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**Between Waste and Efficiency:
Reading Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* as Co-Operative Text**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of the Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Between Waste and Efficiency: Reading Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* as Co-Operative Text

In 1927, one year before her own 329-page fictionalized experiment with the genre, *Orlando*, would appear in the biography section of bookstores, Virginia Woolf's essay "The New Biography" identifies 'excess' as the major flaw of the Victorian-era biography. Although these works might be "laden with truth," a reader must "rummage among [those biographies] with a sense of prodigious waste, of the artistic wrongheadedness" of recording a life in "innumerable words."¹ By contrast, the 'New' biographical style is marked by a "diminution of size," in which authors like Lytton Strachey could compress the lives of "four stout Victorians into one slim volume." Woolf seems to be a strong supporter of this modern, efficient approach to biography—she values the technique of using "the tone of a voice, the turn of a head, some little phrase or anecdote" to convey what would have been "whole chapters in the Victorian volume."²

¹ Woolf, Virginia. "The New Biography." *Collected Essays: Volume Four*. Hogarth Press, 1966. p.231

² *ibid*, p. 232

However, in the second section of her essay, Woolf complicates her own Victorian/long/bad vs Modern/short/good binary with a second, intersecting opposition: that of granite vs rainbow, “the truth of real life” vs “the truth of fiction.” What if the subject of a New Biography *shouldn't* be compressed and compacted into one slim volume? What if, when applied to the life of a living person and not a fictional character, the method of selecting brief snatches of life artificially prevents the biography from “grow[ing] up and becom[ing] something serious or perhaps tragic?”³ Woolf makes it clear that sometimes “real life” *is* large, labyrinthine, “innumerable.” Thus, although “the days of Victorian biography are over,” the New Biography’s compulsion to excise and debunk has not truly been able to produce the “perpetual marriage” of life and art necessary for a successful biography. However, argues Woolf, Harold Nicholson in his work *Some People*, “waves his hand...in a possible direction” by creating a fictionalized biography, freeing himself from the sometimes “wasteful” weight of accuracy that a mimetic obligation puts on the genre.

Woolf’s critiques of Victorian and New biographies could be mapped onto an ideological paradigm of the waste/efficiency dialectic, a framework that structures much literary, social, and economic discourse in English during the interwar period. As Suzanne Raitt has shown, Edwardian moral standards imagined efficiency as the logical opposite (and thus, answer) to a vast array of Victorian social ills associated with “waste,” including environmental destruction, barren women, and artistic decadence.⁴ Literature, too, configured itself to eliminate “excess,” although whether this streamlining process involves a tighter mimesis between “life” and “art” or simply less verbose prose

³ *ibid*, p. 233-234

⁴ Raitt, Suzanne. “The Rhetoric of Efficiency in Early Modernism.” *Modernism/modernity*, Volume 13, Number 1, 2006, pp. 835-851. p. 836

seems to be a point of divergence for various modern authors.⁵ Within the local culture of the Bloomsbury group and the specific genre of biography, however, the definition of textual efficiency seems to be less ambiguous than in the literary world at large: Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* situated itself as *the* efficient biography in 1918, invoking an association with industrial and capitalist tropes of "convenience" that dovetails smoothly with Raitt's claims. What Raitt does not examine, and what I hope to explore in this paper, is how the economic counter-movements to an efficient capitalist modernity, such as the Co-operative movements in England, also have literary counterparts: Woolf's *Orlando* is one of them.

As "The New Biography" shows, Virginia Woolf remains skeptical of a paradigm that denies the possibility of a desirable "wastefulness." In addition, she questions the very validity of the waste/efficiency (Victorian/modern) binary by pointing out that in Nicholson's pithy, efficient, New Biography his treatment of the subjects "stunts their growth." If efficiency can be roughly defined as the maximum output for the minimum input, then a biography-machine that inputs little and outputs little is hardly efficient. It may even be the opposite especially if "the figure which has been most completely and mostly subtly displayed [in *Some People*] is that of the author:" a *waste* of a book, one may argue, if one approached it looking for it to produce a picture of the purported subjects and not their biographer.

My argument will consist of two major components. First, I wish to examine Woolf's critiques of "efficiency" and modernity with respect to the genre of biography specifically. I will show how Woolf undermines any easy association (such as the type that her friend Lytton Strachey posited in the introduction to his *Eminent Victorians*) of a

⁵ *ibid*, p. 848.

Victorian biography of many words with undesirable “waste” and a Modern aesthetic of tight, pared-down prose with an inherently superior “efficiency.” In the second strand of my argument, I will argue that Woolf’s own major experiment with the genre, her 1928 biography/novel *Orlando*, provides a textual economy that is bound by neither waste nor efficiency. Instead, Woolf employs the principles of the early twentieth-century Co-operative Societies, economic organizations established to resist modern capitalism.

Part I: Victorian Waste and Modern Efficiency

That biography was, overall, shrinking in bulk during the early twentieth century is not just Woolf’s impression. With the rise of the middle class in the early nineteenth century came increased leisure time, vaulting the long novel and long biography into a prominent cultural position. In addition, the excessive length of nineteenth-century literary works was in part a function of a literary marketplace that had depended on per-volume lending library fees and thus favored multi-part texts. The novels of authors like Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope initially spanned months of serial publication in periodicals; thus, when each installment was combined, the final product often exceeded what would be, to a modern buying public, a “manageable” size of a book. Biographies, as Hermione Lee notes, were similarly bulky. They often appeared as multi-volume “Life and Letters” collections, a hybrid of external commentary on a subject and an exhaustive republication of his or her body of correspondence. The impulse behind such expansive writing could be compared to the religious impulse to create relics out of every scrap of saint’s bodies; since biographies were written to portray the lives of cultural role models, readers needed as much detail as possible in order to most closely emulate the subject’s

actions. Of course, the most scandalous or unclean material was generally edited out, but the resulting gaps in those lives were often covered over with *more* words. Lee uses the example of John Morley's biography of Gladstone, in which Morley avoids mentioning Gladstone's "horrible" mouth cancer in favor of "substituting a last page as if from a Victorian novel."⁶ Thus, to some extent, the criticism that Victorian biographies were weighed down with a "prodigious waste" of prose simply reflects a reality of the nineteenth-century literary