with passionate hatred of him.”²²¹ To this remark Hyman offers a critical explanation, describing Virginia’s feelings towards her father as follows:

Proud as she [Virginia] was of the Stephen heritage, there were elements in it which became increasingly disturbing as she grew older, elements which she had seen at first hand in her father and which she feared might reappear in herself. As a result, the father, whom she had begun by emulating, became increasingly the figure whom she most wished to deny, for he had bequeathed to her a heritage that was both admirable and threatening, and it was with this heritage that she had, finally, to come to terms.²²²

The passage illustrates the reasons of Virginia’s changeable attitude towards her father: Leslie Stephen, who is portrayed as “a domestic tyrant,” can also be “kindly and supportive,” offering “moments of intimacy and intellectual freedom for which [Virginia] was continually grateful.”²²³

In “Reminiscences,”²²⁴ Virginia’s autobiographical sketch, written in 1907, Virginia placed the three women of her family – Julia, Stella and Vanessa – in relationship to her father. Hyman observes that Virginia, by placing herself outside

²²⁰ Lewis, Thomas S. W., “Virginia Woolf’s Sense of the Past,” cit., p. 189.

²²¹ Woolf, Virginia, “Old Bloomsbury,” (1922), in Woolf, Virginia, *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, cit., pp. 159-179, p. 161.

²²² Hyman, Virginia R., “Reflections in the Looking-Glass: Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf,” in *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 2, (Jun., 1983), pp. 197-216, p. 198.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

²²⁴ Woolf, Virginia, “Reminiscences,” (1907), in Woolf, Virginia, *Moments of Being, Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, cit., pp. 28-59. “Reminiscences” was begun in 1907, intended as a memoir of the childhood and adolescence Virginia and Vanessa shared. Also Vanessa Bell, in her *Notes on Virginia’s Childhood: A Memoir by Vanessa Bell*, records how much Virginia resembles her father. See Bell, Vanessa, *Notes on Virginia’s Childhood: A Memoir by Vanessa Bell*, edited by R. F. Scaubek, New York, Frank Hallman, 1974, pp. 2-4.

this circle, put herself “on her father’s side.”²²⁵ These similarities may also explain why Virginia resisted identification with Leslie and why such resistance was for her so difficult to accomplish.

As argued above, Leslie Stephen’s figure represented a very strong and long lasting influence on Virginia. His insistence on history and biography fostered her love of both disciplines throughout her entire life.²²⁶ Indeed Virginia detached herself from the Victorian tradition in which she was born and grown, even though – consciously or unconsciously – she kept within her this inheritance, owing to the awe-inspiring presence of her father, Sir Leslie Stephen. Virginia’s description of him strongly represents what “being the daughter of Leslie Stephen” meant:

He still wrote daily and methodically, though never for a long at a time. In London he wrote in the large room with three long windows at the top of the house. He wrote lying almost recumbent in a low rocking chair which he tipped to and fro as he wrote, like a cradle, and as he wrote he smoked a short clay pipe, and he scattered books round him in a circle. The thud of a book dropped on the floor could be heard in the room beneath.²²⁷

2.5 Contribution to Maitland’s *Life of Leslie Stephen*

Frederic William Maitland (1850-1906) was an English jurist and historian, regarded as the modern father of English legal history. He was Downing Professor of the Laws of England at Cambridge. Married to Florence Fisher (1863-1920), the eldest of Virginia’s Fisher cousins, he was a very close friend of Sir Leslie Stephen. For these

²²⁵ Hyman, Virginia R., “Reflections in the Looking-Glass: Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf,” cit., p. 209.

²²⁶ Hill, Katherine C., “Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution,” in *PMLA*, vol. 96, No. 3, (May, 1981), pp. 351-362, p. 354.

²²⁷ Woolf, Virginia, “Leslie Stephen,” cit., 76.

reasons, he wrote the *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* in 1906.²²⁸ Ferris Greenslet, reviewing Maitland's *Life*, maintains that "Leslie Stephen [...] has been fortunate in his biographer. Mr. Maitland has constructed an unconventional but singularly adequate account of an unconventional literary career. [...] he has drawn a lively portrait of a cheerful, melancholy, lovable man."²²⁹

Virginia Stephen contributed to Maitland's *Life* of her father with a note which, according to her diary and letters, she wrote quite enthusiastically. Her sketch pictures Leslie Stephen sailing a toy boat with his children and reading poetry to them.²³⁰ As Mitchell A. Leaska explains in his edition of Virginia's early journals, after the death of Leslie Stephen, in February 1904, Virginia suffered a period of depression and was removed to Violet Dickinson's house, in Burnham Wood, for three months. In October, after the summer holiday with her family, she went to Cambridge with her aunt Carolina Emelia Stephen²³¹ and the meeting with Frederic Maitland helped her recovery. Maitland was already working to his *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* and asked Virginia to read all her father and mother's letters in order to mark the passages he might have quoted in his work. Moreover, he asked her to write a brief note of her father's last years. Maitland's request made Virginia feel valued and this helped her to recover from her illness.²³²

In a diary entry dated 9th January 1905, Virginia wrote:

²²⁸ See Woolf, Virginia, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909*, cit., note 12, p. 219.

²²⁹ Greenslet, Ferris, Review of Maitland, Frederic W., *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, cit., p. 195.

²³⁰ Briggs, Julia, *Reading Virginia Woolf*, cit., p. 26. See also Woolf, Virginia, "Impressions of Sir Leslie Stephen," (1906), in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. I, 1986, pp. 127-130.

²³¹ To have a brief account of Carolina Emelia Stephen's life, see Woolf, Virginia, "Carolina Emelia Stephen," (1909), in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. I, 1986, pp. 267-269.

²³² Woolf, Virginia, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909*, cit., p. 214.

Began, being Monday, work on the note for Fred M[aitland]: which I mean to do as well as I can, & to which at present I shall give my mornings. Wrote a few pages: difficulties will come later. So far smooth, & delightful writing – It remains to be seen what stuff it is tomorrow morning. Went down to the London Library this P.M. & consulted C.B. Clarke about the sketches from Cambridge. They *do* possess a copy wrongly catalogued.²³³

Thus, Virginia started working hard again. Her letters to Violet Dickinson are the main evidence of her commitment and enthusiasm. On the 30th October 1904, she wrote to Violet:

I am getting through my copying – and now I have to go through two vols.: of extracts from Father and Mother’s letters to each other. They are so private that Fred wont (*sic*) look at them himself, and I have to decide what he ought to see and possibly publish. I am very anxious to get on and write something, very short of course, which Fred can read and get a hint from or possibly quote from.²³⁴

Virginia’s commitment to the task and her appreciation of Maitland, as well as her personal feelings, are expressed in many other letters to Violet, written during the years 1904-1906. For instance, she wrote: “I want to do it as well as I can,”²³⁵ or “I like him [Maitland] more and more, and I know I shall like his writing.”²³⁶ From these

²³³ Woolf, Virginia, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909*, cit., p. 219. As explained in the note 13, p. 219, C.B. Clarke was Charles Baron Clarke (1832-1906), botanist and mathematician, friend and contemporary of Leslie Stephen at Cambridge. Virginia was in search of “Sketches from Cambridge” by Leslie Stephen, published in *The Pall Mall Gazette* and reprinted by Macmillan in 1865.

²³⁴ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. I, 1975, p. 148. To Violet Dickinson, 30th October 1904.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. I, 1975, p. 165. To Violet Dickinson, 8th December 1904.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. I, 1975, p. 188. To Violet Dickinson, April 1905.

letters, it is also possible to gauge Virginia's satisfaction with her work and its progress. In a letter to Violet, dated 28th February 1905, Virginia related the words of praise she received from Maitland:

My Violet,

As I can make my boasts in public, I must send a line to say that I have heard from Fred Maitland, and he says my thing is "beautiful. Really it is beautiful, and if this were a proper occasion I would write a page of praise. But of course I know that this is not what you would like and I can only say that what you write is just what your father would have wished you to write. Whether all of it will be printed I cannot yet say; but you well know that my inclination will be to print as much as possible."²³⁷

And again:

Then I saw Fred Maitland, whom I love. He gets more meaning into 10 words than I do into 100 and than Snow does into a 1000 – we will not go on with the calculation which might be painful. Anyhow, he brought me a packet of letters from distinguished people upon the book, and two of them say that my part of it was "beautifully done." [...] He (this is F.M.) is really satisfied, I think, and goes out happy to Teneriffe.²³⁸

²³⁷ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. I, 1975, p. 180. To Violet Dickinson, 28th February 1905. The note was printed, but signed "by one of his daughters."

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. I, 1975, p. 259. To Violet Dickinson, Monday 10th December 1906.

Unfortunately, that trip to Tenerife was fatal to Frederic Maitland: on his voyage, he developed pneumonia and died in Las Palmas on the 19th of December 1906. Virginia heard the sad news from one of Violet's letters:

My Violet,

Your letter gave me the first news of Freds [Maitland] death. Then Adrian went and read it in a paper. O dear – the earth seems swept very bare – and the amount of pain that accumulates for some one to feel grows every day. [...] I was thinking that I should see him often, and perhaps he would come and dine with us – and anyhow he would be there always. [...] He was a real genius; father always said so.²³⁹

Virginia's despair for Maitland's sudden death was very deeply felt. She had always highly regarded him: Maitland was the biographer of her father, the one who had preserved his memory and, above all, the one who had given new zest to her own life. His loss represented another bad blow for Virginia. Nevertheless, after this first experience of life-writing, her activity as a writer and as a biographer continued and flourished throughout the years. Virginia controversial relationship with her father and her commitment to his *Life* represent the inception of her flourishing reflection on the genre of biography. These preliminary elements constitute the fundamental basis for the proceeding of my dissertation.

After an introduction concerning the mutual relationships between novelist/life and character/fiction, the next chapter will analyse the biographical

²³⁹ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. I, 1975, pp. 270-271. To Violet Dickinson, Sunday 23rd December 1906.

elements in Woolf's fiction, starting with her novel *Night and Day* (1919). It must be said, however, that already in *The Voyage Out* (1915) Woolf somehow tackles the problem of writing a life with her young protagonist Rachel Vinrace, whose apprenticeship to life is cruelly stopped by a sudden undeserved and explicable death.

Before exploring Woolf's production as a writer of fictional lives, it is relevant for this survey to make a brief digression concerning the connection between biography and autobiography. This is a useful aspect to take into consideration, while reading Woolf's biographical experiments.

Writing is a literary activity which cannot avoid involving one's self: every piece of writing hides a personal experience. And, in this sense, writing a biography is even more involving, in particular when the biographer chooses to tell the life of a member of his/her family, of a friend or an acquaintance. Virginia Woolf often wonders about this aspect. After the composition of *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940), she writes in a letter to Ruth Fry: "I did my best to let Roger tell his own life, but of course one can't simply do that. And it was a question, how far to intrude, and how far to suppress, oneself."²⁴⁰

According to Lytton Strachey's theories, the biographer must be the primary speaker and he is allowed to intervene at any chosen moment.²⁴¹ In 1940, Leonard Woolf had told to Virginia that a life "must be seen from the writers (*sic*) angle."²⁴² But it is not only a matter of judgment. The problem also concerns the personal experience of the biographer who, writing about his/her subject, draws his/her inspiration from his/her own life, combining, indeed, two levels: the life of the subject, i.e. biography,

²⁴⁰ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. VI, 1980, p. 423. To Ruth Fry, 9th February 1941.

²⁴¹ Backscheider, Paula R., *Reflections on Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 14.

²⁴² Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. V, 1984, p. 271. Wednesday 20th March 1940.

with his/her own life, i.e. autobiography. Considering this aspect, it is relevant to keep in mind that the works which are going to be analysed in the next chapter are not only Woolf's attempts with the genre of biography, but they also include episodes taken from her own personal experience. *Orlando* provides an excellent example, for it mingles Woolf's aim to compose a life, according to the new biography method, with her personal need to write about herself and her own life experience: "every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind is written large in his works," Woolf maintains.²⁴³

The critical perspective adopted in the next chapter can thus be enhanced by the awareness of the complex play between biography and autobiography.

²⁴³ Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando: A Biography*, cit., pp. 145-146.

Chapter 3

Lives in fiction

3.1 Lives and characters, reality into fiction

Life's what you see in people's eyes; life's what they learn, and, having learnt it, never, though they seek to hide it, cease to be aware of – what? That's life's like that, it seems.²⁴⁴

Since the rise of the novel, the question of the relationship between life and the novelist has been strongly affecting authors and readers alike. Virginia Woolf often investigated this domain, in her attempt to find a response. In an essay dated 1926, “Life and the Novelist,” she maintains that “the novelist [...] is terribly exposed to life,”²⁴⁵ because

²⁴⁴ Woolf, Virginia, “An Unwritten Novel,” (1921), in Woolf, Virginia, *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1962, pp. 14–26, p. 14.

²⁴⁵ Woolf, Virginia, “Life and the Novelist,” (1926), in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1994, pp. 400–406, p. 400.

Taste, sound, movement, a few words here, a gesture there, a man coming in, a woman going out, even the motor that passes in the street or the beggar who shuffles along the pavement, and all the reds and blues and lights and shades of the scene claim his attention and rouse his curiosity.²⁴⁶

In Woolf's opinion, every accident of life is recorded by the novelist who, instead of withdrawing from mankind "for weeks" as the artist does, "fills his glass and lights his cigarette, [and] enjoys presumably all the pleasures of talk and table,"²⁴⁷ experiencing life in all shades. The novelist is connected with life at a very deep level, to the extent that the link changes, in his/her view, into a kind of submission in which the author may even become "a slave to life."²⁴⁸ As a consequence, this strong relationship affects the novelist's art inasmuch as his/her characters are built "by observing the incoherence, the fresh natural sequences of a person," in "the crowded dance of modern life."²⁴⁹ What Virginia Woolf is trying to argue is that a novelist inevitably takes inspiration from life and, in so doing, he or she may design the lives of his/her characters.

In the analysis of the issue of perception and its relevance on the building of characters, Woolf's early short fiction, especially "An Unwritten Novel" (1921) and "Character in Fiction" (1924), is of great relevance. "An Unwritten Novel" is the story of an elderly woman, Minnie Marsh, and of the person who is sitting opposite her in a railway carriage, the narrator. This short fiction appears at a crucial time in Woolf's artistic development. In the first decades of the twentieth century, in fact, she had gone past the conventions of contemporary fiction, as shown by *Night and Day* (1919),

²⁴⁶ Woolf, Virginia, "Life and the Novelist," cit., p. 400.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 405.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 403; p. 405.

and was moving towards a new direction which would reach its climax with *Jacob's Room* (1922).²⁵⁰ Lyndall Gordon identifies “An Unwritten Novel” as a “comic drama of a writer in pursuit of a subject.”²⁵¹ This dynamic process, indeed, will be revisited in *Jacob's Room*, and precisely in the railway episode in Chapter Three.²⁵²

In “An Unwritten Novel,” Woolf poses herself a central question – “what is reality?” She also wonders whether reality can be mirrored by art. Like other modernist writers such as James Joyce, Woolf had felt that the discoveries of Einstein²⁵³ and Freud about outer and inner reality implied that only partial and subjective truths were possible. Hence, fiction could only reflect one side of reality. The omniscient narrator could not be accepted anymore.²⁵⁴ The woman-narrator of “An Unwritten Novel,” as a matter of fact, is not omniscient, for she actually ignores everything about her fellow traveller. Therefore, the narrator is trying to assess Minnie's life on the basis of observations, and from the few words Minnie and another traveller exchange when left alone. Following her reveries about the person she is observing, the narrator begins to imagine Minnie's life, to guess about her past, her loneliness, her hopes, while hiding behind the pages of the *Times* she holds in her hands. She is indeed convinced of the accuracy of her conclusions about the elderly

²⁵⁰ Baldwin, Dean R., *Virginia Woolf: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1989, p. 21.

²⁵¹ Gordon, Lyndall, *Virginia Woolf: A Writer's Life*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1984, p. 170.

²⁵² Woolf, Virginia, *Jacob's Room*, (1922), edited with an Introduction and Notes by Sue Roe, London, Penguin Books, 1992, pp. 23-24.

²⁵³ It is worth remarking that some years later, when Woolf was writing *The Waves* (1931), she was indeed responding to Albert Einstein, John Tyndall, Arthur Eddington and to their theories about the universe. See Orestano, Francesca, “Contracting Authority, Expanding the Canon: The Case of Virginia Woolf, in Mihaela, Irimia, Dragoş, Ivana, eds., *Author(ity) and the Canon Between Institutionalization and Questioning: Literature from High to Late Modernity*,” Bucharest, Institutional Cultural Română, 2011, pp. 153-166, p. 160.

²⁵⁴ Bradshaw, David, “Introduction” to Woolf, Virginia, *The Mark on the Wall and Other Short Fiction*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by David Bradshaw, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. xix.

woman, but her speculations are proved wrong when Minnie is met at the station by her son.²⁵⁵ The narrator has to admit her confusion and wrong assumptions:

And yet the last look on them – he stepping from the kerb and she following him round the edge of the big building brims me with wonder – floods me anew. Mysterious figures! Mother and son. Who are you? Why do you walk down the street? Where to-night will you sleep, and then, to-morrow? Oh, how it whirls and surges – floats me afresh! I start after them. [...] Wherever I go, mysterious figures, I see you, turning the corner, mothers and sons; you, you, you. [...] If I fall on my knees, if I go through the ritual, the ancient antics, it's you, unknown figures, you I adore;²⁵⁶

The narrator, as well as Woolf, has to admit that life is mysterious, elusive, rather unpredictable. In her later *Jacob's Room*, Woolf will wonder about this idea affirming that:

the strange thing about life is that though the nature of it must have been apparent to every one for hundreds of years, no one has left any adequate account of it. The streets of London have their map; but our passions are uncharted. What are you going to meet if you turn this corner?²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ Bradshaw, David, "Introduction" to Woolf, Virginia, *The Mark on the Wall and Other Short Fiction*, cit., pp. xix-xx.

²⁵⁶ Woolf, Virginia, "An Unwritten Novel," cit., p. 26.

²⁵⁷ Woolf, Virginia, *Jacob's Room*, cit., p. 82.

Moreover, in a 1930 letter to her friend Ethel Smyth,²⁵⁸ Woolf will firmly state:

I shall never forget the day I wrote *The Mark on the Wall* – all in a flash, as it flying, after being kept stone breaking for months. The Unwritten Novel was the great discovery, however. That – again in one second – showed me how I could embody all my deposit experience in a shape that fitted it – not that I have ever reached that end; but anyhow I saw, branching out of the tunnel I made, when I discovered that method of approach, *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway* etc – How I trembled with excitement;²⁵⁹

In 1930 Woolf still remembered the moment in which she had discovered how to use her personal experience in the shape of fiction.

With “Character in Fiction” (1924),²⁶⁰ partially published in 1923 as “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,”²⁶¹ Woolf advances in her study of character-development. In the essay, she analyses the techniques of three Edwardian writers, Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), H. G. Wells (1866-1946) and John Galsworthy’s (1867-1933), casting against them her new ideas. Woolf’s aim is to “make out what it is that we mean when

²⁵⁸ Dame Ethel Mary Smyth (1858-1944) was an English composer and a leader of the women's suffrage movement. She became friend of Virginia Woolf at the age of 71.

²⁵⁹ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1978, p. 231. To Ethel Smyth, 16th Oct 1930.

²⁶⁰ Woolf, Virginia, “Character in Fiction,” (1924), in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1988, Appendix III, pp. 501-517, p. 501. The Woolfs travelled to Cambridge on the afternoon of Saturday 17th May 1924 and Virginia delivered her paper to the “Cambridge Heretics Society” on the following day. The paper then was published by T. S. Eliot in the *Criterion* of July 1924. The Heretics Society was founded in 1909 or 1911, its founders included the linguist and philosopher Charles Kay Ogden (1889-1957), the academic lawyer Herbert Felix Jolowicz (1890-1954), the economist Philip Sargant Florence (1890-1982) and the mathematician and philosopher Frank Plumpton Ramsey (1903-1930). Lytton Strachey and Roger Fry also read papers to the Society.

²⁶¹ Woolf, Virginia, “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” (1923), in Woolf, Virginia, *Collected Essays*, cit., vol. I, 1971, pp. 319-337.

we talk about ‘character’ in fiction,”²⁶² and how “the novelist thinks differently about character from other people.”²⁶³ To accomplish this goal, she gives the account of the experience of a railway journey she had made from Richmond to Waterloo:

<This incident happened one night about two weeks ago. I was going up to London> I was late. I ran down the stairs just as the train was going out, and jumped into the first carriage I came to. As I opened the door, I had a strange and rather uncomfortable feeling that I was interrupting a conversation between two people who were already sitting there. [...] the woman must have been sixty at least, and the man well over forty. They were sitting opposite each other, and the man had been leaning over and talking rather emphatically from the expression on his face – he was flushed.²⁶⁴

Observing the two people in the carriage, Woolf begins to imagine who they are, and whether there may have been a relationship between them. She wonders whether there is a likely “secret business”²⁶⁵ they share. Using her power of imagination and creation, she describes the so-called Mrs Brown and Mr Smith with accuracy, dwelling on anecdotes about them. Her observations are so full of details that finally she realizes that: “here is a character imposing itself upon another person. Here is Mrs Brown making someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about her.”²⁶⁶ Thus, Mrs Brown, the tidy elderly woman, becomes a fictional character in the novelist’s mind.²⁶⁷ But “it is the novelists who get in and out,”²⁶⁸ and only the modern novelist has the

²⁶² Woolf, Virginia, “Character in Fiction,” cit., p. 503.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 505.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 505.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 506.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 508.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 512.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 512.

power of exploring all the inner nuances of a human being. What would the Edwardian writers have done, if placed in front of Mrs Brown? Wells would have looked out of the window; Galsworthy would have concentrated on the injustices of the industrial, school or family system; Bennett would have kept his eyes in the carriage, carefully observing every detail:

They have looked, very powerfully, very searchingly, out of the window; at factories; at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; at the circumstances and conditions of life, but not at life itself. [...] They have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things, the appearance of things [...] they have given us a house, in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human being who lives there.²⁶⁹

And yet, they would not have noticed anything of the person sat opposite them. According to Woolf, instead, Mrs Brown herself is the only object worthy of her interest because she represents life and humanity.

Already in 1919, Woolf had begun her personal battle against Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett in “Modern Novels” (1919)²⁷⁰, an essay then fully revised in the later “Modern Fiction” (1925):²⁷¹

Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy [...] have excited so many hopes and disappointed them so persistently that our gratitude largely takes the form of thanking them for having shown us what they might have done but have not

²⁶⁹ Woolf, Virginia, “Character in Fiction,” cit., pp. 512-513.

²⁷⁰ Woolf, Virginia, “Modern Novels,” (1919), in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1988, pp. 30-37, p. 31.

²⁷¹ Woolf, Virginia, “Modern Fiction,” (1925), in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1994, pp. 157-165.

done; what we certainly could not do, but as certainly, perhaps, do not wish to do.²⁷²

Woolf had even defined Bennett as “perhaps the worst culprit of the three, inasmuch as he is by far the best workman.”²⁷³ She had acknowledged him as the best craftsman capable of a solid book, but she had wondered whether “life should refuse to live there.”²⁷⁴ Woolf, in fact, accused Bennett and the other Edwardian novelists of materialism. She saw them as writers of “unimportant things,”²⁷⁵ intent on spending “immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring.”²⁷⁶ They provided plots, comedies and tragedies according to a rigid genre convention. But minds, according to Woolf, receive impressions that are “trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved,”²⁷⁷ so that for the modern writer there should be “no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style.”²⁷⁸ Woolf’s concern was indeed life, for, she maintained, “without life nothing else is worthwhile.”²⁷⁹ Woolf strongly believed that only great writers were able to concentrate on a living person and to appreciate truth. Among them, she mentions Joyce and Strachey who, despite their differences, are considered by her the greatest modernist writers: *Ulysses* and *Eminent Victorians* are indeed their best achievement in the character-development perspective.

A relevant contribution to this issue was given some years later by Edward M.

²⁷² Woolf, Virginia, “Modern Fiction,” cit., p. 158.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 158-159.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

Forster²⁸⁰ (1879-1970) with his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). The work consists of a collection of lectures – the Clark lectures – delivered by Forster at Trinity College, during the spring of 1927. In his lecture entitled “People,” he specifically deals with characters and their representation in fiction. It is interesting to point out that the perspective given by Forster recalls the central connection between fiction and reality. In the wake of this consideration, he explains the reason why he chooses to call characters “people,” stating that “since the actors in a story are usually human, it seemed convenient to entitle this aspect People.”²⁸¹ In a story, Forster maintains, actors “are, or pretend to be, human beings.”²⁸² At the core of the question stands the figure of the novelist and his/her task that Forster describes as follow:

Since the novelist is himself a human being, there is an affinity between him and his subject-matter which is absent in many other forms of art. [...] The novelist, unlike many of his colleagues, makes up a number of word-masses roughly describing himself (roughly: niceties shall come later), gives them name and sex, assigns them plausible gestures, and causes them to speak by the use of inverted commas, and perhaps to behave consistently. These word-masses are his characters. They do not come thus coldly to his mind, they may be created in delirious excitement, still, their nature is conditioned by what he guesses about other people, and about himself, and is further modified by the other aspects of his work.²⁸³

²⁸⁰ As Quentin Bell points out, Forster was one of Woolf’s English contemporaries whom she had most respect for. In “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” Woolf identifies Forster as one of the younger Georgians who were in contrast to Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett. See Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, cit., vol. II, pp. 132-133.

²⁸¹ Forster, Edward M., “People,” in Forster, Edward M., *Aspects of the Novel*, (1927), London, Edward Arnold Publishers, 1961, pp. 43-62, p. 43.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

Like the narrator of the train episodes in “An Unwritten Novel,” “Character in Fiction,” and *Jacob’s Room*, the novelist observes his/her characters and guesses about their fates, always considering them as human beings tightly bound both to life in general, and to their life experience in particular. Forster is indeed interested in the characters’ relation to actual life. To this end, in the development of his argument, he raises a central question: “what is the difference between people in a novel and people like the novelist or like you, or like me, or Queen Victoria?”²⁸⁴ Forster identifies the difference between a fictional and real character in the following reflection:

If a character in a novel is exactly like Queen Victoria – not rather like but exactly like – then it actually is Queen Victoria, and the novel, or all of it that the character touches, becomes a memoir. A memoir is history, it is based on evidence. A novel is based on evidence + or – *x*, the unknown quantity being the temperament of the novelist, and the unknown quantity always modifies the effect of the evidence, and sometimes transforms it entirely. [...] it is the function of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source: to tell us more about Queen Victoria than could be known, and thus to produce a character who is not the Queen Victoria of history.²⁸⁵

By taking into consideration five main aspects of human life – birth, food, sleep, love and death – Forster highlights the differences between “Homo Sapiens” and “Homo Fictus,” stating that:

²⁸⁴ Forster, Edward M., “People,” cit., p. 44. Concerning the mention of Queen Victoria, perhaps it is no accident that Forster used her name as an example. She was, in fact, a great queen, but she was also the subject of Lytton Strachey’s biography *Queen Victoria*, published some years earlier, in 1921. See Chapter 2.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

Homo Fictus is more elusive than his cousin. He is created in the minds of hundreds of different novelists, who have conflicting methods of gestation, so one must not generalize. Still, one can say a little about him. He is generally born off, he is capable of dying on, he wants little food or sleep, he is tirelessly occupied with human relationships. And – most important – we can know more about him than we can know about any of our fellow creatures, because his creator and narrator are one.²⁸⁶

As far as biography is concerned, Forster's conclusion about characters is indeed inspiring for the development of my survey. From his point of view, a character in a book is real when the novelist knows everything about him:

In the novel we can know people perfectly, and, apart from the general pleasure of reading, we can find here a compensation for their dimness in life. In this direction fiction is truer than history, because it goes beyond the evidence, and each of us knows from his own experience that there is something beyond the evidence, and even if the novelist has not got it correctly, well – he has tried. He can post his people in as babies, he can cause them to go on without sleep or food, he can make them be in love, love and nothing but love, provided he seems to know everything about them, provided they are his creations.²⁸⁷

The question of characters and fiction linked to life-experience lies at the core of Woolf's critical discourse and her ideas about fiction. Fiction indeed, both for Forster

²⁸⁶ Forster, Edward M., "People," cit., pp. 54-55.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62. Another distinction which Forster made concerns the difference between "flat" and "round" characters. The former are built around a single idea or quality, they are basically two-dimensional (Forster identifies them in Dickens's characters); the latter are capable of surprising in a convincing way (like Madame Bovary or like several of Dostoevsky, Proust, Thackeray, Fielding and Charlotte Brontë's characters). See Forster, pp. 65-75.

and Woolf, is granted the main focus, owing to the connections it entertains with life, and with the genre of biography.

3.2 Biography into fiction: *Night and Day*, towards a new concept of biography

Biographer – We are both in the same business. *Novelist* – How do you make that out? *Biographer* – We are both writing about people. *Novelist* – But your people have actually existed, while mine are made up inside my head. *Biographer* – That difference is not as real as it seems on the surface. The people you believe you have invented get their start from people you have known in real life, or have read about. And the statesmen or adventurers whose lives I choose to retell are in great part my own creations.²⁸⁸

By taking into account the new modern criteria of perception in the early part of the twentieth century, the aim of this chapter is to justify, through the analysis of some of Virginia Woolf's novels, the statement that opens her later essay of 1940, "The Leaning Tower," by which she explains who a writer is and what his object consists of.

A writer is a person who sits at a desk and keeps his eye fixed, as intently as he can, upon a certain object [...]. He is an artist who sits with a sheet of paper in front of him trying to copy what he sees. What is his object – his model? Nothing so simple as a painter's model; it is not a bowl of flowers, a naked figure, or a dish

²⁸⁸ "Truth is Stranger," *The New Republic*, (16th December 1925), pp. 112-113, in Clifford, James L., *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560-1960*, cit., pp. 123-125.

of apples and onions. Even the simplest story deals with more than one person, with more than one time. Characters begin young; they grow old; they move from scene to scene, from place to place. A writer has to keep his eye upon a model that moves, that changes, upon an object that is not one object but innumerable objects. Two words alone cover all that a writer looks at – they are, human life.²⁸⁹

“The Leaning Tower” was written in 1940. But Woolf had begun her literary investigation towards that conclusion several years before.

After *The Voyage Out* (1915)²⁹⁰, the story of the short life of Rachel Vinrace, a sort of *bildungsroman*, Woolf turned to a new novel, entitled *Night and Day*. This work was first published in 1919, by her half-brother Gerald Duckworth’s²⁹¹ publishing house, the Duckworth & Company, and then, in 1920, in the United States by the George H. Doran Company.²⁹² The novel has been described as a comedy of manners involving five young people: Katharine Hilbery, Mary Datchet, Ralph Denham, William Rodney and Cassandra Otway. They struggle with love and work, engagement and marriage in early twentieth century London. Woolf, in 1930, wrote to Ethel Smyth that she had composed that “interminable work” – for some her best book – “lying in bed, allowed to write only for one half hour a day” after having drunk her

²⁸⁹ Woolf, Virginia, “The Leaning Tower,” (1940), in McNeillie, Andrew, Clarke, Stuart N., eds., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. VI, 2011, pp. 259–283, p. 259.

²⁹⁰ Woolf, Virginia, *The Voyage Out*, (1915), edited by Elizabeth Heine, London, Vintage Classics, 1990.

²⁹¹ Gerald de l'Etang Duckworth (1870–1937) was a British publisher. He was the son of Herbert Duckworth, a London barrister, and Julia Jackson, then Stephen. His middle name, de l'Etang, was the surname of one of his mother's ancestors, Antoine de l'Etang, a page to Queen Marie Antoinette. Gerald's father died before his birth, and when he was eight his mother married Leslie Stephen, and had four more children: Virginia, Vanessa, Thoby and Adrian Stephen. Woolf accused Gerald and his elder brother, George, of having sexually abused her and Vanessa when they were children and teenagers. Nevertheless, Woolf published her first two novels with her half-brother's help before forming The Hogarth Press.

²⁹² Hussey, Mark, *Virginia Woolf A TO Z, A Comprehensive Reference for Students, Teachers and Common Readers to her Life, Works and Critical Reception*, New York, Facts On File, 1995, p. 183.

daily glass of milk.²⁹³ For her earliest experiment in biography, Woolf got her start from people she had known in real life. She turned to members of her family and friends who provided her with material for her writing. Thus, she narrowed the gap between biography and fiction, by combining truth and imagination.

Actually, already in 1904, Woolf had begun writing real lives. As Julia Briggs maintains in her work *Reading Virginia Woolf*, Woolf did follow a family tradition, because one of her relatives had been engaged in the writing of lives.²⁹⁴ Woolf wrote the lives of her paternal aunt Caroline Stephen and her maternal aunt Mary Fisher (Maitland's mother-in-law), works that unfortunately have not survived. In a letter to Violet Dickinson, dated 6th December 1904, Woolf reported: "I am writing a comic life of Aunt [Mary] Fisher, as a pendant to the life of Caroline Emelia. I think it ought to be amusing, as she is a promising subject."²⁹⁵ But, as already remarked in the previous chapter, Woolf's first serious attempt at life-writing was "Reminiscences," whose subject is her sister Vanessa, probably begun in the late summer of 1907. This life, as Briggs maintains, still followed the *Dictionary of National Biography* principles, for the technique used are as linear and well-arranged as the lives written by her father were.²⁹⁶

At that time, in 1907, her new concept of biography had not been brought to

²⁹³ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1978, p. 231. To Ethel Smyth, Thursday, 16th October 1930. Virginia Woolf must have begun *Night and Day* in 1913. She was certainly at work during a lucid interval between 1914 and 1915, but for much of those years she was too ill to write. Even before 1912, when Virginia and Leonard got married, Leonard himself realized the fragility of Virginia's health: nervous illness, which she had suffered since childhood, headache, insomnia, reluctance to eat, overexcitement were Virginia's main symptoms. Dr Savage, the family consultant, ordered her to stay in bed, drinking milk and writing no more than a page a day. See Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, Orlando, Harcourt, 2005, pp. 36-37.

²⁹⁴ Briggs, Julia, "The Proper Writing of Lives': Biography versus Fiction in Woolf's Early Work," cit., p. 28.

²⁹⁵ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. I, 1975, p. 163. To Violet Dickinson, Tuesday 6th December 1904.

²⁹⁶ Briggs, Julia, "The Proper Writing of Lives': Biography versus Fiction in Woolf's Early Work," cit., p. 28.

light yet, and her father's teachings had still a strong influence on her. Nevertheless, it is of great interest to notice that, already in 1908, in a letter to Clive Bell, Vanessa's husband, Woolf questioned herself about "the subtle work on the proper writing of lives:"

I have been writing Nessa's life; and I am going to send you 2 chapters in a day or two. I might have been so good! As it is, I am too near, and too far; and it seems to be blurred, and I asked myself why write it at all? Seeing I never shall recapture what you have, by your side this minute. I should like to write a very subtle work on the proper writing of lives. What it is that you can write – and what writing is. It comes over me that I know nothing of the art; but blunder in a rash way after motive, and human characters; and that I suppose is the uncritical British method; for I should choose my writing to be judged as a chiselled block, unconnected with my hand entirely.²⁹⁷

It is plain that the inclination for life-writing, and thus for biography, had been present in Woolf's mind from the very beginning of her activity as a writer.

Going back to *Night and Day*, and considering its genesis, it is relevant to notice that even if Woolf began to write this work early in 1917, no mention of it was yet made in her letters of that year.²⁹⁸ The first reference to this work appeared in a letter of the following year, addressed to her sister Vanessa:

I've been writing about you all the morning, and have made you wear a blue dress; you've got to be immensely mysterious and romantic, which of course you

²⁹⁷ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. I, 1975, p. 325. To Clive Bell, Wednesday 15th April 1908.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. II, 1976, p. 135.

are; yes, but [it's] the combination that's so enthralling; to crack through the paving stone and be enveloped in the mist.²⁹⁹

In composing *Night and Day*, Woolf employed her own experiences of her family, of their friends and literary heritage.³⁰⁰ Many scholars have noticed similarities between *Night and Day's* fictional characters and Woolf's real acquaintances. For instance, Leonard Woolf, whom she married in 1912, has been recognized as the model for Ralph Denham and it has been pointed out that Katharine Hilbery's visit to the Denham family at Highgate in Chapter Twenty-seven draws on Woolf's visits to Leonard's family in Putney. Like Leonard Woolf, Ralph Denham comes from a large Jewish family, his father has died prematurely, leaving all the family in financial difficulties.³⁰¹ But Miss Katharine Hilbery – a determined and statuesque young woman who condemns the sphere of emotions and is in secret love with mathematics and the stars – is indeed the most impressive character. The majority of critics has found it easy to identify Katherine with Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell, to whom Woolf dedicated her novel. The corpus of Woolf's letters gives the main evidence. In a letter addressed to Vanessa and written in 1916, three years before the publication of *Night and Day*, we read: "I am very much interested in your life, which I think of writing

²⁹⁹ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. II, 1976, p. 232. To Vanessa Bell, Monday 22nd April 1918. Nicolson explains that Woolf, by 12th March, had written over 100,000 words and Vanessa was the model for Katharine Hilbery, the heroine of the novel. Letter 986, addressed to Vanessa Bell, dated November 11th [Armistice Day, 1918], reports: "How am I to write my last chapter with all this shindy." *Night and Day* was finished before the end of 1918, on the 21st of November.

³⁰⁰ Concerning this attitude, André Maurois expresses his opinions in "The Ethics of Biography." See Chapter 1.

³⁰¹ Hussey, Mark, *Virginia Woolf A TO Z, A Comprehensive Reference for Students, Teachers and Common Readers to her Life, Works and Critical Reception*, cit., p. 188.

another novel about. It's fatal staying with you – you start so many new ideas."³⁰² And again, in a 1919 letter to Janet Case, Woolf wrote:

My dear Janet,

[...] I shall like very much to discuss my [*Night and Day*] people with you – save that I'm beginning to feel that they're not mine at all. I'm told so many different things about them. But try thinking of Katherine [Hilbery] as Vanessa, not me; and suppose her concealing a passion for painting and forced to go into society by George [Duckworth] – that was the beginning of her; *but* as one goes on, all sorts of things happen. It's the conflict that turns the half of her so chilly.³⁰³

Not only Ralph and Katharine have much in common with Woolf's family members, but other significant parallels should be also highlighted. First of all, Katharine's parents are both biographers. Mr Hilbery – an elderly man, constantly playing with “a little green stone attached to his watch-chain” – works in his study on the lives of the Romantic poets and easily recalls the figure of Leslie Stephen;³⁰⁴ while, Annie Thackeray Ritchie – Woolf's mother's friend and her father's sister-in-law – has been recognized as the main model for Mrs Hilbery. Secondly, as Briggs points out, the character of Mary Datchet, the “New Woman,” working for a Society for Adult

³⁰² This is the first conception of *Night and Day*. See Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. II, 1978, p. 109. To Vanessa Bell, Sunday 30th July 1916.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, vol. II, 1978, p. 400. To Janet Case, 19th November 1919. Janet Case, who was one of the first women to pass through Girton College, Cambridge (established in 1869 as the first residential college for women) had been Virginia Woolf's teacher.

³⁰⁴ Leslie Stephen is explicitly mentioned in the novel when, talking to Ralph, Katharine quotes the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Woolf, Virginia, *Night and Day*, (1919), with Introductions by Jo Shapcott and Angelica Garnett, London, Vintage Classics, 2000, p. 368: “You can think of me tomorrow morning looking up dates in the ‘Dictionary of National Biography.’”

Suffrage³⁰⁵ in Russell Square, recalls the figures of Janet Case and Mary Sheepshanks,³⁰⁶ earliest mentors of the Women's Movement, but also of Pippa Strachey and Ray Strachey, Lytton's sister and sister-in-law, who were active in the NUWSS (National Union for Women's Suffrage Societies).³⁰⁷

Concerning the parallel between Mrs Hilbery and Lady Ritchie, Ronald McCail, in his essay "A Family Matter: *Night and Day* and *Old Kensington*," suggests a detailed account which is interesting to consider.³⁰⁸ Lady Ritchie, née Anne Isabella Thackeray, was the sister of Leslie Stephen's first wife Harriet, who died in 1875. Lady Ritchie's friendship with Leslie Stephen was not interrupted after the death of Harriet and Leslie's remarriage with Julia Prinsep Duckworth in 1878. She was a frequent visitor of the Stephen's household in Hyde Park Gate and Virginia used to call her aunt Anny, even if she was not her real aunt.³⁰⁹ Thus, Woolf had the opportunity to observe her during her childhood. When later she conceived the idea of *Night and Day*, she decided to use the figure of aunt Anny as a model for the character of Mrs Hilbery. With his vivid description of Woolf's aunt, Quentin Bell confirms that the likeness between Lady Ritchie and Mrs Hilbery is very close:

Anny was a more formidable, a more arresting personality than Minny [Harriet]. She was a novelist; her novels were tenuous, charming productions in which the narrative tended to get lost and in which something of her own vague, erratic, engaging personality is preserved. [...] At the age of seventy Aunt Anny, as she was called by all Leslie's children, could impress a child by her extraordinary

³⁰⁵ See Chapter VI in Woolf, Virginia, *Night and Day*, cit., pp. 67-86.

³⁰⁶ Mary Sheepshanks was the principal of Morley College, where Woolf gave classes from 1905 to 1907.

³⁰⁷ Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, cit., pp. 89-90.

³⁰⁸ McCail, Ronald, "A Family Matter: *Night and Day* and *Old Kensington*," in *The Review of English Studies, New Series*, Vol. 38, No. 149, (Feb. 1987), pp. 23-39.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

youthful, vigorous and resilient optimism; when she was young, not only in spirit but in years, her ebullience must have been overwhelming. It is not hard to believe that such cheerful impetuosity could sometimes be exasperating. Leslie found it so; he loved silence and she was for ever talking; he loved order, and she rejoiced in chaos; he prided himself on his realism, she was unashamedly sentimental; he worried about money, she was recklessly extravagant; he prized facts, she was hardly aware of them.³¹⁰

It is not difficult to remark some similarities, comparing the previous description with the following one devoted to Mrs Hilbery:

She was a remarkable-looking woman, well advanced in the sixties, but owing to the lightness of her frame and the brightness of her eyes she seemed to have wafted over the surface of the years without taking much harm in the passage.³¹¹

Moreover, like Lady Ritchie, Mrs Hilbery belongs to the world of literature, and she commits herself to the sphere of love and feelings rather than to a rational attitude to life. In addition to this, in Chapter Seven, Woolf includes a paraphrase of perhaps the most private episode in the life of Lady Ritchie's father, William M. Thackeray. She renames Thackeray as Alardyce, a Victorian poet. Even though she changes some details and obscures others, such as Thackeray's wife's madness, she shows the ruin of the novelist's marriage and the desolation of his last years:³¹²

³¹⁰ Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, cit., vol. I, pp. 10-11.

³¹¹ Woolf, Virginia, *Night and Day*, cit., p. 12.

³¹² McCail, Ronald, "A Family Matter: *Night and Day* and *Old Kensington*," cit., pp. 23-24.

The poet's marriage had not been a happy one. He had left his wife, and after some years of a rather reckless existence, she had died, before her time. This disaster had led to great irregularities of education, and, indeed, Mrs. Hilbery might be said to have escaped education altogether. But she had been her father's companion at the season when he wrote the finest of his poems. She had sat on his knee in taverns and other haunts of drunken poets, and it was for her sake, so people said, that he had cured himself of his dissipation, and become the irreproachable literary character that the world knows, whose inspiration had deserted him. As Mrs. Hilbery grew old she thought more and more of the past, and this ancient disaster seemed at times almost to prey upon her mind, as if she could not pass out of life herself without laying the ghost of her parent's sorrow to rest.³¹³

It is essential to know that Lady Ritchie, in her life, had never authorized a biography of her father. Thus, foreseeing that she could have possibly caused offence, Woolf allowed Lady Ritchie to read the novel in manuscript before publishing it. The Ritchies, reading *Night and Day*, felt their privacy invaded, and were deeply offended.³¹⁴ Nevertheless, Woolf chose not to change anything in the manuscript and the novel was published as it was.

Not only family members, also events occurring at 22 Hyde Park Gate are part of *Night and Day*. The Hilberys's family life, their Sunday tea parties are reminiscent of the life at 22 Hyde Park Gate. In the opening tea-party-scene of the novel, even the character of Mr Fortescue, "the eminent novelist,"³¹⁵ recalls the presence of Henry

³¹³ Woolf, Virginia, *Night and Day*, cit., p. 92.

³¹⁴ McCail, Ronald, "A Family Matter: *Night and Day* and *Old Kensington*, cit., p. 24.

³¹⁵ Woolf, Virginia, *Night and Day*, cit., p. 2.

James and his visits to the Stephen's household.³¹⁶ But the most interesting aspect of the novel, as regards Woolf's attitude to life-writing, is Katharine Hilbery's commitment to the biography of her grandfather, the Victorian poet Richard Alardyce. In this difficult work she assists her mother:

“You are writing a life of your grandfather, aren't you? [...] must take up a lot of time.” [...] “You've got it very nearly right,” she said, “but I only help my mother. I don't write myself.”³¹⁷

Woolf chooses to include in her novel not only the lives of her family and friends, but also to dedicate a place of honour, in the development of the story, to the genre of biography. She puts Mrs Hilbery in charge of the task of writing the life of her father, with the help of her practical daughter Katharine. Actually, the biographical project of the two women had started some years before. At that time, it seemed it would brightly succeed because the conditions to realize a great work were all set:

At the age of seventeen or eighteen – that is to say, some ten years ago – her mother had enthusiastically announced that now, with Katharine to help her, the biography would soon be published. Notices to this effect found their way into the literary papers, and for some time Katharine worked with a sense of great pride and achievement. Lately, however, it had seemed to her that they were making no way at all, and this was the most tantalizing because no one with the ghost of a literary temperament could doubt but that they had materials for one of the greatest biographies that has ever been written. Shelves and boxes bulged with

³¹⁶ Briggs, Julia, “The Proper Writing of Lives’: Biography versus Fiction in Woolf's Early Work,” cit., p. 36.

³¹⁷ Woolf, Virginia, *Night and Day*, cit., p. 11.

the precious stuff. The most private lives of the most interesting people lay furled in yellow bundles of close-written manuscript. In addition to this Mrs. Hilbery had in her own head as bright a vision of that time as now remained to the living, and could give those flashes and thrills to the old words which gave them almost the substance of flesh. She had no difficulty in writing, and covered a page every morning as instinctively as a thrush sings, but nevertheless, with all this to urge and inspire, and the most devout intention to accomplish the work, the book still remained unwritten. Papers accumulating without much furthering their task, and in dull moments Katharine had her doubts whether they would ever produce anything at all fit to lay before the public.³¹⁸

Despite these propitious conditions, “the book still remained unwritten.” This short sentence is the revealing statement of a critical attitude, in Woolf, which will gradually move towards a new concept of biography. Katharine asks herself “where did the difficulty lie?” Not in the lack of material, nor in the women’s ambition, but in something more profound. The language of the new biography cannot be the language of the Victorian tradition anymore. At the beginning of the new century, inspiration, and the truth about the subject were becoming more and more fragmentary:

Katharine would calculate that she had never known her [mother] write for more than ten minutes at a time. Ideas came to her chiefly when she was in motion. She liked to perambulate the room with a duster in her hand, with which she stopped to polish the back of already lustrous books, musing and romancing as she did so. Suddenly the right phrase or the penetrating point of view would suggest itself, and she would drop her duster and write ecstatically for a few breathless moments; and then the mood would pass away, and the duster would be sought

³¹⁸ Woolf, Virginia, *Night and Day*, cit., pp. 31-32.

for, and the old books polished again. These spells of inspiration never burnt steadily, but flickered over the gigantic mass of the subject as capriciously as a will-o'-wisp, lighting now on this point, now on that.³¹⁹

Having stated that the biographer is not a romantic genius overflowing with inspiration, Woolf remarks that Katharine Hilbery has to face the “radical question” of “what to leave in and what to leave out.”³²⁰ In so doing, she draws our attention to one of the most discussed problems in the ethics of biography. She cleverly expresses this “dilemma” through the voice of Mrs Hilbery who, even if she has all the facts and a fertile imagination, is

[unable] to face the radical questions of what to leave in and what to leave out. She could not decide how far the public was to be told the truth about the poet’s separation from his wife. She drafted passages to suit either case, and then liked each so well that she could not decide upon the rejection of either.³²¹

Alardyce’s biography is becoming an increasingly impossible effort, in so far as it cannot any longer be placed within the past literary tradition, with its obsolete principles. Those “imposing paragraphs” with which the biography has to open are, for Katharine, anachronistic: “many of these [...] resembled triumphal arches standing upon one leg.”³²²

The new biography was trying to find its own way in a difficult struggle of contrasting principles and methods, waged against the old-fashioned writing of lives.

³¹⁹ Woolf, Virginia, *Night and Day*, cit., p. 32.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³²² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

It is only when Mrs Hilbery and Katharine detach themselves from the duties of the traditional biographer that they become able to move towards new techniques. This indeed is what Woolf, in that period, was trying to achieve, both in her creative writing and in her critical reflections. The result of the efforts of Katharine and her mother is a new form, more sketchy and hard to define:

[It] seemed to Katharine that the book became a wild dance of will-o'-the-wisps, without form or continuity, without coherence even, or any attempt to make a narrative. Here were twenty pages upon her grandfather's taste in hats, an essay upon contemporary china, a long account of a summer day's expedition into the country, when they had missed their train, together with fragmentary visions of all sorts of famous men and women, which seemed to be partly imaginary and partly authentic. There were, moreover, thousands of letters, and a mass of faithful recollections contributed by old friends, which had grown yellow now in their envelopes, but must be placed somewhere, or their feelings would be hurt.³²³

Carlyle's concept of the "Great Men" – as representative of the Victorian tradition in biography – is now far aside. Ralph Denham, soon to become Katharine's fiancé, refuses their oppressive presence through his declaration which sounds like an anti-Victorian manifesto. When he is introduced for the first time at the Hilberys's tea-party, he discusses on Katharine's statements as follows:

"Nobody ever does do anything worth doing nowadays," she remarked. "You see" – she tapped the volume of her grandfather's poems – "we don't even print as well as they did, and as for poets or painters or novelists – there are none; so, at any

³²³ Woolf, Virginia, *Night and Day*, cit., p. 35.

rate, I'm not singular." "No, we haven't any great men," Denham replied. "I'm very glad that we haven't. I hate great men. The worship of greatness in the nineteenth century seems to me to explain the worthlessness of that generation."³²⁴

As Julia Briggs suggests, the lessons which Woolf learns and retains from her early experiments with biography are: "to use the materials of real life" and "to rewrite personal history as fiction."³²⁵ *Night and Day* transforms the material of biography – the lives of Woolf's sister, cousins and aunts, of her father, and aspects of Clive Bell and Leonard Woolf – into fiction.³²⁶ Woolf's attempt is to reconceive biography, rejecting the traditional technique, but, at the same time, focusing on it in order to demonstrate its obsolescence. With *Night and Day* she manages to accomplish this twofold task thanks to the stratagem of putting the biography of a famous poet at the centre of the scene. Woolf's determination to master the traditional writing of lives and to break away from it is reflected in Katharine and Mrs Hilbery's effort to complete their "impossible" biography.³²⁷ This central aspect is recalled throughout the novel, for, as Katharine affirms: "it's life that matters, nothing but life – the process of discovering, the everlasting and perpetual process."³²⁸ In this wake, Jo Shapcott, in her "Introduction" to the novel, affirms that "the elusive nature of experience and the struggles we go through to capture it – as epitomised by Mrs Hilbery's life's task to write her father's biography – is Woolf's subject."³²⁹

Night and Day is indeed the novel most connected with the weight of the past,

³²⁴ Woolf, Virginia, *Night and Day*, cit., p. 12.

³²⁵ Briggs, Julia, "The Proper Writing of Lives': Biography versus Fiction in Woolf's Early Work," cit., p. 31.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³²⁸ Woolf, Virginia, *Night and Day*, cit., p. 125.

³²⁹ Shapcott, Jo, "Introduction" to Woolf, Virginia, *Night and Day*, cit., p. xiii.

but also the symbol of a change. In this novel, Woolf recreates the atmosphere of her childhood, in order to express – according to Briggs – how stifling that world had been, and, thus, to make her personal and literary escape towards a new life.³³⁰

3.3 Experiments in lives, *in absentia et in praesentia*: *Jacob's Room* and *To the Lighthouse*

From the early twenties, Virginia Woolf turned away from the concept of biography as a faithful construction of the past, as she began to “espouse her cause” for a new form of writing:

The day after my birthday; in fact I am 38. Well. I've no doubt I'm a great deal happier than I was at 28; & happier today than I was yesterday having this afternoon arrived at some idea of a new form for a novel.³³¹

The short stories Woolf wrote in those years – “The Mark on the Wall” (1917), “Kew Gardens” (1919), “An Unwritten Novel” (1921)³³² – influenced her approach towards both a new ‘novel design’ and an innovative conception of the genre of biography. As a consequence, the experimental style she used in those stories cleared the way for the writing of *Jacob's Room* (1922).

Not only the short stories, but also the essays she composed acted as a turning point between her previous literary production and her coming work. For instance, in “Modern Novels” (1919) before and later in “Modern Fiction” (1925), Woolf identified

³³⁰ Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, cit., p. 49.

³³¹ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. II, 1978, p. 13. Monday, 26th January 1920.

³³² These short stories were previously published separately, then collected in *Monday or Tuesday*, by The Hogarth Press in 1921. “The Mark on the Wall” appeared in *Two Stories* in 1917; “Kew Gardens” was published privately in 1919; “An Unwritten Novel” came out in the periodical *London Mercury* in 1920.

life as “a luminous halo” in which our mind receives “a myriad of impressions,” “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms,”³³³ so that the writer drops hints about his/her subject, while the reader, as a consequence, catches only glimpses and fragments. In this perspective, it is easier to perceive in which direction Woolf’s conception of the genre of biography was moving during those years: as she maintained, life is not “a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged,”³³⁴ therefore the art of life-writing must be practiced according to this principle.

As far as Woolf experiments in life-writing are concerned, Woolf began composing *Jacob’s Room* on the 16th of April 1920, and showed Leonard her final typescript later in July 1922.³³⁵ She wrote in her diary:

On Sunday L. [Leonard] read through *Jacob’s Room*. He thinks it is my best work. But his first remark was that it was amazingly well written. We argued about it. He calls it a work of genius;³³⁶

Woolf’s friends, E. M. Forster included,³³⁷ praised *Jacob’s Room* for its originality: Woolf, actually, considered her novel “too much as an experiment.”³³⁸

³³³ Woolf, Virginia, “Modern Fiction,” cit., vol. IV, 1994, p. 160.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

³³⁵ Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, cit., p. 105.

³³⁶ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. II, 1978, p. 186. Wednesday 26th July 1922.

³³⁷ Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970) had previously judged *Night and Day* “a strictly formal and classical work,” “a deliberate exercise in classicism,” less interesting than *The Voyage Out* (1915). See Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, cit., p. 55. In a letter to Woolf, he wrote: “I don’t yet understand how, with your method, you managed it.” Quoted from Zwerdling, Alex, “*Jacob’s Room*: Woolf’s Satiric Elegy,” in *ELH*, Vol. 48, No. 4, (Winter 1981), pp. 894-913, p. 895. Arnold Bennett had declared: “I have seldom read a cleverer book than Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room*, a novel which has made a great stir in a small world. It is packed and bursting with originality, and it is exquisitely written.” Nevertheless, he criticized its characters for they “do not vitally survive in the mind because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness.” See Bennett, Arnold, “Is the Novel Decaying?,” *Cassell’s Weekly*, (28 March 1923), in Majumdar, Robin, McLaurin, Allen, eds., *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, London, Routledge, 1975, pp. 112-114, p. 113.

Lytton Strachey, in a letter, wrote: “The technique of the narrative is astonishing – how you manage to leave out everything that’s dreary, and yet retain enough string for your pearls I can hardly understand.”³³⁹ Leonard, according to Virginia’s diary,

thinks it unlike any other novel; he says that the people are ghosts; he says it is very strange: I have no philosophy of life he says; my people are puppets, moved hither & thither by fate.³⁴⁰

Jacob, in fact, appears to be a vanishing character from the very first page of the novel. His life is the core of every chapter, in “a montage of cinematic-like scenes”³⁴¹ from his boyhood in Scarborough, through his years in Cambridge and London, until his premature death. Nevertheless, his presence is like that of a ghost: Jacob and his actions are always described through the eyes, thoughts and feelings of the people who meet him.³⁴² In Chapter One, he is introduced by his brother Archer who screams: “Ja—cob! Ja—cob!”³⁴³ Archer and Jacob’s mother, Betty Flanders, are already in search of him from the very first scene. But we have to wait until Chapter Three to read the first description of Jacob, told through the words and the eyes of a fifty-year-old woman, Mrs Norman, in a railway carriage towards Cambridge:

³³⁸ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. II, 1976, p. 573. To Roger Fry, 22nd October 1922.

³³⁹ Strachey, Lytton, Woolf, Virginia, *Letters*, edited by Leonard Woolf and James Strachey, London, Hogarth Press, 1969, p. 103.

³⁴⁰ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. II, 1978, p. 186. Wednesday 26th July 1922.

³⁴¹ Lewis, Thomas S. W., “Virginia Woolf’s Sense of the Past,” cit., p. 201

³⁴² See Billi, Mirella, “Introduzione” to Woolf, Virginia, *La Stanza di Jacob*, Venezia, Marsilio Editori, 1994, pp. 9-26, p. 14.

³⁴³ Woolf, Virginia, *Jacob’s Room*, cit., p. 4.

she once more reached his face. She dwelt upon his mouth. The lips were shut. The eyes bent down, since he was reading. All was firm, yet youthful, indifferent, unconscious – as for knocking one down! [...] now he looked up, past her ... he seemed so out of place, somehow, alone with an elderly lady ... then she fixed his eyes – which were blue – on the landscape. He had not realized her presence, she thought.³⁴⁴

This description lacks the typical elements of physical portraiture, a strategy Woolf applies throughout the novel. Mrs Norman studies Jacob's features, but, in the end, she concludes that he appears "out of a place." In the pages of the novel, the character keeps disappearing and writer and reader (as well as Jacob's family and friends) are continuously looking for him.

As Suzanne Raitt points out, Virginia Woolf was trying to find a new voice.³⁴⁵ She is successful in this stylistic project with *Jacob's Room*: "I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice,"³⁴⁶ she said in her diary. In this novel, in fact, Woolf tries to reflect upon the conditions of the narrative voice itself: she doesn't develop her protagonist's voice, but, instead, the voices of others³⁴⁷ who describe him, speak in his place, thus underlining more and more his *absentia* throughout the story. Even the women around him – his mother, Clara, Florinda and Sandra – never succeed in possessing him, so that their voices calling for Jacob remain unanswered. As Briggs highlights, Woolf set out to write a novel about "not knowing," about the "unknowability of Jacob," in which "the narrative searches for

³⁴⁴ Woolf, Virginia, *Jacob's Room*, cit., p. 23.

³⁴⁵ Raitt, Suzanne, "Finding a Voice: Virginia Woolf's Early Novels," in Roe, Sue, Sellers, Susan, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 29-49, p. 31.

³⁴⁶ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. II, 1978, p. 186. Wednesday 26th July 1922.

³⁴⁷ Raitt, Suzanne, "Finding a Voice: Virginia Woolf's Early Novels," cit., p. 31.

him, calls for him,”³⁴⁸ as his brother Archer had done at the beginning, and as his friend Bonamy will do at the end of the novel, crying Jacob’s name. Some years later, Woolf wrote in her diary: “Now is life very solid or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions.”³⁴⁹ Indeed, on the one hand, Jacob appears the most real and solid figure, while, on the other hand, we know nothing about him.

Mrs Norman identifies Jacob as a “nice, handsome, interesting, distinguished, well built”³⁵⁰ young man, but, as Woolf suggested: “It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, not yet entirely what is done.”³⁵¹ Jacob is always surrounded by a halo of mystery, for life is nothing more than “a procession of shadows:”³⁵²

why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us – why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him. Such is the manner of our seeing.³⁵³

As Jacob, right from the beginning, shows himself as a ghostly presence, his room, as well, appears an empty space, completely still, the place where a ghost may dwell and be faintly heard:

³⁴⁸ Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, cit., p. 93.

³⁴⁹ Woolf, Leonard, ed., *A Writer’s Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1959, p. 141. Friday, January 4th 1929.

³⁵⁰ Woolf, Virginia, *Jacob’s Room*, cit., p. 24.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there.³⁵⁴

Jacob's room becomes the setting of Jacob's life and the centre of his being.³⁵⁵ Even though an empty space, it is worth noticing that the discourse concerning biography, however, has its place within it. Jacob reads the *Lives of the Duke of Wellington*,³⁵⁶ and, on his table, there is his essay entitled "Does History consist of the Biographies of Great Men?"³⁵⁷ This work refers to Thomas Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, and recalls the concept of the "Great Men" that Ralph Denham had already discussed with Miss Hilbery in *Night and Day*. With *Jacob's Room*, Woolf provides the figure of a protagonist which encapsulates the problem of representation, and anticipated the necessity of a new kind of biography, which will emerge later in *Orlando* and *Flush*. Nevertheless, with this novel, the seeds of a new concept of a biographically-inclined-narrative are already evident.³⁵⁸

Emptiness persists throughout Jacob's life, until the end, when, in the last chapter, his death – only hinted at by the narrative voice – leaves another unfilled gap. The description of the empty room – with its listless air, its flowers in the jar and its empty wicker arm-chair which, anyhow, creaks – recurs again, providing an echo to the reader who is still in search of a subject. Indeed the theme of death is present in the novel from the very beginning. As Alex Zwerdling underlines, by naming her hero Jacob Flanders, Woolf immediately predicts his fate.³⁵⁹ Flanders, in fact, was a

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³⁵⁵ Guiguet, Jean, *Virginia Woolf et son Oeuvre: l'Art et la Quête du Réel*, Paris, Didier, 1962, p. 219.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³⁵⁷ Woolf, Virginia, *Jacob's Room*, cit., p. 31.

³⁵⁸ Kazan, Francesca, "Description and the Pictorial in *Jacob's Room*," in *ELH*, Vol. 55, No. 3, (Autumn, 1988), pp. 701-719, pp. 711-712.

³⁵⁹ Zwerdling, Alex, "*Jacob's Room*: Woolf's Satiric Elegy," cit., p. 896.

synonym for death in battle during World War One.³⁶⁰ Thus, Jacob's surname constantly evokes the possibility of the imminent catastrophe. Also in the opening scene, death manifests itself through the announcement that "Mrs Flanders had been a widow these two years,"³⁶¹ and through the image of the young Jacob with a sheep skull found on the beach. Jacob being an orphan, Jacob playing with a skull, Jacob unknown, Jacob's destiny hidden "beneath the leaf,"³⁶² Jacob dying very young: Woolf, as a matter of fact, is creating a fresco in which death is at the core, recalling those Italian medieval paintings known as "Trionfo della Morte."³⁶³

Jacob's Room, as many critics have noticed, can be considered Woolf's elegy for her brother Thoby (1880-1906). Like her later novel *The Waves* (1931), the work is a tribute to Woolf's brother, who prematurely died from a typhoid contracted after a trip to Greece at the age of 26. In Woolf's experiment with biography, as a central feature of her fiction, Jacob cannot avoid being related to the drama of Thoby's death. Comparing the two young men, the real and the fictional one, it is easy to notice that they both study at Cambridge (Thoby was educated at Clifton College), they both share a passion for literature, they both travel to Greece, and finally they both die at the age of 26. Indeed, it is not surprising that Jacob just goes to Cambridge in October 1906, the same year of Thoby's death. As Thomas S. W. Lewis maintains, in Woolf's novel,

³⁶⁰ Official sources report that nearly a third of the million British soldiers killed in World War One lost their lives in the Flanders mud. Famous was the poem by John McCrae (1872-1918), "Flanders Fields," in which the poet remembers these war tragic events: "In Flanders fields, the poppies blow, Between the crosses, row on row [...] We are the Dead. Short days ago, We lived, felt down, saw sunset glow, Loved and were loved, and now we lie in Flanders fields." McCrae, John, *In Flanders Fields and Other Poems*, New York, Putnam's, 1919, p. 3.

³⁶¹ Woolf, Virginia, *Jacob's Room*, cit., p.3.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

³⁶³ Orestano, Francesca, "Jacob's Room: crisi della prospettiva e "Trionfo della Morte," in Palusci, Oriana, ed., *La tipografia nel salotto: saggi su Virginia Woolf*, Torino, Tirrenia Stampatori, 1999, pp. 149-166, p. 155.

we see evidence of Woolf seeking to untwist the intricate Gordian knot of her own past with her parents, sister, brothers, and step-brothers and, with an aesthetic distance acquired with time and thought, to transmute those experiences into art.³⁶⁴

With *Jacob's Room* the knot is untwisted. Woolf creates a literary portrait – as Robert Kiely affirms – “inspired by a man she had loved” – Thoby – and “associated with crucial moments in her life,”³⁶⁵ in which “vividness of detail” and “inconclusiveness” are designed in such an idiosyncratic “picture of life.”³⁶⁶

Jacob's life is basically static. This young man is, more an object than a subject, even if Woolf tries to kindle life in him. Lessing, in *Laocoon*, opposes the aim of poetry and the aim of painting: the former coincides with description, he explains, while the latter with allegory.³⁶⁷ Jacob occupies a place in between. As Kazan points out, Jacob serves as a “mediator linking the world of life and the world of art,” so that life and art can be always juxtaposed in a perpetual relationship.³⁶⁸

“Does anybody know Mr. Flanders?,” Mrs. Plumer asks in London.³⁶⁹ “Was Jacob nothing more than his empty room?,” Lewis wonders in his essay “Virginia Woolf's Sense of the Past.”³⁷⁰ Again, “how might it be possible to ‘know’ another person, even a loved, a cherished, familiar person?”³⁷¹ This last key-question stands at

³⁶⁴ Lewis, Thomas S. W., “Virginia Woolf's Sense of the Past,” cit., p. 186.

³⁶⁵ Kiely, Robert, “*Jacob's Room* and *Roger Fry*: Two Studies in Still Life,” in Kiely, Robert, Hildebidle, John, eds., *Modernism Reconsidered*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 147-166, p. 147.

³⁶⁶ Grabo, Carl H., “Mrs Woolf's *Jacob's Room*,” in McNees, Eleanor, ed., *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessments*, 4 vols., Mountfield, Helm Information, (1992-1994), vol. III, 1994, pp.190-194, p. 193.

³⁶⁷ Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, *Laocoon: an Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, cit., p. 23.

³⁶⁸ Kazan, Francesca, “Description and the Pictorial in *Jacob's Room*,” cit., pp. 701-702.

³⁶⁹ Woolf, Virginia, *Jacob's Room*, cit., p. 26.

³⁷⁰ Lewis, Thomas S. W., “Virginia Woolf's Sense of the Past,” cit., p. 202.

³⁷¹ Roe, Sue, “Introduction” to *Jacob's Room*, in Woolf, Virginia, *Jacob's Room*, cit., p. xviii.

the core of Woolf's literary inquiry, as pointed out by Sue Roe. Even though Jacob is merely *absentia*, we can learn something about this life, maybe more than we can from his essay about the life of a "Great Man."³⁷² Jacob is part of the countless procession of shadows, his generation is eventually similar to that of Pitt and Chatham, Burke and Gladstone, who

looked from side to side with fixed marble eyes and an air of immortal quiescence which perhaps the living may have envied. [...] altogether they looked too red, fat, pale or lean, to be dealing, as the marble heads had dealt, with the course of history.³⁷³

The four statesmen are statues. Their air of immortality is questioned: they look from side to side with "fixed marble eyes," and cannot do much else anymore. Like them, Victorian biography is a static and obsolete sculptural form, and Jacob's literary portrait shows the way towards Woolf's revolution in the genre.

In 1922, on Christmas Day, a few months after having published *Jacob's Room*, Woolf wrote to her friend Gerald Brenan (1894-1987):

I have been thinking a great deal about what you say of writing novels. One must renounce, you say. I can do better than write novels, you say. I can't altogether understand. I don't see how to write a book without people in it. Perhaps you mean that one ought not to attempt a 'view of life'? – one ought to limit oneself to one's own sensations [...] be lyrical, descriptive: but not set people in motion, and attempt to enter them, and give them impact and volume? Ah, but I'm doomed! [...] It is not possible now and never will be, to say I renounce. [...]

³⁷² Lewis, Thomas S. W., "Virginia Woolf's Sense of the Past," cit., p. 202.

³⁷³ Woolf, Virginia, *Jacob's Room*, cit., pp. 151-152.

The human soul, it seems to be, orientates itself afresh every now and then. It is doing so now. No one can see it whole, therefore. The best of us catch a glimpse of a nose, a shoulder, something turning away, always in movement. Still, it seems better to me to catch this glimpse, then to sit down with Hugh Walpole, Wells, etc. etc. and make large oil paintings of fabulous fleshy monsters complete from top to toe. [...] I am doubtful whether people, the most disposed towards each other, are capable of more than an intermittent signal as they forge past – a sentimental metaphor, leading obviously to ships, and night, and storm and reefs and rocks, and the obscured, uncompassionate moon.³⁷⁴

At the end of 1922, after the great experiment of *Jacob's Room*, Woolf was still wondering about fiction, characters, life and people.

*

Several works by Woolf are shaped around an absence.³⁷⁵ Jacob is probably the most absent character Woolf ever conceived, as we have seen above. Mrs Ramsay as well – who disappears in the chapter “Time Passes” – is absent in the second half of *To the Lighthouse*. Absence, in fact, allows Woolf to give predominance to memory; absence becomes a way to exorcise the ghosts of the past, making them present on the page. As Lyndall Gordon suggests, Woolf's life as a writer was based on two persistent memories: first, Talland House, her summer house at St Ives, in Cornwall, with its

³⁷⁴ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. II, 1976, pp. 597-598. To Gerald Brenan, Christmas Day 1922. Gerald Brenan was a British writer who spent much of his life in Spain. He is best known for *The Spanish Labyrinth* (1943), a historical work on the background to the Spanish Civil War, and for *South from Granada: Seven Years in an Andalusian Village* (1957).

³⁷⁵ Beer, Gillian, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1996, p. 29.

view across the bay to the Godrevy lighthouse (the same setting that had opened *Jacob's Room*), and, secondly, her parents Julia and Leslie Stephen.³⁷⁶

Woolf had spent every summer at St Ives, from her birth until 1895, the year of Julia Stephen's sudden death, and there she has her best-loved memories.³⁷⁷ After the death of Julia, Leslie Stephen had decided to give up the rent of Talland House, but in 1905, the year after his death, Virginia, her sister Vanessa and her brothers Thoby and Adrian returned to St Ives to spend a nostalgic summer holiday all together. Visiting their old house, Woolf reported that "the lights were not our lights; the voices were the voices of strangers. We hung there like ghosts in the shade of the hedge."³⁷⁸ In 1925, when she was planning to write her new novel, she reread the account of that holiday spent twenty years before.³⁷⁹

To the Lighthouse was published on Thursday, 5th May 1927, the day of the 32nd anniversary of Woolf's mother's death. In May 11th, 1927 Vanessa Bell, extremely impressed by the novel, wrote to her sister:

it seemed to me in the first part of the book you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could ever have conceived of as possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. You have made one feel the extraordinary beauty of her character, which must be the most difficult thing in the world to do. It was like meeting her again with oneself grown up & on equal terms & it seems to me the most astonishing feat of creation to have been able to see her in such a way – You have given father too I think as clearly, but perhaps, I may be wrong, that isn't quite so difficult. There is more to

³⁷⁶ Gordon, Lyndall, *Virginia Woolf, A Writer's Life*, cit., p. 3.

³⁷⁷ Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, cit., pp. 161-162.

³⁷⁸ Woolf, Virginia, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909*, cit., p. 282.

³⁷⁹ Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, cit., p. 162.

catch hold of. Still it seems to me to be the only thing about him which ever gave a true idea. So you see as far as portrait painting goes you seem to me to be a supreme artist & it is so shattering to find oneself face to face with those two again that I can hardly consider anything else. In fact for the last two days I have hardly been able to attend to daily life.³⁸⁰

Woolf had already thought of her parents as subjects for a novel in the autumn of 1924, one year before she started composing *To the Lighthouse*. On Thursday, 14th May 1925, she reported in her diary:

I'm now all the strain with desire to stop journalism & get on to *To the Lighthouse*. This is going to be fairly short: to have father's character done complete in it; & mothers; & St Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in – life, death & c. but the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting We perished, while he crushes a dying mackerel – However I must refrain.³⁸¹

Hers was a clear announcement: with her new work, she set out to be more biographical than before, that is to write about somebody's life, wrapping it on the imaginary clothing of a fictional character. Woolf openly declared her desire that people “will read [*To the Lighthouse*] & recognise poor Leslie Stephen & beautiful Mrs Stephen in it.”³⁸² And so people will do, as much as Vanessa did: in 1927, after the publication of the book, Virginia was in a “terrible state of pleasure” for Vanessa had

³⁸⁰ Letter quoted in Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, vol. II, p. 128. Vanessa Bell, 11th May 1927.

³⁸¹ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1984, pp. 18-19. Thursday 14th May, 1925.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 61. Wednesday, 24th February 1926.

stated that Mrs Ramsay was totally similar to their mother.³⁸³

There is a photograph in which Virginia, at the age of about ten, is sitting on a sofa at St Ives, chin in hand, listening to her parents reading, dressed in dark Victorian clothes.³⁸⁴ This memory is one of the sources that allowed her to commit herself to a new biographical experiment. As a modern artist, she painted the portrait of her parents with the colours of Mr and Mrs Ramsay.

No praise the deep vermilion in the rose,³⁸⁵

she read, and so reading she was ascending, she felt, on the top, on to the summit. How satisfying! How restful! All the odds and ends of the day stuck to this magnet; her minds felt swept, felt clean. And then there it was, suddenly entire shaped in her hands, beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the essence sucked out of life and held rounded here – the sonnet. But she was becoming conscious of her husband looking at her. He was smiling at her, [...] he was thinking, Go on reading. [...] She was astonishingly beautiful. Her beauty seemed to him, if that were possible, to increase.³⁸⁶

The scene of the reading is the scene of the photograph, at a distance. Woolf seems to be peering at her beloved ghosts through a window. Mrs Ramsay shows herself as a beautiful, kind, well-advised woman with a perfect simplicity in relationships, who dies – in brackets – prematurely, while Mr Ramsay is “lean as a knife,”³⁸⁷ with a “magnificent head,”³⁸⁸ with his “great forehead and his great nose.”³⁸⁹ He is egocentric,

³⁸³ Gordon, Lyndall, *Virginia Woolf, A Writer's Life*, cit., p. 29.

³⁸⁴ Gordon, Lyndall, *Virginia Woolf, A Writer's Life*, cit., p. 28.

³⁸⁵ William Shakespeare, Sonnet 98.

³⁸⁶ Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse*, cit., pp. 131-132.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 220.



Virginia Stephen sitting on a sofa at St Ives, chin in hand, listening to her parents – Julia and Leslie Stephen – reading, dressed in dark Victorian clothes.

<http://www.woolfonline.com/>

(Last access 1st Feb 2013)

severe, an “Old Man”³⁹⁰ who hangs over his eight children in a rigorous stillness, “demanding sympathy.”³⁹¹ Their fictional portraits, without the slightest doubt, mirror Julia and Leslie Stephen: her familiar experience becomes the material of life projected into the novel.

For a numbers of years, Woolf had suppressed the memories of her parents and of her childhood. With *To the Lighthouse*, she manages to exorcise her “malign ghosts” along with the heavy burden of her Victorian past.³⁹² The cultural shift from the Victorian code of values to a new range of possibilities and new forms of expressions was symptomatic of Woolf’s need of change, both in her inner life and in her literary expression. However, unlike Leslie – who still is a heavy disturbing figure – Julia was a dear ghost. In the novel, Woolf’s acceptance of her mother’s presence is continuous:³⁹³ “on more occasions than I can number, in bed at night, or in the street, or as I come into the room, there she is; beautiful, emphatic, with her familiar phrase and her laugh; closer than any of the living.”³⁹⁴ And now, Woolf, at the age of 45 “no longer hear[s] her voice.”³⁹⁵ In *Moments of Being*, she even declared: “I supposed that I did for myself [with *To the Lighthouse*] what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and very deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to the rest.”³⁹⁶

³⁹⁰ See Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1984, p. 3. Tuesday, 6th January 1925.

³⁹¹ Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse*, cit., p. 42.

³⁹² Lewis, Thomas S. W., “Virginia Woolf’s Sense of the Past,” cit., p. 191.

³⁹³ As Flora De Giovanni notices in her work *La pagina e la tela, intersezioni in Virginia Woolf*, Napoli, Giannini Editore, 2007, Lily Briscoe’s invocation of Mrs Ramsay’s name indicates the conscious beginning of Woolf’s mourning. See De Giovanni, p. 103.

³⁹⁴ Quoted in Gordon, Lyndall, *Virginia Woolf, A Writer’s Life*, cit., p. 39.

³⁹⁵ From “A Sketch of the Past,” quoted in Dalsimer, Katherine, *Virginia Woolf Becoming a Writer*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001, p. 1.

³⁹⁶ Woolf, Virginia, *Moments of Being. Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, London, Triad Grafton, 1978, p. 94. It is interesting to remark that Woolf – even if Freud and her theories were, in that period, having a great appeal – always refused to solve her psychological disorders through the act of writing. See Zaccaria, Paola, “Freud fa la differenza? Appercezione

Not only a way to experiment with biography, nor a therapeutic medium for coming to terms with her ghosts, *To the Lighthouse* is also an occasion to reflect upon aesthetic and narrative questions. Lily Briscoe, a young friend and painter, is thirty-three in the first part of the book, while Mrs. Ramsay is fifty. As a consequence, Lily can relate to Mrs Ramsay as a daughter. Moreover, in Part III, Lily is forty-four, the same age of Woolf when she is writing the novel. These hints reveal the possibility that, behind Lily, there might be Virginia.³⁹⁷ With this character, Virginia also elaborated her aesthetic investigation: with her paintbrush, Lily catches the image of Mrs Ramsay on the canvas, just like Woolf captures her mother's figure on the white page. As Laura Di Michele reports in her essay "La parola dipinta di Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*," Woolf, in a letter to her sister Vanessa, many years later, confessed: "One should be a painter. As a writer, I feel the beauty, which is almost entirely colour, very subtle, very changeable, running over my pen."³⁹⁸ Lily, like Virginia returning to St Ives after a decade, returns to the Ramsays' summer house, exactly ten years after her last visit. Everything is falling into disrepair, everything has changed, in St Ives as well as at the Ramsays': Julia Stephen and Mrs Ramsay are dead, even Andrew and Prue³⁹⁹ are dead, summer holidays are no longer the same. "The house, the place, the morning, all seemed stranger to her,"⁴⁰⁰ says Woolf expressing Lily's sensations as

fisico-spaziale e fantasmi genitoriali in Virginia Woolf e H.(ilda) D.(oolittle)," in Oriana Palusci, ed., *La tipografia nel salotto: saggi su Virginia Woolf*, cit., pp. 38-53, p. 44.

³⁹⁷ Dick, Susan, "Literary Realism in *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*," in Roe, Sue, Sellers, Susan, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, cit., pp. 50-71, p. 58.

³⁹⁸ To Vanessa Bell, 25th June 1938, quoted in Di Michele, Laura, "La parola dipinta di Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*," in Palusci, Oriana, ed., *La tipografia nel salotto: saggi su Virginia Woolf*, cit., pp. 167-184, p. 168.

³⁹⁹ Virginia Woolf describes Stella Duckworth in *To the Lighthouse*, she appears as Prue Ramsay. In "Time Passes," Prue is given in marriage, but she suddenly dies, as Stella who, three months after her marriage, died, pregnant. See Gordon, Lyndall, *Virginia Woolf, A Writer's Life*, cit., pp. 47-49.

⁴⁰⁰ Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse*, cit., p. 160.

well as hers. Anyway, Virginia writes her notes, while Lily thinks it the right moment to complete her unfinished picture:

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was – her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps: they were empty; she looked at her canvas: it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.⁴⁰¹

According to Gordon Lyndall, what happens to Lily Briscoe in the post-war episode of the book, is the fictional account of Virginia's self-discovery as a writer.⁴⁰²

To come straight to the point, Woolf saw biography as a portrait,⁴⁰³ whose subjects had to be composed as a work of art, and not as a mere compendium of facts. Memories, and also facts, are essential, but only as a guide to direct her creative imagination. Her subjects are elusive and undergo a continuous transformation, as Lily Briscoe throughout the three sections of the novel.⁴⁰⁴ Like *Jacob's Room* before, *To the*

⁴⁰¹ Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse*, cit., pp. 225-226.

⁴⁰² Gordon, Lyndall, *Virginia Woolf, A Writer's Life*, cit., p. 37.

⁴⁰³ To this point, I want to remind Woolf's involvement with art as a central aspect of her life. First of all, her sister Vanessa and her friend Roger Fry were respectively a painter and an art critic. Then, Woolf often visited art galleries and museums herself and wrote about art in her essays. For instance, see Virginia, Woolf, "The Royal Academy," (1919), in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1988, pp. 89-95. Woolf, Virginia, "Pictures and Portraits," (1920), in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1988, pp. 163-166. Woolf, Virginia, "Pictures," (1925), in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1994, pp. 243-247. Woolf, Virginia, "The Fleeting Portrait," (1928), in *Granite & Rainbow*, edited by Leonard Woolf, San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986, pp. 216-224. Woolf, Virginia, "Walter Sickert," (1934), in *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1950, pp. 172-185.

⁴⁰⁴ Zaccaria, Paola, "Freud fa la differenza? Appercezione fisico-spaziale e fantasmi genitoriali in Virginia Woolf e H.(ilda) D.(oolittle)," cit., pp. 38-53, p. 51.

Lighthouse is an elegy for Julia and Leslie Stephen, in which, according to Katharine Dalsimer, Woolf invites the reader to examine “the way a life is told and retold over the course of time, by a writer who was herself intensely interested in the working of memory.”⁴⁰⁵ If Jacob is *absentia*, Mr and Mrs Ramsay, in perspective, become *praesentia*, for their biographical account represents Woolf’s acceptance of their presence in her adult-writer mind.

3.4 Revolutionary *Orlando*, an impossible life

According to Quentin Bell, Virginia Woolf, in 1927, rushed into the writing of *Orlando: A Biography* “in a state of high exhilaration.”⁴⁰⁶ She abandoned fiction in order to explore biography more deeply. Her new work was dedicated to Vita Sackville-West.⁴⁰⁷ Almost thirty years later, in 1955, on a BBC radio broadcast, Vita would confirm that that book examined “myself, my family, and Knole my family home.”⁴⁰⁸ However, Bell points out that, in *Orlando*, it is also possible to trace many elements of Woolf’s daily life, which he considers a token of her renewed interest in biography.⁴⁰⁹ As a matter of fact, while *To the Lighthouse* explores Woolf’s juvenile life and passions, in *Orlando*, Woolf records contemporary events together with past history and with a discourse critically focused on the art of biography. *Orlando* is her

⁴⁰⁵ Dalsimer, Katherine, *Virginia Woolf Becoming a Writer*, cit., p. xv.

⁴⁰⁶ Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, cit., vol. II, p. 132.

⁴⁰⁷ Victoria Mary Sackville-West, best known as Vita Sackville-West (9th March 1892 – 2nd June 1962) was an English author, poet and gardener. She was married with Harold Nicolson, the author of *The Development of English Biography* (1927) and supporter of the “new biography” theories. She had a love affair with Virginia Woolf. One of her most remembered work is the biography *Knole and the Sackvilles* (1922), from which Woolf took inspiration while she was writing *Orlando: A Biography*.

⁴⁰⁸ Quoted in Palusci, Oriana, *Le dimore nel tempo: Mrs Dalloway, Orlando, Mrs Woolf*, Torino, Tirrenia Stampatori, 1996, p. 52.

⁴⁰⁹ Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, cit., vol. II, p. 132.

attempt to find an answer to the question raised by the title of Jacob's essay, "Does History Consist of the Biographies of Great Men?"⁴¹⁰

The idea of *Orlando* appeared to have been proposed to Woolf by Lytton Strachey. Woolf reported in her diary that, on a particular day, at lunchtime, Strachey, debating her previous novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)⁴¹¹, suggested that in order to master her method she should try to write "something wilder and more fantastic."⁴¹² The roots of *Orlando* can be traced back to this episode, as well as to 1927, the year in which Virginia Woolf is reviewing *Some People*, a work by Harold Nicolson, for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Inside this fictional-autobiographical book by Nicolson, she discovered a new path to follow.⁴¹³ *Some People* mixed biography and autobiography, fact and fiction, truth and personality, as a series of autobiographical anecdotes of Edwardian figures, clearing the way for the conception of *Orlando*:

One of these days, though, I shall sketch here, like a grand historical picture, the outlines of all my friends. I was thinking of this in bed last night, & for some reason I thought I would begin with a sketch of Gerald Brenan. There may be something in this idea. It might be a way of writing the memoirs of one's own times during people lifetimes. It might be a most amusing book. The question is how to do it. Vita should be Orlando, a young nobleman. There should be Lytton.

⁴¹⁰ Woolf, Virginia, *Jacob's Room*, cit., p. 31. The concept of "Great Men" is recurring. Also Mr Ramsay, after having read an article in *The Times* concerning the number of Americans who visit Shakespeare's house every year, wonders: "If Shakespeare had never existed, [...] would the world have differed much from what it is today? Does the progress of civilization depend upon great men?" See Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse*, cit., p. 48.

⁴¹¹ Woolf, Virginia, *Mrs Dalloway*, (1925), edited with an Introduction and Notes by David Bradshaw, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁴¹² Quoted in Edel, Leon, *Literary Biography: The Alexander Lectures 1955-56*, cit., p. 93.

⁴¹³ Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, cit., p. 192.

& it should be truthful.; but fantastic. Roger. Duncan. Clive. Adrian. Their lives should be related.⁴¹⁴

As Thomas S. W. Lewis underlines, while the subject of *Orlando* had its genesis in Vita Sackville-West's life, and its idea in Strachey's challenge, the method may be inspired by Harold Nicolson's *Some People*.⁴¹⁵ In fact, in a letter to Vita's husband, Woolf expressed to Nicolson all her astonishment and delight for this work, stating: "I can't make out how you combine the advantages of fact and fiction as you do."⁴¹⁶

The mixture of fact and fiction is already visible from the title of Woolf's work. The title "Orlando" has the subtitle "A Biography." Woolf remarked in her diary: "But it is a novel, says Miss Ritchie. But it is called a biography on the title page, they say."⁴¹⁷ Woolf herself declared that hers was an attempt to get the right balance between truth and fantasy. Thus, Vita's lineage offered the opportunity to explore the mutual relationship between historico-biographical truth and the fantasy of fiction:⁴¹⁸ "I am writing Orlando," she said, "half in a mock style very clear and plain, so that people will understand every word. But the balance between truth&fantasy must be careful. It is based on Vita, Violet Trefusis,⁴¹⁹ Lord Lascelles, Knole &c."⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁴ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1984, pp. 155-156. Tuesday 18th September 1927.

⁴¹⁵ Lewis, Thomas S. W., "Combining 'The Advantages of Fact and Fiction': Virginia Woolf's Biographies of Vita Sackville-West, Flush, and Roger Fry," in McNeese, Eleanor, ed., *Virginia Woolf Critical. Assessments*, cit., vol. II, 1994, pp.376-397, p. 378.

⁴¹⁶ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1977, p. 392. To Harold Nicolson, 15th June 1927.

⁴¹⁷ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1984, p. 198. Saturday 22nd September 1928.

⁴¹⁸ Palusci, Oriana, *Le dimore nel tempo: Mrs Dalloway, Orlando, Mrs Woolf*, cit., p. 53.

⁴¹⁹ Violet Trefusis née Keppel (6th June 1894 – 29th February 1972) was an English writer . She wrote novels and many non-fictional works, both in English and French. She is chiefly remembered for her affair with the poet Vita Sackville-West. The affair was featured in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*, as well as in many letters and memoirs of the period.

⁴²⁰ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1984, p. 162. Saturday 22nd October 1927.

Orlando was, in fact, based, as already mentioned, on the imaginary life of Vita Sackville-West, but also on Knole, the aristocratic seat of the Sackvilles. Woolf visited Knole for the first time on the 17th of January 1927. On that occasion, she selected among family portraits the one which would become the portrait of Orlando.⁴²¹ Vita, moreover, gave her a copy of her historical essay *Knole and the Sackvilles* (1922). *Knole and the Sackvilles* was a small book, filled with odd facts, anecdotes and documents relating the history of Vita's aristocratic family. It represented, as Naremore points out, an example of biography to which Woolf would respond with *Orlando*.⁴²² As Briggs highlights, Woolf read Vita's work closely, in order to borrow "names for household servants and catalogues of household furnishings, noting the friends, titles and habits of Vita's ancestors, as well as details of the great house itself."⁴²³ According to Frank Baldanza, author of "Orlando and the Sackvilles," in *Orlando* several Sackville personalities reappear. For instance, Baldanza recognizes Vita's grandmother, Pepita, in Orlando's gipsy wife, Rosina Pepita.⁴²⁴ Woolf was interested in recreating characters because her very aim was to capture "the granite and rainbow" of her intimate friend Vita. In so doing, she wanted to revolutionise biography.⁴²⁵

Woolf wrote about her intention in a letter addressed to Vita, dated 9th October 1927:

Yesterday morning I was in despair: you know that bloody book which Dadie and Leonard extort, drop by drop, from my breast? Fiction, or some title to that effect

⁴²¹ Pawlowski, Merry M., "Introduction" to Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), London, Wordsworth Classics, 2003, p. vii.

⁴²² Naremore, James, *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1973, p. 206.

⁴²³ Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, cit., p. 195.

⁴²⁴ To have a complete account of any detail, see Baldanza, Frank, "Orlando and the Sackvilles," in *PMLA*, Vol. 70, No. 1, (Mar., 1955), pp. 274-279, p. 277.

⁴²⁵ Cooley, Elizabeth, "Revolutionizing Biography: Orlando, Roger Fry, and the Tradition," in *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 55, No. 2, (May, 1990), pp. 71-83, p. 71.

The portraits of Orlando



Orlando as a boy



Orlando as ambassador



Orlando on her return to England



Orlando about the year 1940



Orlando at the present time

From Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando* (1928), London, Penguin Books, 1993.

[*Phases of Fiction*]. I couldn't screw a word from me; and at last dropped my head in my hands: dipped my pen in the ink, and wrote these words, as if automatically, on a clean sheet: Orlando A Biography. No sooner had I done this than my body was flooded with rapture and my brain with ideas. I wrote rapidly till 12. Then I did an hour to Romance. So every morning I am going to write fiction (my own fiction) till 12; and Romance till 1. But listen; suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and it's all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind [...] suppose, I say, that Sybil next October says "There's Virginia gone and written a book about Vita" and Ozzie [Dickinson] chaws with his great chaps and Byard [of Heinemann] guffaws, Shall you mind? Say yes, or No Your excellence as a subject arises largely from your noble birth. (But what's 400 years of nobility, all the same?) and the opportunity thus given for florid descriptive passages in great abundance. Also, I admit, I should like to untwine and twist again some very odd, incongruous strands in you: going at length into the question of Campbell; and also, as I told you, it sprung upon me how I could revolutionise biography in a night: and so if agreeable to you I would like to toss this up in the air and see what happens. Yet, of course, I may not write another line.⁴²⁶

To this letter, Vita replied on the 11th of October: "My God, Virginia, if ever I was thrilled and terrified it is at the prospect of being projected into the shape of Orlando. What fun for you; what fun for me... You have my full permission."⁴²⁷ Thus Woolf, having received a "full permission," proceeded with her challenging project:

If my pen allowed, I should now try to make out a work table, having done my last article for The Tribune, & now being free again. And instantly the usual

⁴²⁶ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1977, pp. 427-429. To V. Sackville-West, 9th October 1927.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 429, quoted in footnotes.

exciting devices enter my mind: a biography beginning in the year 1500 & continuing to the present day, called Orlando: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another. I think, for a treat, I shall let myself dash this in for a week, while [text ends].⁴²⁸

With *Orlando*, Woolf openly resumes her lifelong interest in the genre of biography. The work is a biographical text – as the subtitle indicates – in which the author becomes intrusive, running after his subject throughout five centuries, from the Elizabethan age until the Edwardian one, from Shakespeare to Strachey, and ending on the 11th of October 1928, the day of its publication.⁴²⁹ Therefore, *Orlando* is not only a work about Woolf's friend Vita, but it is also a response, theoretically charged, to the works of that period concerning the writing of biography. In this regard, it is interesting to remember that *Orlando* is contemporary with Lytton Strachey's anti-Victorian life studies, such as his *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928), and it looks forward to Virginia Woolf's attempt in regular biography, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940). *Orlando* is also a reflection upon the relationship between "fact" and "imagination."⁴³⁰ And it is by using imagination that Woolf violated the first duty of the biographer, that is "Truth", along with "Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot" of the Victorian biographer.⁴³¹

As James Naremore underlines, also Orlando's sex-change seems to be a rebellion against the "Purity," "Chastity," and "Modesty" of the Victorians.⁴³² *Orlando*, in fact, is also an impressive treatise on gender identity, masculinity, femininity and

⁴²⁸ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1984, p. 161, Wednesday 5th October 1927.

⁴²⁹ Bonadei, Rossana, *Virginia Woolf. In the Nerves of Writing*, Bergamo, Bergamo University Press, 2011, p. 76.

⁴³⁰ Naremore, James, *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel*, cit., p. 196.

⁴³¹ Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando: A Biography*, cit., p. 95.

⁴³² Naremore, James, *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel*, cit., p. 214.

sexual change. Quentin Bell, in his aunt's biography, gives an interesting account of a party organized by Maynard and Lydia Keynes at Tilton, in September 1927. He reports that, on that occasion, someone had brought to the party a newspaper cutting representing a pretty young woman who had become a man. Virginia had seen that photograph and, he adds, that photograph had become her main topic of conversation during the evening.⁴³³ The issues of *sexuality* and gender are at the core of *Orlando's* dramatic focus. As Leslie Hankins maintains, Woolf brought "feminism squarely into the queer realm by confronting the sexually ambiguous protagonist with his/her own complicity in the misogynist sex/gender system and by encouraging a feminist conversion experience."⁴³⁴ Moreover, Patricia Morgan Cramer highlights that "Woolf's novels are passionately concerned with female sexuality, especially the role of male sexual abuse in women's subordination and the liberating possibilities of lesbian love."⁴³⁵ Therefore, in Woolf's work, the desire to challenge gender norms towards a "completely changed non-hierarchical society,"⁴³⁶ is highly felt and expressed. When Orlando becomes a woman, she has to take a husband, the "burden" of a woman in Victorian England. The spirit of the age ordered to behave in such a way. In the light of these considerations, Woolf's revolutionary attitude towards both gender and the strict rules of patriarchal society can be placed side by side with her rebellion against Victorian biography. In that period, her wish to escape Victorian strictness manifested itself on several fronts because, as Pamela Caughie observes, *Orlando* is first of all "a

⁴³³ Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, cit., vol. II, p. 132.

⁴³⁴ Hankins, Leslie, "Orlando: 'A Precipice Marked V': Between 'A Miracle of Discretion' and 'Lovemaking Unbelievable': Indiscretions Incredible," in Barrett, Eileen, Cramer, Patricia, eds., *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Reading*, New York, New York University Press, 1997, pp. 180-202, p. 182.

⁴³⁵ Cramer, Patricia Morgan, "Virginia Woolf and Sexuality," in Sellers, Susan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion of Virginia Woolf. Second Edition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 180-196, p. 182.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

text about writing, about constructing lives,” but also about “history, [sexual] identities and fictions.”⁴³⁷

In this perspective, it is remarkable that not only Orlando’s *gender* is subject to alteration, but also the *genre* of *Orlando*. As Palusci highlights, if on the one hand the work is the biographical account of Vita, Knole and her family, on the other hand it displays autobiographical hints concerning Woolf’s own love for Vita. In addition, *Orlando* is a *romance*.⁴³⁸ It can be viewed as a play with its actors on the stage – Vita, Violette Trefusis, Lord Lascelles, Edmund Gosse, Clive Bell... – and, sat among the audience, the biographers, to which Woolf addressed herself and her literary quest.⁴³⁹ *Orlando* becomes a piece of evidence of Woolf’s inner design: she was more and more determined to point out the connections between traditional biography and contemporary literature.

To this end, the modern narrator-biographer’s voice becomes more and more audible throughout the text, stressing the central aspect of “truth:”

The biographer is now faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over. Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando’s life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfill the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; [...] But now we come to an episode which lies right across our path, so that there is no ignoring it. Yet it is dark, mysterious, and undocumented; so that there is no explaining it. Volumes might be written in interpretation of it; whole religious systems founded upon the signification of it.

⁴³⁷ Caughie, Pamela L., “Virginia Woolf Double Discourse,” in Barr, Marleen S., Feldstein, Richard, eds., *Discontented Discourses: Feminism/Textual Intervention/Psychoanalysis*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1989, pp. 41-53, p. 42.

⁴³⁸ Palusci, Oriana, *Le dimore nel tempo: Mrs Dalloway, Orlando, Mrs Woolf*, cit., pp. 65-66.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, cit., p. 54.

Our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may.⁴⁴⁰

Furthermore, according to Susan Dick, in casting the narrator in the role of biographer, Woolf restricts her perspective,⁴⁴¹ especially because Orlando is a writer and he requires a critic to explain his deepest secrets: “every secret of a writer’s soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind is written large in his works, yet we require critics to explain the one and biographers to expound the other.”⁴⁴²

With her “mock biography,” Woolf satirizes the biographical conventions of her forefathers. She introduces Orlando with a description in a perfect hagiographic style, in order to ridicule Victorian life-writing. Orlando’s biographer speaks pompously from the very beginning, when, claiming to write about an aristocratic man of action, she describes Orlando in such a rhetorical way:

Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet. From deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach whatever seat it may be that is the height of their desire. Orlando, to look at, was cut out precisely for some such career.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴⁰ Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando: A Biography*, cit., p. 47.

⁴⁴¹ Dick, Susan, “Literary realism in *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*,” cit., p. 63.

⁴⁴² Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando: A Biography*, cit., pp. 145-146.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Orlando is also built up by many selves, by many identities: as Woolf maintained, “a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand.”⁴⁴⁴

Woolf expresses again her perplexities upon Victorian literature and its way of writing lives when she wonders whether to write it “in sixty volumes octavo” or “to squeeze it into six lines,”⁴⁴⁵ for “the true length of a person’s life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute.”⁴⁴⁶ But then, she chooses economy, according to the prevailing style the new biography was espousing in those years. She quotes Leslie Stephen’s titanic work with unashamed irony.

However, in the end, in spite of her aim to discredit Victorian biography, Woolf with *Orlando*, decides to follow, even if superficially, some traditional rules. She provides, for instance, illustrations, an index, and also a Preface in which she thanks all the people who had helped her writing the work. Among these Strachey and Nicolson have a prominent position.⁴⁴⁷ This contradictory choice, despite her revolutionary impulse, is a way to convey to her novel the form and fashion of the biographical genre to which – despite all its transgression – *Orlando* has to conform. It is worth noticing that the literary critic and biographer Leon Edel, in his “Alexander Lectures” on literary biography, wrote at length about Woolf’s *Orlando*, judging it “a fantasy in the form of biography.”⁴⁴⁸ Nevertheless Edel, analysing *Orlando* and its “failures” in being an “all-round biography,” states that:

⁴⁴⁴ Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando: A Biography*, cit., p. 213.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁴⁴⁷ Cooley, Elizabeth, “Revolutionizing Biography: Orlando, Roger Fry, and the Tradition,” cit., pp. 75-76.

⁴⁴⁸ Edel, Leon, *Literary Biography: The Alexander Lectures 1955-56*, cit., p. 90.

a student of biography, seeking to understand something about that art, would do well to read not the life of Roger Fry, sound, careful, honest, sensitive though it is, but the soaring and playful, yet highly serious and didactic – if fictitious – *Orlando*.⁴⁴⁹

Edel recognizes that Woolf, in mocking traditional biography, offers not only an involving novel about a life span of five centuries, but she also carries out a sort of helpful study concerning the “newborn” biography. As Elizabeth Cooley points out, Woolf broke with conventions of style, form, and subject, “in such a way to revolutionise biography by essentially making it fiction.”⁴⁵⁰ In such a way, perhaps unconsciously, “for the fun of calling it [*Orlando*] a biography,”⁴⁵¹ Woolf prepared herself to the new adventures of *Flush* and *Roger Fry*, going as far as the new biography and its urgency were able to lead her.

3.5 Writing about dogs, why not? *Flush*, the biography of a cocker spaniel

Virginia Woolf began to write *Flush: A Biography* in July 1931, while she was completing the difficult first draft of *The Waves*:

I am writing, but a dull book this time, I think. Never mind – it keeps me bubbling like a very small but cheerful black kettle. *Flush* is only by way of a joke. I was so tired after the *Waves*, that I lay in the garden and read the Browning

⁴⁴⁹ Edel, Leon, *Literary Biography: The Alexander Lectures 1955-56*, cit., p. 98

⁴⁵⁰ Cooley, Elizabeth, “Revolutionizing Biography: *Orlando*, Roger Fry, and the Tradition,” cit., p. 81.

⁴⁵¹ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1984, p. 198. Saturday 22nd September 1928.

love letters, and the figure of their dog made me so laugh so I couldn't resist making him a Life.⁴⁵²

Flush is the biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel. It is structured like a human biography, from birth through to death. It traces the life of the dog from his country origins and his puppyhood spent with the writer Mary Mitford, to his existence with Elizabeth Barrett in Walpole Street.

The introductory pages legitimize Woolf's biographical enterprise with the use of footnotes and a list of sources, dates, references, in order to make the reader recognize the conventions of the genre.⁴⁵³ The book is divided into six chapters, each one containing a distinct life-sequence of the spaniel. The events that matter are those that Woolf imagines as making a relevant impression on a dog's perception and character. Therefore, she insists on smells, on the texture of objects surrounding Flush, and on his sharp sense of hearing. Eyesight, instead, seems less important, compared with the other senses. For instance, the episode of Flush's kidnapping, included in Chapter IV ("Whitechapel"); or his stay in Italy with Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning in Chapter V ("Italy") are filtered through the ears, the nostrils and the tongue of Flush, in an all-round canine perception. The biography of Flush is divided into life as experienced by a dog and life as experienced by his human owner, Miss Barrett.

T. S. Eliot judged *Flush* a waste of time.⁴⁵⁴ Virginia Woolf herself considered it just "a joke," "a joke with Lytton, and a skit on him."⁴⁵⁵ However, *Flush* can be

⁴⁵² Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. V, 1979, pp. 161-162. To Lady Ottoline Morrell, Feb. 23rd 1933.

⁴⁵³ Flint, Kate, "Introduction" to Woolf, Virginia, *Flush: A Biography* (1933), edited with an Introduction and Notes by Kate Flint, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. xviii.

⁴⁵⁴ See Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1982, p. 153. 29th April 1933.

considered not only a parody of Strachey's biographical method or a work written for fun: it has a significant value in the development of Woolf's thought concerning biography. Edward Morgan Forster, Woolf's critic and friend, maintained that:

Flush is a complete success, and exactly what it sets out to be; the material, the method, the length, accord perfectly, it is doggie without being silly, and it does give us, from the altitude of the carpet of the sofa-foot, a peep at high poetic personages, and a new angle on their ways.⁴⁵⁶

In her first diary entry on *Flush*, Woolf wrote:

It is a good idea I think to write biographies; to make them use my powers of representation reality accuracy; & to use my novels simply to express the general, the poetic. *Flush* is serving this purpose.⁴⁵⁷

As Pamela L. Caughie maintains in her essay "*Flush* and the Literary Canon: Oh where oh where has that little dog gone?," *Flush* is not a frivolous work. On the contrary it serves a purpose, as Virginia Woolf affirmed in her diary.⁴⁵⁸ Moreover, *Flush* also provides Woolf with the opportunity to explore once again the fascinating world of biography.

⁴⁵⁵ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. V, 1979, p. 83. To John Lehmann, 31st July 1932.

⁴⁵⁶ Forster, Morgan, Rede Lecture, quoted in Szladits, Lola L., "The Life, Character and Opinions of *Flush* the Spaniel," in McNeese, Eleanor, ed., *Virginia Woolf. Critical Assessments*, cit., vol. II, 1994, pp. 504-510, p. 510.

⁴⁵⁷ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1982, p. 40. Sunday 16th August 1931.

⁴⁵⁸ Caughie, Pamela L., "*Flush* and the Literary Canon: Oh where oh where has that little dog gone?," in McNeese, Eleanor, ed., *Virginia Woolf. Critical Assessments*, cit., vol. II, 1994, pp. 514-531, p. 520.

In *Flush*, Woolf's great achievement lies in her ability to include in it some aspects of Barrett's inner life.⁴⁵⁹ Woolf, in fact, by highlightening Flush's perceptions, manages to have access to Barrett's inner feelings, and to relate some significant episodes of the Brownings's life. In particular, Woolf depicts the dog's understanding of Barrett's sad confinement in her bedroom in Wimpole Street, her uneasy relation with a tyrannical father, the secret love with Browning, and their escape with Flush to Italy. Virginia Woolf remarks a similarity between Flush and Miss Barrett, from their very first meeting in the house in Wimpole Street:

'Oh Flush!' said Miss Barrett. For the first time she looked him in the face. For the first time Flush looked at the lady lying on the sofa. Each was surprised. Heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett's face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush's face; his eyes, too, were large and bright; his mouth was wide. There was a likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I – and then each felt: But how different!⁴⁶⁰

According to T.S.W. Lewis, *Flush* provides Woolf with the opportunity to manipulate the relationship truth/fiction that she had explored in her essay "The New Biography."⁴⁶¹ Thanks to the Brownings's love letters Woolf had read while relaxing after *The Waves*, she succeeded in collecting the facts she needed for her biography, as well as the stimuli for her imagination. Woolf was free to play with the constraints of the biographer, so that the reader is left wondering where the truth of the letters ends

⁴⁵⁹ O'Brien Schaefer, Josephine, "Moments of Vision in Virginia Woolf's Biographies," in McNees, Eleanor, ed., *Virginia Woolf. Critical Assessments*, cit., vol. II, 1994, pp. 363-375, p. 369.

⁴⁶⁰ Woolf, Virginia, *Flush: A Biography*, cit., p. 18.

⁴⁶¹ Lewis, Thomas S. W., "Combining 'The Advantages of Fact and Fiction': Virginia Woolf's Biographies of Vita Sackville-West, Flush, and Roger Fry," cit., p. 384.

Elizabeth Barrett and her cocker spaniel Flush



“Heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett’s face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush’s face; his eyes, too, were large and bright; his mouth was wide. There was a likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I – and then each felt: But how different!” (*Flush*, 18).

Cover illustration from Woolf, Virginia, *Flush: A Biography*, (1933),

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

Detail from a drawing of Elizabeth Barrett with Flush, 1843, by her brother Alfred.

and the creation begins.⁴⁶²

Also Woolf's love of dogs justifies the choice of the subject: while she was writing *Flush*, it is interesting to notice that a cocker spaniel, Pinker, was sharing her and Leonard's household at Monks House in Rodmell from 1925 to 1935.⁴⁶³ In addition, Woolf was presumably so interested in *Flush* because of Elizabeth Barrett's difficult relationship with her stern Victorian father. With *Flush*, Woolf evoked her own experience with Leslie Stephen, and thus, by exploiting her therapeutic writing, once again she managed to control her ghosts.

As traditional biography requires, *Flush* ends with the death of the dog. The scene echoes Strachey's *Queen Victoria*, lying "blind and silent"⁴⁶⁴ before passing away:

She was growing old now and so was Flush. She bent down over him for a moment. Her face with its wide mouth and its great eyes and its heavy curls was still oddly like this. Broken asunder, yet made in the same mould, each, perhaps, completed what was dormant in the other. But she was a woman; he was a dog. Mrs Browning went on reading. Then she looked at Flush again. But he did not look at her. An extraordinary change had come over him. 'Flush!' she cried. But he was silent. He had been alive; he was now dead. That was all. The drawing-room table, strangely enough, stood perfectly still.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶² Lewis, Thomas S. W., "Combining 'The Advantages of Fact and Fiction': Virginia Woolf's Biographies of Vita Sackville-West, Flush, and Roger Fry," cit., p. 386.

⁴⁶³ Szladits, Lola L., "The Life, Character and Opinions of Flush the Spaniel," cit., p. 504.

⁴⁶⁴ Strachey, Lytton, *Queen Victoria* (1921), Bremen, Europäischer Hochschulverlag, 2010, p. 226.

⁴⁶⁵ Woolf, Virginia, *Flush: A Biography*, cit., pp. 105-106.

This last scene highlights again the parallel between the cocker spaniel and his mistress. Flush, in the end, has become an “Eminent Victorian.”⁴⁶⁶ Actually, *Flush* is more than this: it is an example of Woolf’s ability to come closer and closer to the genre of biography, and to master it with an awareness which clears the ground for the most classical biography among her works: *Roger Fry: A Biography*.

⁴⁶⁶ Garnett, David, “Flush,” in McNees, Eleanor, ed., *Virginia Woolf. Critical Assessments*, cit., vol. II, 1994, pp. 497-499, p. 499.

Chapter 4

Practising biography: Virginia Woolf as a critic and a biographer

4.1 Virginia Woolf as a critic

“No critic these past fifty years has had such an exquisite command of English as Virginia Woolf. [...] But it is in the field of biography that I think her facility as a critic finds its happiest expression [...] She interpolates these lives in her own light with a play of feeling and an irony and a ‘flood and foam of language’ which come to a head in the final and compelling paragraph. You put down her book wishing there were a critic today who could write half so well.”⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁷ Weeks, Edward, review of Woolf's *Granite & Rainbow*, published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, quoted in Woolf, Virginia, *Granite & Rainbow*, cit., back cover.

Virginia Woolf's reputation as a novelist has often eclipsed the fact that before devoting herself to the art of fiction, she was primarily a reviewer and an essayist. For a whole decade of her professional life – from the very beginning of her career in 1905 to the publication of her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, in 1915 – she worked as a literary critic. Her work as a reviewer must not be regarded as secondary or incidental to the rest of her oeuvre, but as a complementary activity organically related to her creative life. Woolf, in fact, never gave up reviewing. The obituary column of *The Times*, on the occasion of Woolf's death, commemorates her as a “NOVELIST, ESSAYIST, AND CRITIC,” juxtaposing on the same level her three professional roles.⁴⁶⁸

After her 1904 breakdown⁴⁶⁹ – as Briggs reports – Virginia Woolf was introduced by her friend Violet Dickinson to Margaret Lyttelton, the editor of the women's pages in *The Guardian*, a weekly issue. During the following year she also began her activity as a reviewer for *The Times Literary Supplement*.⁴⁷⁰ Three years before, in 1902, when *The Times Literary Supplement* was launched, the editor Bruce Richmond had invited Leslie Stephen to contribute, but Stephen did not accept the offer. After Stephen's death, Richmond contacted his daughter: on 10th March 1905, Virginia Woolf's first review was published.⁴⁷¹ Bruce Richmond was happy with her

⁴⁶⁸ Quoted in Brosnan, Leila, *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism. Breaking the Surface of Silence*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1997, p. 96.

⁴⁶⁹ Leslie Stephen died in 1904, and Virginia had a second breakdown after the first one, suffered because of her unexpected mother's death in 1895. Quentin Bell relates that, during the 1904 breakdown, Woolf entered into a period of nightmare: “She heard voices urging her to acts of folly; [...] In this emergency the main burden fell upon Vanessa; but Vanessa was enormously helped by Violet Dickinson. Dickinson took Virginia to her house at Burnham Wood and it was there that she made her first attempt to commit suicide. She threw herself from a window, which, however, was not high enough from the ground to cause her serious harm.” In the meanwhile, Vanessa arranged to move from their family house in 22, Hyde Park Gate to 46, Gordon Square, in Bloomsbury. See Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, cit., vol. I, pp. 89-90.

⁴⁷⁰ Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, cit., p. 113.

⁴⁷¹ Woolf's piece “Literary Geography” reviewed Lewis Melville's *The Thackeray Country* and F. G. Kitton's *The Dickens Country*. See Woolf, Virginia, “Literary Geography,” (1905), in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. I, 1986, pp. 33-36.

work and he immediately sent Virginia more books to review.⁴⁷² No other periodical printed her reviews as frequently as the *Times Literary Supplement*: around 40 per cent of her essays appeared there first, the majority she produced between 1912 and 1918. All were unsigned.⁴⁷³ Woolf continued reviewing for Richmond until the editor's retirement in 1938. Hiding herself behind a conventional plural "we", she anonymously entered the world of literary journalism, "passing as a man."⁴⁷⁴ McNeillie notes that, at the beginning of 1919, outside the circle of her intimate friends, the London intelligentsia knew Virginia Woolf only as the author of *The Voyage Out* (1915), even though "since 1904 she had published anonymously a vast quantity – more than a quarter of a million words – of journalism."⁴⁷⁵ These first steps marked the inception of an extensive and lasting commitment as a literary critic.

Woolf's development into the kind of novelist she would become was in large part achieved thanks to her reviewing taste and her knowledge of contemporary writing. During the 1920s, she composed a number of essays which have a direct bearing on her fictional theory, and eventually on her fiction.

Of all forms of literature, however, the essay is the one which least calls for the use of long words. The principle that controls it is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. I should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. In the interval we may pass through the most various experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation; we may soar to the heights of fantasy

⁴⁷² Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, cit., vol. I, p. 104.

⁴⁷³ Fernald, Anne E., *Virginia Woolf: Feminism and the Reader*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 87.

⁴⁷⁴ Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, cit., p. 113.

⁴⁷⁵ McNeillie, Andrew, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., "Introduction" to vol. III, 1988, p. xi.

with Lamb or plunge to the depths of wisdom with Bacon, but we must never be roused. The essay must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world.⁴⁷⁶

Woolf also contributed literary reviews to American magazines. Twenty years of non-fiction writing led to her first collection of critical essays, *The Common Reader: First Series*,⁴⁷⁷ which was conceived after *Jacob's Room* and published three weeks before *Mrs. Dalloway*, in April 1925.⁴⁷⁸ Woolf's pattern of interconnection between essays and fiction continued all through the 1930s. Next to *The Waves*, in fact, she edited *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1932).⁴⁷⁹

After Virginia's death, Leonard Woolf published several selections of her uncollected essays and journalism. These were: *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942), *The Moment and Other Essays* (1947), *The Captain's Death Bed* (1950), *Granite & Rainbow* (1956) and *Contemporary Writers* (1965).⁴⁸⁰ These books were finally gathered as *Collected Essays* in four volumes, published in 1966 and 1967. After Leonard's death

⁴⁷⁶ Woolf, Virginia, "The Modern Essay," (1925), in McNeillie, Andrew, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1994, pp. 216-227, p. 216.

⁴⁷⁷ Woolf, Virginia, *The Common Reader: First Series*, (1925), London, Hogarth Press, 1984. The title was borrowed from Doctor Johnson's. Johnson expressed the concept of the "common reader" in his "Life of Gray," in *Lives of the Poets (Gay, Thomson, Young, Gray, Etc.)*, 2 vols., edited by Henry Morley, Rockville, Arc Manor, 2008: "In the character of his *Elegy* I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours. The 'Churchyard' abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo. The four stanzas beginning 'Yet even these bones' are to me original: I have never seen the notions in any other place; yet he that reads them here persuades himself that he has always felt them. Had Gray written often thus, it had been vain to blame and useless to praise him." See vol. II, pp. 129-137, p. 137.

⁴⁷⁸ Lee, Hermione, "Virginia Woolf's Essays," in Roe, Sue, Sellers, Susan, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, cit., pp. 91-107, p. 92.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92. Woolf, Virginia, *The Common Reader: Second Series*, (1932), London, The Hogarth Press, 1986.

⁴⁸⁰ Woolf, Virginia, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, (1942), London, Harvest Book, 1942. *The Moment and Other Essays*, (1947), London, Harvest Book, 1947. *The Captain's Death Bed*, (1950), New York, Hardcover, 1950. *Granite & Rainbow: Essays by Virginia Woolf*, (1956), San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986. *Contemporary Writers, Essays on 20-century Books and Authors by Virginia Woolf*, (1965), edited with a Preface by Jean Guiguet, New York, Hardcover, 1976.

in 1969, along with Virginia's diaries and letters, new collections of essays were published: *The London Scene: Five Essays by Virginia Woolf* (1975), *Moments of Being* (1976), *Books and Portraits: Some Further Selections from the Literary and Biographical Writings of Virginia Woolf* (1977) and *Women and Writing* (1979).⁴⁸¹ Finally, in 1986, under the editorship of Andrew McNeillie, the project of a complete and chronological edition of Woolf's essays began.⁴⁸² From 1995 to 2011, McNeillie edited six fully annotated volumes of essays.⁴⁸³

Hermione Lee categorises Woolf's essays into different areas, according to their subject, although, she maintains, this operation was difficult to accomplish because Woolf's essays often dissolve distinctions and "do their best to resist categories."⁴⁸⁴ Nevertheless, Lee is able to trace distinctions. The first group is made of short essays, reviews of contemporary fiction, anthologies, memoirs, biographies, poetry, criticism. A second category includes longer essays about authors of the past. Among them, Defoe, Boswell, Sterne, Austen, Coleridge, De Quincey, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Meredith, Gissing, James, Hardy, Conrad. In the same category, Lee places the longer essays: those which explore historical periods, such as classical Greece, the Elizabethan period, the eighteenth century, or the Russian nineteenth century, and those which investigate themes, such as essay-writing, biography, women's lives, and painting. Thirdly, Lee describes a category of essays dealing with fictional theory, to be viewed as Woolf's manifestos of

⁴⁸¹ Woolf, Virginia, *The London Scene: Five Essays by Virginia Woolf*, (1975), New York, Hardcover, 1975. *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, (1976), edited by Jeanne Schulkind, London, Sussex University Press, 1976. *Books and Portraits: Some Further Selections from the Literary and Biographical Writings of Virginia Woolf*, (1977), edited by Mary Lyon, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1978. *Women and Writing*, (1979), edited by Michèle Barrett, San Diego, Harvest Book, 1979.

⁴⁸² Lee, Hermione, "Virginia Woolf's Essays," cit., pp. 93-94.

⁴⁸³ Volume V (2009) and Volume VI (2011) were edited by Stuart N. Clarke.

⁴⁸⁴ Lee, Hermione, "Virginia Woolf's Essays," cit., p. 96.

modern writing. Finally, besides the essays on aesthetics, Lee groups those short pieces or long meditations Woolf wrote about architecture, painting, exhibitions, opera, travel, streets, shops, illness and so forth.⁴⁸⁵ Woolf's essays concerning the art of biography will be investigated in this chapter. My aim is to retrace her critical path concerning the genre of biography. My analysis also includes *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940), as a document of Woolf's involvement with the genre itself and its rules.

In Woolf's diary, in 1937, we read: "I am doubtful if I shall ever write another novel [...] Were I another person, I would say to myself, Please write criticism; biography; invent a new form for both."⁴⁸⁶ In those years, her purpose was to:

take in everything, sex, education, life etc.: and come, with the most powerful and agile leaps, like a chamois, across precipices from 1880 to here and now. That's the notion anyhow, [...]. Everything is running of its own accord into the stream, as with *Orlando*. What has happened of course is that after abstaining from the novel of fact all these years – since 1919 – and N[ight] & D[ay] is dead – I find myself infinitely delighting in facts for a change, and in possession of quantities beyond counting: though I feel now and then the tug to vision, but

⁴⁸⁵ Lee, Hermione, "Virginia Woolf's Essays," pp. 96-97.

⁴⁸⁶ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*; cit., vol. V, 1984, p. 91. Monday 1st June 1937. To this end, five years earlier, in 1932, Woolf began *The Pargiters*, a "novel-essay" on feminism. "But The Pargiters. I think this will be a terrific affair. I must be bold & adventurous. I want to give the whole of the present society – nothing less: facts, as well as the vision. And to combine them both. I mean, The Waves going on simultaneously with Night & Day. Is this possible?" See Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1982, pp. 151-152, 25th April 1933. After 60,000 words, Woolf realized the two forms incompatible, giving up the "essay" and developing the fictional passages into *The Years* (1937). Then, she revised her essays and she expanded them into *Three Guineas*, which was published the following year. In the 1930s, Woolf was preoccupied with the position of women in a men's world. Indeed *The Years* deals with the consequences of a Victorian education on men and women, while *Three Guineas* is an attack on contemporary militarism, largely attributed to men and to their supremacy on women. These two subjects were too different to mingle: Victorian and fascist men belonged to different world, and Woolf's attempt to link them could not be convincing. See "Introduction" to Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*; cit., vol. V, 1979, pp. xiv-xv.

resist it. This is the true line, I am sure, after *The Waves* – *The Pargiters* – this is what leads naturally on to the next stage – the essay novel.⁴⁸⁷

As this quotation suggests, the issue of biography and the relevance of criticism, besides fiction, have never been disregarded by Woolf during her whole career. On the contrary, these two elements are fundamental to her literary achievement.

4.2 Virginia Woolf's reviews of other writers' biographies

There are some stories which have to be retold by each generation, not that we have anything new to add to them, but because of some queer quality in them which makes them not only Shelley's story but our own. Eminent and durable they stand on the skyline, a mark past which we sail, which moves as we move and yet remains the same.⁴⁸⁸

Virginia Woolf's involvement in the genre of biography manifested itself not only in her creative writing and in her critical essays, but also in her reviews of other writers' works. Actually, Woolf reviewed several biographies written by contemporary and not contemporary writers, because, as she declared, she wanted them to become "our own" patrimony.⁴⁸⁹ Relevant to this dissertation are a number of essays that illustrate Woolf's vision of the genre, and that will be analysed in this section.

⁴⁸⁷ Quoted in Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, cit., vol. II, pp. 171-172.

⁴⁸⁸ Woolf, Virginia, "Not One of Us," (23rd October 1927), a signed review in the *New York Herald Tribune* of Walter Edwin Peck's *Shelley [1792-1822]: His Life and Work* (2 vols., Ernst Benn Ltd, 1927), in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1994, pp. 465-472, p. 465.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 465.

Already in 1906, Woolf reviewed Percy Lubbock's *Elizabeth Barrett in her Letters*. It is relevant to mention this review because it deals with the main biographer's issue, that is the problem with documents, letters and private materials, and how to use them without disregarding the ethical principles which society requires. Here Woolf praises Lubbock for the "substantial service"⁴⁹⁰ he had done to Mrs Browning and her readers. She maintains:

With singular discretion and tact he has gone through the many volumes of her correspondence, prompting her as it were to speak just those words which explain herself and connecting them with admirably intelligent comments of his own. In the compass of one modest volume we have all the passages we could wish to see preserved, and, when thus skilfully pieced together, it is seen that they compose a finished and brilliant portrait of the writer.⁴⁹¹

"Discretion" and "tact" qualify the biography of the author she would later represent through the eyes, nose, ears of her dog Flush.

The matter of letters and of their use has always been central for biographers. These private materials have to be used with a kind of respect towards both their author and his/her family. Woolf acknowledges Lubbock's skilfulness: like Boswell, he combines whole letters, or fragments, with facts, realizing a "brilliant portrait of the writer,"⁴⁹² without offending neither his subject nor his readers.

In "A Man With a View," a review of John F. Harris's *Samuel Butler: Author of Erewhon, the Man and his Work*, published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Woolf deals

⁴⁹⁰ Woolf, Virginia, "Poets' Letters," (21st April 1906), a review in the *Speaker* of *Elizabeth Barrett and her Letters*, by Percy Lubbock, in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. I, 1986, pp. 101-105, p. 102.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

with Victorian biography. Her negative attitude towards a conception of biography she could not share may be perceived in the lines that follow:

The Victorian age, to hazard another generalisation, was the age of the professional man. The biographies of the time have a depressing similarity; very much overworked, very serious, very joyless, the eminent men appear to us to be, and already strangely formal and remote from us in their likes and dislikes.⁴⁹³

This passage is particularly relevant because already in 1916, before her first fictional experiments, it highlights the critical attitude taken by Virginia Woolf against the tradition of Victorian biography. These lines indeed show – despite her father’s example, the education she had received and the tradition in which she had grown up – her dislike towards an obsolete conception of the genre. The reasons of her critical attitude will be discussed again in her later essays “The New Biography” (1927) and “The Art of Biography” (1939).

With “Stopford Brooke,”⁴⁹⁴ her review of Lawrence Pearsall Jacks’s *Life and Letters of Stopford Brooke*, Woolf acknowledges that Jacks had carried the art of biography a step further, opening the genre to the field of psychology. This remark is the evidence that, in a period of great changes, science was influencing society, and Freud’s studies on psychoanalysis were notably modifying the “I” perception of human beings. Psychology indeed would affect the art of biography (and autobiography as well), insofar as the writer would analyse his or her subject according to a deeper,

⁴⁹³ Woolf, Virginia, “A Man With a View,” (20th July 1916), a review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of John F. Ferris’s *Samuel Butler: Author of Erewhon, the Man and His Work*, in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. II, 1987, pp. 34-39, pp. 35-36.

⁴⁹⁴ Woolf, Virginia, “Stopford Brooke,” (29th November 1917), a review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of Lawrence Pearsall Jacks’s *Life and Letters of Stopford Brooke*, in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. II, 1987, pp. 183-187.

different level of knowledge.⁴⁹⁵

In 1919, in “Small Talk About Meredith,” a review of Stewart Marsh Ellis’s *George Meredith [1828-1909]: His Life and Friends in Relation to his Work* (1919),⁴⁹⁶ Woolf handles the issue, already touched elsewhere, of character in fiction. In Ellis’s biography – Woolf maintains – the aim was to prove “how largely the characters and the situations of [Meredith’s] novels were drawn from living people and actual events.”⁴⁹⁷ Ellis’s aim thus comes useful to Woolf’s stance, because – she argues – life and the novel have to mingle together: characters taken from reality may have a successful fictional life. Hence, Woolf highlights Ellis’s valuable points:

More substantial and less disputable is the evidence which Mr Ellis supplies that Meredith was no exception, as we were inclined to think him, to the rule that great novelists take their characters from life. Not only characters and places, but even actual incidents and names were introduced, his method being to ‘blend the actual traits and facts and names with the entirely imaginary doings of his characters.’⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁵ Virginia Woolf reported her impressions on Sigmund Freud in a page of her diary: “Doctor Freud gave me a narcissus. Was sitting in a great library with little statues at a large scrupulously tidy shiny table. We like patients on chairs. A screwed up shrunk very old man; with a monkeys light eyes, paralysed spasmodic movements, inarticulate; but alert. Difficult talk. An interview. Daughter & Martin helped. Immense potential, I mean an old fire now flickering.” See Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. V, 1984, p. 202, Sunday, 29th January 1939. Woolf and Freud met in Hampstead, London, in 1939. Freud had just moved there after his stay in Vienna.

⁴⁹⁶ Woolf, Virginia, “A Small Talk About Meredith,” (13th February 1919), a review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of S. M. Ellis’s *George Meredith [1828-1909]: His Life and Friends in Relation to his Work*, in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1988, pp. 5-10.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

After more than a decade, in “Memories of a Working Women’s Guild” (1930), Woolf will maintain that writing is “an impure act” because it is “much infected by life,” while art has to be pure.⁴⁹⁹

Also deserving mention is the review “Saint Samuel of Fleet Street.”⁵⁰⁰ Here Woolf praises both the genius of Samuel Johnson and his *Life* written by James Boswell.⁵⁰¹

If this were the age of faith, Dr Johnson would certainly be Saint Samuel, Fleet Street would be full of holy places where he preached his sermons and performed his miracles, and the Boswells, the Thrales, and the Hawkinses would all be exalted to the rank of prophets. [...] There can be no doubt – these two new editions, this abridgement of the famous biography show it – that Dr Johnson has proved himself of the stuff that Saints are made of.⁵⁰²

As already argued, Dr Johnson and Mr Boswell were two pillars in Woolf’s literary education. With their works, they helped her to become more aware of what a biography should be or should not be. This review is Woolf’s tribute to the genius of both writers. It is also a declaration of great respect for their contribution to the art of biography and, more in general, to English literature.

After a couple of years, in 1927, Woolf writes a remarkable signed review,

⁴⁹⁹ Woolf, Virginia, “Memories of a Working Women’s Guild,” (September 1930), a signed essay in the *Yale Review*, revised as the Introduction to Margaret Llewelyn Davies’s *Life as We Have Known It*, in McNeillie, Andrew, Clarke, Stuart N., eds., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. V, 2009, pp. 176-194, p. 188.

⁵⁰⁰ Woolf, Virginia, “Saint Samuel of Fleet Street,” (14th November 1925), a review in the *Nation & Athenaeum* of James Boswell’s *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (3 vols., Dent, 1925), in McNeillie, Andrew, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1994, pp. 309-313.

⁵⁰¹ See Chapter 1.

⁵⁰² Woolf, Virginia, “Saint Samuel of Fleet Street,” cit., pp. 309-310.

“Not One of Us,” of Walter Edwin Peck’s *Shelley [1792-1822]: His Life and Work*.⁵⁰³ In her diary, she reported:

“And Quentin came, & the Keynes’s came, & Morgan came. All of these I meant, perhaps, to describe: but then how hard I drive my pen through one article after another – Hemingway, Morgan, Shelley; & now Biography.”⁵⁰⁴

In this review Woolf expresses her appreciation to Professor Peck and his biographical method. She considers Shelley’s biography written by Edward Dowden, and Matthew Arnold’s critical essays on Shelley.⁵⁰⁵ She criticizes the former author for having canonised Shelley and the latter for having “reduced [him] to the ordinary human scale.”⁵⁰⁶ Thus, she praises Peck because he had been able to give the right synthesis of Shelley’s being:

He [Professor Peck] is singularly dispassionate, and yet not colourless. He has opinions, but he does not obtrude them. His attitude to Shelley is kind but not condescending. He does not rhapsodise, but at the same time he does not scold. [...] Here, he seems to say, is all that is actually known about Shelley’s life; in October he did this; in November he did that; now it was that he wrote this poem; it was here that he met that friend. And, moulding the enormous mass of the Shelley papers with dexterous fingers, he contrives tactfully to embed dates and

⁵⁰³ Woolf, Virginia, “Not One of Us,” cit., pp. 465-472.

⁵⁰⁴ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. III, 1984, pp. 157-158. Tuesday 20th September 1927.

⁵⁰⁵ Edward Dowden wrote *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (2 vols., Kegan Paul, 1886). Matthew Arnold expressed his famous judgment concerning Shelley in an essay, “Byron,” collected in *Essays in Criticism. Second Series* (1888): “Shelley, beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.” See Arnold, Matthew, *Essays in Criticism. Second Series*, London, Macmillan & Co., 1913, pp. 163-204, pp. 203-204.

⁵⁰⁶ Woolf, Virginia, “Not One of Us,” cit., p. 465.

facts in feelings, in comments, in what Shelley wrote, in what Mary wrote, in what other people wrote about them, so that we seem to be breasting the full current of Shelley's life and get the illusion that we are, this time, seeing Shelley, not through the rosy glasses or the livid glasses which sentiment and prudery have fixed on our forerunners' noses, but plainly, as he was.⁵⁰⁷

In Woolf's opinion, Peck has depicted a vital portrait of his subject, composing a biography which is also a model in its genre because it is well-balanced, and it exceeds neither in sentimentalism nor in prudery.

In "I am Christina Rossetti,"⁵⁰⁸ Woolf's signed review in the *N&A* of *The Life of Christina Rossetti* by Mary F. Sandars and of *Christina Rossetti & her Poetry* by Edith Birkhead, Woolf openly expresses her devotion to biography: "what could be more amusing?," she wonders, "[a]s everybody knows the fascination of reading biographies is irresistible."⁵⁰⁹ Woolf believes that biography is a genre capable of recreating the illusion of the past:

No sooner have we opened the pages of Miss Sandar[s]'s careful and competent book than the old illusion returns. Here is the past and all its inhabitants miraculously sealed up as in a magic tank, and all we have to do is to look and to look and to listen and to listen and soon the little figures – for they are rather

⁵⁰⁷ Woolf, Virginia, "Not One of Us," cit., pp. 465-466.

⁵⁰⁸ Woolf, Virginia, "I am Christina Rossetti," (6th December 1930), a signed review in the *Nation & Athenaeum* of the *The Life of Christina Rossetti* by Mary F. Sandars (Hutchinson, n.d., 1930) and of *Christina Rossetti & her Poetry* by Edith Birkhead (George G. Harrap, 1930), in McNeillie, Andrew, Clarke, Stuart N., eds., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. V, 2009, pp. 208-217.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

under life size – will begin to move and speak, and as they move we shall arrange them in all sorts of patterns of which they were ignorant.⁵¹⁰

Another relevant piece deserving mention is “Edmund Gosse,”⁵¹¹ Woolf’s signed review of Evan Charteris’s *The Life and Letters of Sir Edmund Gosse [1849-1928]*, which appears in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1931. Here Woolf considers the life of a writer who had expressed himself in history, criticism, and also in the genre of biography.⁵¹² She praises Charteris’s *Life* for having portrayed Sir Edmund Gosse exactly as he was: “a complex character composed of many different strains.”⁵¹³ Then, she compares Gosse to Boswell, stating that “if only he [Gosse] had pushed his curiosity further, [...] he might have rivalled the great Boswell himself.” She goes on, “where Boswell left us that profound and moving masterpiece, the *Life of Johnson*, Gosse left us *Father and Son*, a classic doubtless, as Mr Charteris claims, certainly a most original and entertaining book.”⁵¹⁴ However, even if she considers Gosse a great writer, in the end, she cannot avoid acknowledging Boswell’s indisputable genius: “how little and light, how dapper and superficial Gosse’s portraits appear if we compare them with the portraits left by Boswell himself!”⁵¹⁵

The centrality of Boswell, perhaps the greatest biographer of the past according to Woolf, is pinpointed ten years later in “Mrs Thrale,” Woolf’s signed

⁵¹⁰ Woolf, Virginia, “I am Christina Rossetti,” cit., pp. 208-209.

⁵¹¹ Woolf, Virginia, “Edmund Gosse,” (1st June 1931), a signed review in the *Fortnightly Review* of Evan Charteris’s *The Life and Letters of Sir Edmund Gosse [1849-1928]*, in McNeillie, Andrew, Clarke, Stuart N., eds., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. V, 2009, pp. 248-257.

⁵¹² See Chapter 2.

⁵¹³ Woolf, Virginia, “Edmund Gosse,” cit., p. 249.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

review of James L. Clifford's *Hester Lynch Piozzzi (Mrs. Thrale) [1741-1821]*, published in the *NS&N*, in March 8th, 1941:⁵¹⁶

No one can destroy Boswell's sketch of Mrs Thrale.⁵¹⁷ It is done with such venom and such vivacity; it contains so much Boswell himself, and, like Boswell's portraits, it fits so perfectly into its place in the picture. But Mr Clifford has done what is far more valuable and more difficult. He has gone behind Boswell's sketch and beyond it. He has amplified it and solidified it. He has brought Mrs Thrale herself into the foreground. And by so doing he has changed the proportions of the picture.⁵¹⁸

Woolf was a dedicated reader. She well knew the conventions of the genre of biography and would follow them when composing *Roger Fry: A Biography* in 1938. Nevertheless, in her view, "life," "character," "writing," and "fact" are elements provided with a double merit: she acknowledges that they lie at the core of biography, but are also essential to fiction. Woolf's reviews show on the one hand her reaction against Victorian conventions, but on the other hand her high consideration for traditional biography, in particular for eighteenth-century biography: her unreserved praise for Boswell is a clear instance of this attitude. At the same time, her reviews allow us to realize that, in the end, her relationship with tradition becomes the cornerstone for a new kind of creative writing.

⁵¹⁶ Woolf, Virginia, "Mrs Thrale," (8th March 1941), a signed review in the *New Statesman and Nation* of James L. Clifford's *Hester Lynch Piozzzi (Mrs. Thrale) [1741-1821]*, in McNeillie, Andrew, Clarke Stuart N., eds., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. VI, 2011, pp. 292-297.

⁵¹⁷ James Boswell portrayed Mrs Thrale in his *Life of Samuel Johnson*.

⁵¹⁸ Woolf, Virginia, "Mrs Thrale," cit., p. 292.

4.3 Biography and the media

In 1929, a curious fact happened. McNeillie and Clarke record it in an Appendix to the sixth volume of Woolf's essays.⁵¹⁹ They report that Joe Ackerley (1896–1967),⁵²⁰ the assistant producer in the Talks Department of the BBC, wrote to Lytton Strachey on 24th September 1929, offering him to speak during a BBC broadcast on the theme of biography:

We want to give you a talk one evening during the next two months – or not exactly a talk but a reading in a series which we are calling something like “Potted Biographies” – real or imaginary, and to which Virginia Woolf, Desmond MacCarthy and others are contributing. There are no rules to the game of choice – people are choosing just whatever character – real or imaginary – gives them most fun. I am not sure what Virginia's choice is, but Desmond is going to write up an imagery biography of Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes' friend, and someone else [Harold Nicolson] is going to do Lord Byron's valet, [William] Fletcher. Will you join the group and give us, for instance, the biography of a real or imaginary minor Victorian? We do hope you will be attracted by this idea, and please do not let yourself be influenced against it by any question of the suitability of your voice.⁵²¹

So far the letter included also Virginia Woolf among the writers invited to contribute to the “Potted Biography” project. Lytton Strachey did not accept the offer, Harold

⁵¹⁹ McNeillie, Andrew, Clarke, Stuart N., eds., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. VI, 2011, Appendix IV, pp. 617-618.

⁵²⁰ Joe Ackerley joined the staff of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1928. He worked in the “Talks” Department, which arranged radio lectures by scholars and public figures. In 1935 he was selected as literary editor of the BBC's magazine, *The Listener*. He served this position until 1959.

⁵²¹ Braybrooke, Neville, ed., *The Letters of J. R. Ackerley*, London, Duckworth, 1975, p. 16.

Nicolson did, and gave his talk on 23rd October 1929, during the first radio broadcast of the series. Desmond MacCarthy gave the 4th of December 1929 talk.

The *Radio Times* announced Nicolson's talk, proclaiming that: "This is the first of a series of 'Biographies in Brief,' specially written by the most distinguished biographers of today."⁵²²

For the occasion, Woolf wrote "Dorothy Wordsworth,"⁵²³ which was accepted by the BBC and also advertised for the 20th November 1929 to be broadcast, from 9:15 to 9:35, after the 9 o'clock news. At the very last moment, however, Woolf replaced "Dorothy Wordsworth" with another piece, "Beau Brummel."⁵²⁴ Vita Sackville-West, an intimate friend of Hilda Matheson (1888-1940), the Director of Talks at the BBC from 1926 to 1932, received a letter dated 19th November 1929, in which Virginia expressed all her disappointment for the BBC experience and her dislike for Hilda Matheson:

I shall be glad when my broadcasting and my speaking at Mauron's lecture are both over. And, your Hilda – my God what friends you have! – has not proved exactly helpful – but there – I daren't say more [...]. She affects me as a strong purge, as a hair shirt, as a foggy day, as a cold in the head – which last indeed I believe I am now developing (but its sure to be the nerves) so if you listen in, you'll probably hear sneeze, cough, choke. But as, what with Hilda and the B.B.C,

⁵²² McNeillie, Andrew, Clarke, Stuart N., eds., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. VI, 2011, Appendix IV, p. 617.

⁵²³ Woolf, Virginia, "Dorothy Wordsworth," (1929), in McNeillie, Andrew, Clarke, Stuart N., eds., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. V, 2009, pp. 113-121.

⁵²⁴ Woolf, Virginia, "Beau Brummel," (27th November 1929), a signed essay in the *Listener*, based on a talk broadcast by the BBC, No. 2, in the series 'Miniature Biographies,' on 20th November 1929, in McNeillie, Andrew, Clarke, Stuart N., eds., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. VI, 2011, Appendix IV, pp. 617-624. George Bryan "Beau" Brummell (1778–1840) was an iconic figure in Regency England, a friend of the Prince Regent, the future King George IV. He established the mode of dress for men. This look was based on dark coats, full-length trousers, shirts in linen and knotted cravat. His style of dress is often referred to as dandyism.

my poor little article has been completely ruined (but don't whisper a word of this) I'm not altogether looking forward to 9.20 tomorrow night. Also I am billed at 9.15 – Oh dear oh dear what a tumult of things one does one doesn't (*sic*) want to do!⁵²⁵

Even if the BBC experience was not successful, it is worth noticing that in 1929 also the media were interested in biography and in its popular circulation. Moreover, they identified Strachey, Nicolson, and Woolf as the most eminent representatives of the genre. The whole episode proves not only how prestigious biography had become in those years, but also that the genre was increasingly popular thanks to its mass-diffusion through radio broadcasts and specific programmes.

4.4 *Granite & Rainbow*

Alongside the reviews considered above, Virginia Woolf's reflection concerning the genre of biography finds its critical outlet in another set of essays, collected in *Granite & Rainbow* (1956), in a section explicitly dedicated to the genre. Among the essays selected for inclusion in *Granite & Rainbow*, Leonard Woolf inserts "Sterne"⁵²⁶ (1909), "Money and Love"⁵²⁷ (1920), "Eliza and Sterne"⁵²⁸ (1922), plus a few other essays he considers relevant to the topic of biography. The section is completed by Virginia's mature assessment of the genre in "The New Biography"⁵²⁹ (1927). In the early essays

⁵²⁵ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1978, p. 110.

⁵²⁶ Woolf, Virginia, "Sterne," (12th August 1909), published in *The Times Literary Supplement*, in Woolf, Virginia, *Granite & Rainbow*, cit., pp. 167-175.

⁵²⁷ Woolf, Virginia, "Money and Love," (1920), in Woolf, Virginia, *Granite & Rainbow*, cit., pp. 205-211.

⁵²⁸ Woolf, Virginia, "Eliza and Sterne," (1922), in Woolf, Virginia, *Granite & Rainbow*, cit., pp. 176-180.

⁵²⁹ Woolf, Virginia, "The New Biography," (1927), in Woolf, Virginia, *Granite & Rainbow*, cit., pp. 149-155.

we notice Virginia Woolf's first statements about biography. For instance she compares biography to fiction in "Sterne," she identifies the main interest of biography in "Money and Love," and she deals with the thorny issue of morality in "Eliza and Sterne." Finally, in "The Art of Biography," she gives a full appreciation of the genre. I will now focus on these essays separately.

"Sterne" is a review of *The Life and Times of Lawrence Sterne* by Wilbur L. Cross (1909). Woolf opens her essay with a reflection: she wonders how to shape a literary life. In the first decade of the twentieth century, contemporary biographers thought that it was necessary to draw a distinction between the man and his works and to circumscribe the study of a writer's life to the study of his literary production.⁵³⁰ Against a close focus on literary texts, Woolf argues that disregarding biography would amount to a loss: "we sacrifice an aesthetic pleasure, possibly of first-rate value – a life of Johnson, for example – and we raise boundaries where there should be none."⁵³¹ She maintains that:

A writer is a writer from his cradle; in his dealings with the world, in his affections, in his attitude to the thousand small things that happen between dawn and sunset, he shows the same point of view as that which he elaborates afterwards with a pen in his hand.⁵³²

According to Woolf, the interest of a literary life cannot be reduced to sheer textuality and to the analysis stemming from a writer's commitment to the literary task. It is worthwhile for her where he or she was born, grown and educated. "The thousand

⁵³⁰ Critics practising a "close reading" method would concentrate on the text, not heading the historical and biographical context. See Cianci, Giovanni, *La Scuola di Cambridge: La critica letteraria di I. A. Richards – W. Empson – F. R. Leavis*, Bari, Adriatica Editrice, 1970.

⁵³¹ Woolf, Virginia, "Sterne," cit., p. 167.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, p. 167.

small things” are important – at least as much as the output of the pen. For the same reasons, Woolf criticizes modern biographers, insofar as they seem inclined to separate the man from the artist:

There is a common formula, in which, having delivered judgment upon his work, they state that ‘a few facts about his life’ may not be inappropriate, or, writing from the opposite standpoint, proclaim that their concern is ‘with the man and not with his works’. A distinction is made in this way which we do not find in the original, and from this reason mainly arises the common complaint against a biography, that is ‘not like’. We have lives that are all ceremony and work; and lives that are all chatter and scandal.⁵³³

Woolf seems to be aiming at a new formula, possibly inclusive of both aspects that she will define later as *granite* and *rainbow*. In “Sterne,” she remarks that the risk for a biographer is to represent his/her subject “under the cover of fiction:” in novel-writing there is more freedom than in life-writing. The object of biography, instead, is “to make men appear as they ought to be, for they are husbands and brothers.” Since facts and real people are endowed with an “indisputable power,” she considers real lives superior to fictional ones, because she believes that no novelist might create a character with that “train of adventures” which only living people may experience in their lives.⁵³⁴

On the 14th of December 1922, Woolf published “Eliza and Sterne” in the *Times Literary Supplement*. In this article she deals with the central issue of morality, which

⁵³³ Woolf, Virginia, “Sterne,” cit., pp. 167-168.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

“lies at the root of biography and affects it in every fibre,”⁵³⁵ an issue she had already debated in “Poets’ Letters.” She opens her reflection with a question:

Of many difficulties which afflict the biographer, the moral difficulty must surely be the greatest. By what standard, that is to say, is he to judge the morals of the dead? By that of their day, or that of his own? Or should he, before putting pen to paper, arrive at some absolute standard of right and wrong by which he can try Socrates and Shelley and Byron and Queen Victoria and Mr. Lloyd George?⁵³⁶

Nevertheless, the period in which Woolf lived was bringing great changes to society. These changes also affected morality and the criteria of judgment. Woolf exemplifies this social aspect in the following statement, “in 1850 Eliza would not have been invited to Court, but [...] in 1922 we should all be delighted to sit next to her at dinner.”⁵³⁷

In “The New Biography,”⁵³⁸ published in *The New York Herald Tribune*, in October 30th 1927, Woolf is trying to work towards a theoretical definition of the genre of biography which will be analysed again in her 1939 essay. In “The New Biography,” Woolf’s attempt to define the true essence of biography is declared already in the opening:

‘The aim of biography’, said Sir Sidney Lee,⁵³⁹ [...] ‘is the truthful transmission of personality’, and no single sentence could more neatly split up into two parts the

⁵³⁵ Woolf, Virginia, “Eliza and Sterne,” cit., p. 177.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁵³⁸ Woolf, Virginia, “The New Biography,” cit., pp. 149-155.

⁵³⁹ Sir Sydney Lee (1859-1926) became assistant-editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* in 1883. In 1890 he became joint editor, and after the retirement of Sir Leslie Stephen in 1891 he succeeded Stephen as editor.

whole problem of biography as it presents itself to us to-day. 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 one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it.⁵⁴⁰

The essence of biography is shaped by a mixture of the granite of truth and the rainbow of personality. “[Biography] stimulates the mind, which is endowed with a curious susceptibility in this direction as no fiction, however artful or highly coloured, can stimulate it.”⁵⁴¹

In the old days, lives offered lists of achievements and protagonists were portrayed like heroes. But then,

Boswell spoke. So we hear booming out from Boswell’s page the voice of Samuel Johnson. ‘No, sir; stark insensibility’, we hear him say. Once we have heard those words we are aware that there is an incalculable presence among us which will go on ringing and reverberating in widening circles however times may change and ourselves. All the draperies and decencies of biography fall to the ground. We can no longer maintain that life consists in actions only or in works. It consists on personality. [...] We are freed from a servitude which is now seen to be intolerable.⁵⁴²

⁵⁴⁰ Woolf, Virginia, “The New Biography,” cit., p. 149.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 150.

Yet Victorian biography resisted Boswell's influence. Poets continued to be portrayed as statesmen. The innovation brought about by Boswell, by destroying conventions, would be ignored, and old rules religiously followed. Woolf depicts Victorian biography as a "hybrid," a "monstrous birth." In her opinion, the very problem of Victorian biographers lies in the contrast between their observation of the truth of fact, and their distortion of personality. They were dominated by "the idea of goodness:"⁵⁴³

Noble, upright, chaste, severe; it is thus that the Victorian worthies are presented to us. The figure is almost always above life size in top-hat and frock-coat, and the manner of presentation becomes increasingly clumsy and laborious. For lives which no longer express themselves in action take shape in innumerable words. The conscientious biographer may not tell a fine tale with a flourish, but must toil through endless labyrinths and embarrass himself with countless documents. In the end he produces an amorphous mass, [...] in which we go seeking disconsolately for [...] any trace that this fossil was once a living man.⁵⁴⁴

Woolf focuses on the main changes which affect biography in the twentieth century. Compared with Victorian biographies, lengthy compounds of words, the thinner size of modern volumes is the most visible sign of a change. "Mr. Strachey compressed four stout Victorians into one slim volume; M. Maurois boiled the usual two volumes of a Shelley life into one little book the size of a novel."⁵⁴⁵ With the new century, biographies are losing their weight. This fact, Woolf remarks, is the first signal of an inward change.

⁵⁴³ Woolf, Virginia, "The New Biography," cit., p. 151.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

Another significant change concerns the biographer's new way of conceiving his/her subjects. Point of view and the relationship author/subject are totally altered:

Whether friend or enemy, admiring or critical, he [the biographer] is an equal [of his subject]. In any case, he preserves his freedom and his right to independent judgment. Moreover, he does not think himself constrained to follow every step of the way. [...] He chooses; he synthesizes; in short, he has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become an artist.⁵⁴⁶

Here, in these lines, the biographer is viewed not only as a “reporter of facts,” but also as an artist with the power to act over his/her subject and to give it a shape. From this perspective, Harold's Nicolson *Some People*⁵⁴⁷ is exemplary. According to Woolf, Nicolson mingles biographical elements to fictional ones. Nevertheless he preserves truth. In this way, the combination of *fiction* and *fact* contributes to better illustrate the subject's personality. As Woolf maintains, “*Some People* is not fiction because it has the substance, the reality of truth. It is not biography because it has the freedom, the

⁵⁴⁶ Woolf, Virginia, “The New Biography,” cit., p. 152.

⁵⁴⁷ The already mentioned work by Harold Nicolson, *Some People* (1927), contains nine portraits of people whom Mr Nicolson actually met, even if its major characters have been heavily fictionalized. There are Miss Plimsoll, the British governess, and Marstock, the very model of the public school hero. There are Lord Curzon's drunken valet Arketall and the snobbish Marquis de Chaumont. We also meet Lambert Orme, a giddy aesthete based on the author Ronald Firbank. And then Jeanne de Henéaut, Titty, Professor Malone and Miriam Cood. The best known character in this book, however, is Mr Nicolson himself: his encounters with these people and the institutions they represent mirror his own personal development. When Harold Nicolson's *Some People* was first published in 1927, Virginia Woolf praised it as a harbinger of a new attitude towards biography. Nigel Nicolson, in his “Introduction” to his father's book, defines *Some People* as “a careful self-portrait of an unusual man, and a reflection on his age.” He continues stating that: “while Boswell had only two main characters, himself and Johnson, and his method was direct reporting, Harold Nicolson had ten, and his method was semifictional. ‘The idea’, as he explained later to a friend, ‘was to put real people in imaginary situations, and imaginary people in real situations.’ So he was free to elaborate or amalgamate people whom he had known to create ‘types’, and through his imagined contacts with these types to explain his own changing attitudes and the character or mores of his times.” See Nicolson, Nigel, “Introduction” to Nicolson, Harold, *Some People* (1927), London, Constable, 1983, pp. vii-xiii, p. vii.

artistry of fiction.”⁵⁴⁸ Woolf praises this work and she acknowledges it as the best example of modern biography:

The great advantages of the new school to which Mr. Nicolson belongs is the lack of pose, humbug solemnity. [...] They have no fixed scheme of the universe, no standard of courage or morality to which they insist that they shall conform. The man himself is the supreme object of their curiosity. [...] they maintain that the man himself, the pith and essence of his character, shows itself to the observant eye in the tone of a voice, the turn of a head, some little phrase or anecdote picked up in passing. [...] And though the figure thus revealed is not noble or impressive or shown in a very heroic attitude, it is for these very reasons extremely like a real human being.⁵⁴⁹

In Woolf’s opinion, Nicolson’s attempt is to mix the devices of fiction with real life using “a pinch of either”⁵⁵⁰ in order to convey personality. However, *truth of fiction* and *truth of fact* are, in the end, conflicting because they destroy each other:

We are in the world of brick and pavement; of birth, marriage, and death; of Acts of Parliament, of Pitt and Burke and Sir Joshua Reynolds. Whether this is a more real world than the world of Bohemia and Hamlet and Macbeth we doubt; but the mixture of the two is abhorrent. [...] the days of Victorian biography are over. [...] Nor can we name the biographer whose art is subtle and bold enough to present that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow. His method still remains to be discovered. But Mr. Nicolson with his mixture of biography and autobiography, of fact and fiction, of Lord

⁵⁴⁸ Woolf, Virginia, “The New Biography,” cit., p. 152.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

Curzon's trousers and Miss Plimsoll's nose, waves his hand airily in a possible direction.⁵⁵¹

As Woolf observes, despite the incompatibility of *truth of fact* and *truth of fiction*, the biographer is urged to combine them because

the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; [...] Each of us is more Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, than he is John Smith of the Corn Exchange. Thus, the biographer's imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist's art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life.⁵⁵²

Fiction is moving closer to life, providing models, and figures, or myths, and discourses: in this sense the art of the novelist ultimately has to give biography its added value.

4.5 “The Art of Biography”

In “The Art of Biography”⁵⁵³ (1939), Woolf wonders whether the genre of biography may be considered an art: “Is biography an art?,” she inquires. As argued in the first chapter of my thesis, biography is a very young art because the genre achieves its major diffusion only in the eighteenth century. According to Woolf, Johnson, Boswell and Lockhart are to be considered the main English model-biographers. Woolf, moreover, by making a comparison between biography and fiction, maintains that the

⁵⁵¹ Woolf, Virginia, “The New Biography,” cit., p. 155.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁵⁵³ Woolf, Virginia, “The Art of Biography,” cit., pp. 181-189. It is a signed essay published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, (April 1939).

two forms differ in their essence: “[o]ne is made with the help of friends, of facts; the other is created without any restrictions save those that the artist [...] chooses to obey.”⁵⁵⁴

A great change has occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century, when Victorian biographies have reached the end of their popularity: “they are like the wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey that were carried in funeral processions through the streets.”⁵⁵⁵ To this funereal image, Woolf opposes the modern figures of Edmund Gosse and of Lytton Strachey, the agents of a radical change.

In “The Art of Biography,” Woolf briefly reviews three works of Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (1918), *Queen Victoria* (1921) and *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928). She focuses her attention on the last two biographies, praising *Queen Victoria* and showing the limitations of *Elizabeth and Essex*. While the life of the former is treated as “a craft,” the one of the latter is treated as “an art.”⁵⁵⁶ Again, the clash between the *granite* of facts and the *rainbow* of personality is highlighted:

[Biography] imposes conditions, and those conditions are that it must be based upon fact. And by fact in biography we mean facts that can be verified by other people besides the artist. If he invents facts as an artist invents them – facts that no one else can verify – and tries to combine them with facts of the other sort, they destroy each other.⁵⁵⁷

Lytton Strachey, with *Queen Victoria*, had realized the necessity of abiding by facts. In this sense, Woolf wants the biographer to be like the “miner’s canary, testing the

⁵⁵⁴ Woolf, Virginia, “The Art of Biography,” cit., p. 182.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 184–185.

atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions.” Both tasks seem to be crucial for her. The aim of modern biography is “to enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners,” in order to bring out “a richer unity.”⁵⁵⁸

As she had previously indicated in *Jacob's Room*, giving Jacob's essay the title “Does History Consist of the Biographies of Great Men?,” Woolf now wonders whether only the lives of great men should be recorded: “Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography – the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious?”⁵⁵⁹

In the wake of this attitude, the biographer has to be a craftsman, not an artist, whose work is “something betwixt and between.” The main task is, eventually, to respect facts, because: “almost any biographer, if he respects facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders.”⁵⁶⁰ With this solid foundation, Woolf was ready to throw herself into her last biographical challenge, the life of Roger Fry.

4.6 Composing *factual* biography: *Roger Fry* and the difficulties of a biographer

Roger Fry died on the 9th of September 1934 from heart failure. Virginia Woolf was asked to write his biography by his sister Margery and by his partner Helen Anrep:

This time Roger makes it harder than usual. We had tea with Nessa yesterday.

Yes, his death is worse than Lytton's. Why I wonder? [...] Margery is going,

⁵⁵⁸ Woolf, Virginia, “The Art of Biography,” cit., p. 186.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 186. Virginia Woolf departs from Victorian biography and from the “Great Men” by ascribing feminist and militant roles to “obscure lives”. Such lives are used to release contemporary social anxieties. See “A Room of One's Own,” (1929) and “Three Guineas,” (1938) in Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own; Three Guineas*, edited by Michèle Barrett, London, Penguin Books, 2000.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

Nessa thinks, to ask me to write about Roger. I don't feel ready to. I dread the plunge into the past. I slog away at Romance & biography of a morning.⁵⁶¹

Initially, Margery Fry had imagined a collective biography, to which different people among Roger's family and friends could contribute. Woolf, who believed that biography "is made with the help of friends, of facts,"⁵⁶² discussed her ideas "about Roger's life" with the Bloomsbury circle and made her plan:

Ideas that came to me last night dining with Clive; [...] About Roger's life: that it should be written by different people to illustrate different stages.

Youth.	by Margery
Cambridge.	by Wedd?
Early London life.	...
Post Imp.	Clive
	Sickert.
Bloomsbury,	Desmond
	V. W.
Later life.	Julian
	Blunt.
	Heard. & so on.

all to be combined say by Desmond & me together. [...] I must now do biography & autobiography.⁵⁶³

⁵⁶¹ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1982, pp. 253-254. Wednesday 17th October 1934.

⁵⁶² Woolf, Virginia, "The Art of Biography," cit., p. 182.

⁵⁶³ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1982, pp. 258-259. Thursday 1st November 1934.

On second thoughts, Margery decided that the only biographer of her beloved brother should be Virginia Woolf. Woolf reported the episode in her diary:

Margery Fry to tea on Sunday. A long debate about the book on Roger: not very conclusive. She says she wants a study by me, reinforced with chapters of other aspects. I say, well but those books are unreadable. Oh of course I want you to be quite free she says. I should say something about his life, I say. The family – Now there of course I'm afraid I should have to ask you to be careful, she says. Agnes is stone deaf; has lived all her life in the family. I couldn't let her be hurt – And so on. The upshot of all of which is that she's to write to the NS. asking for letters: that I'm to go through them; that we're then to discuss – so it will drag in these many months, I suppose. And I plan working at P.s: & getting in reading time with Roger's papers, so that by October next I could write, if that's the decision. But what?⁵⁶⁴

Margery and Helen Anrep encouraged Woolf to undertake the task and, from 1935,⁵⁶⁵ they began to supply her with materials, such as “cardboard boxes stuffed with bills and love letters.”⁵⁶⁶ From that moment until 1938, Woolf devoted her time to the activity of “reading Roger,” whenever she was too tired to write. She copied out extracts, so that by 1936 she already had three volumes of material ready to be used.⁵⁶⁷ In her 22nd October 1935 diary entry, she reported: “I am again held up in The Years

⁵⁶⁴ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1982, p. 262. Wednesday 21st November 1934. Agnes (1869-1958) is the third of Roger Fry's six sisters. The Fry family was composed by six daughters and two sons, Roger included.

⁵⁶⁵ In that year, on the 12th of July, Virginia Woolf is asked to open “Roger Fry Memorial Exhibition” at the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. Her speech will be, at a later stage, published as an essay entitled “Roger Fry.” See Woolf, Virginia, *Collected Essays*, cit., vol. IV, 1967, pp. 88-92.

⁵⁶⁶ Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, cit., p. 340.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

by my accursed love of talk. [...] & spent the morning typing out of Roger's memoirs. This is a most admirable sedative & refresher. I wish I had always had it at hand."⁵⁶⁸

After marking the limits of traditional biography in *Night and Day*, and mocked them in *Orlando* and *Flush*, now Woolf seems excited by the chance of trying factual biography. Nevertheless, from the very beginning, the difficulties of the biographer emerged. Woolf immediately felt under pressure, for she had to accomplish a hard task: writing a biography of a friend, avoiding the risk of hurting his family, and satisfying the expectations of two demanding women.

Woolf started reading Fry's letters while she was revising her last draft of *The Years*: "Reading Roger I become haunted by him. What an odd friendship."⁵⁶⁹ She began to write his biography during the spring of 1938 and expressed all her doubts and fears in a letter addressed to her beloved friend Vita:

My God, how does one write a Biography? Tell me. I'm fairly distracted with Fry's papers. How can one deal with facts – so many and so many and so many? Or ought one, as I incline, to be purely fictitious. And what is a Life? And what was Roger? And if one can't say, what's the good of trying? Yet it's my favourite reading – short of shall we say Shakespeare and Sackville-West: biography.⁵⁷⁰

The same day, Woolf wrote in her diary:

my eyes ache with Roger, and I'm a little appalled at the prospect of the grind this book will be. I must somehow shorten & loosen; I *can't* (remember) stretch out a

⁵⁶⁸ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. IV, 1982, p. 347. Tuesday 22nd October 1935.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 361. Monday 30th December 1935.

⁵⁷⁰ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. VI, 1980, p. 226. To V. Sackville-West, 3rd May 1938.

long painstaking literal book: later I must generalise & let fly. But then, what about all the letters? How can what cut loose from facts, when there they are, contradicting my theories? A problem. But I'm convinced I can't physically, strain after a R[oyal] A[cademy] portrait.⁵⁷¹

Woolf was overwhelmed by a huge quantity of letters and documents, she was – as Leon Edel says – “called upon to impose logic and coherence upon the heterogeneous mass of facts.”⁵⁷² As a consequence, she found herself dealing with more “granite” than “rainbow,” “contradicting [her] theories,” as she wrote in her diary. Having abandoned the creativity that distinguished her previous experiences of *Orlando* and *Flush*, Woolf patterned her work according to the traditional way of writing biography. She went back to the “Great Men,” to her father and to Carlyle’s theories, fighting an interior conflict arising from her aesthetic beliefs. Moreover, she was more and more worried about how to face all the difficulties she was coming across. She asked to her friend Ethel Smyth: “How does one square the relatives? How does one euphemise 20 different mistresses?”⁵⁷³ And again, in a letter to Mary Llewelyn Davies: “How can one write the truth about friends whose families are alive? And Roger was the most scornful of untruths of any man.”⁵⁷⁴

In addition to relatives and family, Woolf also had to face, and to solve, the thorny issue of the relationship between Fry and her sister Vanessa. In 1911, Roger and Vanessa did have a short love affair. Reading her sister’s letters, and feeling

⁵⁷¹ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. V, 1984, p. 138. Tuesday 3rd May 1938.

⁵⁷² Edel, Leon, *Literary Biography: The Alexander Lectures 1955-56*, cit., p. 45.

⁵⁷³ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. VI, 1980, p. 2. To Ethel Smyth, 27th January 1937.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27. To Mary Llewelyn Davies, 18th September 1937.

“flummoxed entirely,”⁵⁷⁵ Woolf decided to consult her: “Do give me some views; how to deal with love so we’re not all blushing.”⁵⁷⁶ According to Quentin Bell, Vanessa bravely replied: “I hope you won’t mind making us all blush, it won’t do any harm.”⁵⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Woolf chose to omit the affair. As Bell maintains, “I do not think that she, or anyone else that I can think of born before 1900 could in cold print have set down the tale of a sister’s adulterous passion.”⁵⁷⁸

Another problem Woolf had to face concerned the lack of information about Fry’s life before 1910, the year during when they met for the first time in Bloomsbury. Instead of making use of her fantasy to “fill the gap,” she committed herself to facts and asked Fry’s friends for help. She wrote a letter to Robert Trevelyan asking for “a sketch of Helen,” Roger’s mental-ill wife, locked up in a clinic, for she “never saw her; and [got] confused accounts, naturally, from Roger’s sisters.”⁵⁷⁹ Woolf insisted and kindly demanded: “If you [...] could put down anything you remember of Roger it would be a great help to have it by me.”⁵⁸⁰ As Woolf relates in the biography, Fry completely changed after Helen’s illness in 1897: “To write of Roger Fry as he was before his wife’s illness is to write of someone who differed fundamentally from the man whom his friends knew later.”⁵⁸¹

Woolf did not confer great significance to the activity of Roger Fry as an artist. As Thomas Lewis remarks, uncomfortable with Fry’s aesthetic theories, she chose to dwell with his personality and she refused to linger over his paintings or his works in

⁵⁷⁵ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. VI, 1980, p. 120. To Vanessa Bell, 8th October 1938.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.120.

⁵⁷⁷ Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, cit., vol. II, pp. 182-183.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁵⁷⁹ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. VI, 1980, p. 100. To Robert Trevelyan, 7th August 1938.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁵⁸¹ Woolf, Virginia, *Roger Fry: A Biography*, (1940), London, Vintage, 2003, pp. 103-104.

aesthetics, such as *Vision and Design* (1920), *Transformations* (1926) and *Cézanne. A Study of his Development* (1927).⁵⁸² Her method was to use events in order to illustrate personality. Apart from the anonymous Appendix at the end of the biography, in which a technical appreciation of Fry as a painter is delivered, Woolf outlines his figure only as an art critic and a lecturer:

As the next slide slid over the sheet there was a pause. He gazed afresh at the picture. And then in a flash he found the word he wanted; he added on the spur of the moment what he had just seen as if for the first time. That, perhaps, was the secret of his hold over his audience. They could see the sensation strike and form; he could lay bare the very moment of perception. [...] For two hours they had been looking at pictures. But they had seen one of which the lecturer himself was unconscious – the outline of the man against the screen, an ascetic figure in evening dress who paused and pondered, and then raised his stick and pointed.⁵⁸³

Furthermore, in her biography, Woolf decides to describe her subject, quoting directly from his letters, fragments of conversation, or passages taken from his works. Her aim was to let Fry tell about himself, and let her reader hear Fry's voice. In a letter to one of Roger's sisters, Woolf declared: "I did my best to let Roger tell his own life, but of course one can't simply do that."⁵⁸⁴ It is worth noticing that Woolf, towards the end of her task, expressed her doubts concerning the possibility of writing about a subject's personality. Like *Orlando's* biographer, Woolf omits the "thousand

⁵⁸² Lewis, Thomas S. W., "Virginia Woolf's Sense of the Past," cit., p. 200.

⁵⁸³ Woolf, Virginia, *Roger Fry: A Biography*, cit., pp. 262-263.

⁵⁸⁴ Nicolson, Nigel, Trautmann, Joanne, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. VI, 1980, p. 423. To Ruth Fry, 9th February 1941.

disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore.”⁵⁸⁵ In the last pages, she expresses her view as follows:

He was impulsive, he knew; he was obstinate; he was, he feared, egotistical. [...] Also he was “cross, fussy, stingy, pernickety and other things”. Perhaps psychoanalysis might help; or perhaps human nature in general and his own in particular was too irrational, too instinctive, either to be analysed or to be cured.⁵⁸⁶

Like *Orlando*, Fry lives many lives, “the active, the contemplative, the public and the private,”⁵⁸⁷ and he lives them “simultaneously.”⁵⁸⁸ Again, Woolf insists on the impossible task of the biographer when he/she is asked to delve deeply into the essence of a subject. She uses Fry’s words:

But how describe the pure delight “of watching a flower unfold its immense cup of red”? Those who knew him best will attempt no summing up of that sensation. They can only say that Roger Fry had a peculiar quality of reality that made him a person of infinite importance in their lives, and add his own words, “Any attempt I might make to explain this would probably land me in the depths of mysticism. On the edge of that gulf I stop.”⁵⁸⁹

Like *Orlando’s* biographer, while aiming at the composition of a factual biography, Woolf in the end would endorse the traditional way of writing she had questioned with her previous fictional experiments. In *Orlando*, the biographer is silent during

⁵⁸⁵ Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando: A Biography*, cit., p. 12.

⁵⁸⁶ Woolf, Virginia, *Roger Fry: A Biography*, cit. 291.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

Orlando's sexual transformation, as Virginia Woolf had done when facing the ethical issue concerning her sister Vanessa and Roger's love affair.

When Leonard Woolf read the first half of the book, he felt that it was dull, of no interest, and, above all, weighed down by "all those dead quotations."⁵⁹⁰ On the contrary, Margery Fry, Helen Anrep and Vanessa Bell praised the work. Vanessa, indeed, told her sister that she had "brought him [Roger] back to me."⁵⁹¹ Margery Fry, instead, expressed all her gratitude in her "Foreword" to *Roger Fry*:

Dear Virginia,

Years ago, after one of those discussions upon the methods of the arts which illuminated his long and happy friendship with you, Roger suggested, half seriously, that you should put into practice your theories of the biographer's craft in a portrait of himself. When the time came for his life to be written some of us who were very close to him, thinking it would have been his wish as well as ours, asked you to undertake it. I have now begged to have this page to tell you of our gratitude to you for having accepted, and for having brought to completion a piece of work neither light nor easy.⁵⁹²

Trying to unravel the huge mass of facts, within her attempt to describe Fry's personality, Woolf composed a biography which is neither totally traditional – for she had to detach her way of writing from the past tradition – nor inventive as *Orlando* and *Flush* had been. However, she hit the mark, realizing a regular "classical" factual biography. The same day of the publication of her work, she noted down in her diary:

⁵⁹⁰ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. V, 1984, p. 316. 20th May 1940.

⁵⁹¹ Quoted in Hussey, Mark, *Virginia Woolf A TO Z, A Comprehensive Reference for Students, Teachers and Common Readers to her Life, Works and Critical Reception*, cit., p. 232.

⁵⁹² Margery, Fry, "Foreword," (April 1940) to Woolf, Virginia, *Roger Fry: A Biography*, cit., p. 5.

What a curious relation is mine with Roger at this moment – I who have given him a kind of shape after his death – Was he like that? I feel very much in his presence at the moment: as if I were intimately connected with him; as if we together had given birth to this vision of him: a child borne of us. Yet he had no power to alter it. And yet for some years it will represent him.⁵⁹³

Elizabeth Cooley maintains that “faced with the task of writing serious biography, Woolf remained within those biographical boundaries delineated by her literary fathers.”⁵⁹⁴ In addition, Cooley adds that *Roger Fry: A Biography* would have been much better if only Woolf “had given free rein to her literary impulses and pushed her curiosity farther.”⁵⁹⁵ This statement would hold within a monolithic vision of Woolf’s achievement as a modernist, bent on following the experiments her “impulses” and “curiosity” would prompt in her inspiration. Actually, the dogmatic view of modernist writers as arch-enemies of the past has to be reconsidered and re-shaped. Twentieth century writers, while living through a short period of experimentalism, never completely forget the past – neither do they renounce the wealth of the literary tradition. Woolf has to be reconsidered in this light: a modern writer indeed, involved in many contemporary issues, yet a lover of her English literary ancestry, able to resort to their lesson whenever she thought it convenient. The adherence of *Roger Fry: A Biography* to standards of classical biography writing is not the failure of a modernist author, but the achievement of a modern writer of lives.

⁵⁹³ Bell Olivier, Anne, McNeillie, Andrew, eds., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., vol. V, 1984, p. 346. 25th July 1940.

⁵⁹⁴ Cooley, Elizabeth, “Revolutionizing Biography: Orlando, Roger Fry, and the Tradition,” cit., p. 81.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Conclusions

Twentieth century biographies insist on death as the moment in which the myth of a person is fixed, preserved and popularized. Virginia Woolf's death is, in some way, mythical and dramatic. Nevertheless and as already remarked, even though an undisputed fact, it has been too much exploited and misinterpreted throughout the years. Very often, it has become almost the only significant fact in her life.

As Hermione Lee concludes in her 1996 biography,

Virginia Woolf's story is reformulated by each generation. She takes on the shape of difficult modernist preoccupied with questions of form, or comedian of manners, or neurotic highbrow aesthete, or inventive fantasist, or pernicious snob, or Marxist feminist, or historian of women's lives, or victim of abuse, or lesbian heroine, or cultural analyst, depending on who is reading her, and when, and in what context.⁵⁹⁶

The 2002 movie "The Hours," directed by Stephen Daldry, is a clear example of this attitude of re-appropriation. The film is based on the 1999 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham, screenplay by David Hare and

⁵⁹⁶ Lee, Hermione, *Virginia Woolf*, cit., p. 769.

starring Nicole Kidman, Meryl Streep and Julianne Moore. The story tells about how the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* affects three generations of women, all of whom have dealt with suicide in their lives. Thus, the recurring theme of the story is death. In fact, by making a circular movement, the opening and final scenes depict the 1941 suicide of Woolf, with Kidman drowning herself in the River Ouse. Thus, the audience's attention is caught by the tragic event from the very beginning of the movie to its end, the dramatic act becoming the essence of the whole storyline and the principle on which the plot is built. Hermione Lee is very sharp in judging "The Hours" as follows:

For all its polemical earnestness about the mistreatment of mental illness and the constrictions imposed on Virginia Woolf after her breakdown, the film evacuates her life of political intelligence or social acumen, returning her to the position of a doomed, fey, mad victim. [...] I wish that to the inattentive viewer it didn't look like as if Virginia Woolf committed suicide just after finishing *Mrs Dalloway*. [...] Above all, I wish her suicide hadn't been transformed into a picturesque idyll. Woolf was not Ophelia: she drowned herself in a cold day in March in a dangerous, ugly river where the water runs so fast that nothing grows in the bare banks. She was wearing an old fur coat, wellington boots, and a hat held on by an elastic band. Whether she jumped or walked, dropped under or struggled, we don't know.⁵⁹⁷

Roberta Rubenstein offers another apt comment:

I'm afraid that too many film-goers will take from *The Hours* the impression of nothing more than a sad, eccentric writer – a figure far simpler than the

⁵⁹⁷ Lee, Hermione, *Virginia Woolf's Nose: Essays on Biography*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005, pp. 55-56.

intellectually robust and emotionally complex Virginia Woolf [...] I'm afraid for the real Woolf.⁵⁹⁸

Patricia Cohen gathers several points of view in an article entitled "The Nose Was the Final Straw," published in *The New York Times* on the 15th of February 2003.

Concerning the film production, she maintains that:

Woolf aficionados are certainly grateful for all the attention and sales. Still, at conferences, over dinner and through Virginia Woolf e-mail lists, many Woolfians are fuming, arguing that their idol has been turned into a pathetic, suicide-obsessed creature, her politics ignored, her personality distorted and even her kisses inaccurately portrayed.⁵⁹⁹

Cohen's overview includes Brenda R. Silver's⁶⁰⁰ opinion. Also Silver disagrees with the filmic presentation of Woolf stating that:

There's a whole history of presenting Woolf as this neurotic, suicidal, bad-to-the-servants kind of woman, and for years Woolf scholars have been working against that. [...] This image of her really should have disappeared years ago.⁶⁰¹

My aim here is not to demolish Daldry's "The Hours." However, I consider it a proper example of how the image of Virginia Woolf has been misrepresented, insisting on her

⁵⁹⁸ Rubenstein, Roberta, "Outlook," *Washington Post*, (26th January 2003), p. 3, quoted in Lee, Hermione, *Virginia Woolf's Nose: Essays on Biography*, cit., p. 59.

⁵⁹⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/15/movies/the-nose-was-the-final-straw.html>. (Last access 1st Feb 2013).

⁶⁰⁰ Brenda R. Silver is the author of *Virginia Woolf Icon*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

⁶⁰¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/15/movies/the-nose-was-the-final-straw.html>. (Last access 1st Feb 2013).

suicide as a central point when, on the contrary, at the core of her personal and professional path there was the everlasting reflection upon life and the self. Not only her life, but the lives of the people who surrounded her, as well as the lives of the obscure, were her preoccupation, and, sometimes, her obsession. In the wake of this consideration I have developed my research, in order to show how much Woolf was affected by life and thus by the genre of biography in her achievement as a writer. As she maintains in *Orlando*, “a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand.”⁶⁰²

Woolf developed her auto/biographical discourse not only through her fictional experiments, her essays and reviews and her last factual biography, but in her letters and diaries, amounting to several volumes. Since her childhood, with *Hyde Park Gate News: The Stephen Family Newspaper* (1895), she was fond of recording life. This feeling was still present in her last letter, addressed to her beloved sister Vanessa and husband Leonard. As she maintains in *Jacob's Room*, letters “lace our days together and make of life a perfect globe.”⁶⁰³

This huge amount of letters, diaries, drafts, essays, novels, shows her continuing interest in the art of biography. In addition to these, we have tickets of any sort, images, pieces of newspapers, small objects, scrapbooks she kept collecting. These letters, manuscripts, and press-cuttings provide documentary evidence of Woolf's career and of her unending interest in biography and life-writing.

Already in 1908 Virginia Woolf was questioning “the proper writing of lives.” A few years later she would try to master traditional biography with fictional experiments and explore, in her criticism, the endless possibilities of the genre. Biography for her was history and imagination, fact and fantasy, reality and fiction,

⁶⁰² Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando: A Biography*, cit., p. 213.

⁶⁰³ Woolf, Virginia, *Jacob's Room*, cit., p. 79.

constraint and freedom, granite of truth and rainbow of personality.⁶⁰⁴ Like Mr Ramsey, when he finally came close to the lighthouse, Woolf realised that “nothing was simply one thing.”⁶⁰⁵ In the same year, 1927, in “The New Biography,” her review of *Some People*, by Harold Nicolson, she emphasized that belief, praising Nicolson for having originally mingled together fact and fiction.

In 1939, in “The Art of Biography,” Woolf is aware of the impossible coexistence of external facts and “the proper writer of lives”. *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940) is indeed proof of this incompatibility. Fact and fiction may coexist in creative writing, but within the classical task of biography, the lessons learned from the eighteenth century cannot be omitted. Despite the cultural shift in affecting the nature of the genre, and the changes in society as well, the debt to Doctor Johnson, James Boswell, and Leslie Stephen has to be acknowledged anyway.

When the whole life-achievement of Virginia Woolf is considered, what appears to be Woolf’s literary achievement is her ability to take into her writing both the issues which entail fictional experiments *and* the lessons derived from the tradition of biography. When considered side by side with experimental works such as *Jacob’s Room* and *Orlando*, *Roger Fry: A Biography* is a clear indicator of her capability to stride over different epochs and to profit from the classical models in the genre. Thus a different image of Woolf emerges: an image less encumbered by the orthodoxy of “Modernism” and deeply involved in a constant and fruitful dialogue with the past.

⁶⁰⁴ Briggs, Julia, “The Proper Writing of Lives”: Biography versus Fiction in Woolf’s Early Work,” in Briggs, Julia, *Reading Virginia Woolf*, cit., p. 39.

⁶⁰⁵ Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse*, cit., p. 202.

Bibliography

This bibliography is divided into six sections, as follows:

Section A – “Virginia Woolf”: Virginia Woolf’s diaries, letters, short fiction, novels, biographies, memoirs, and essays.

Section B – “On Virginia Woolf”: works and articles on Virginia Woolf.

Section C – “Biographers”: authors of biographies and their works.

Section D – “On biography”: critical assessments of the art of biography.

Section E – “Further readings”: further references and works cited.

Section F – “Websites”: websites concerning biography and life-writing projects.

Section A – Virginia Woolf

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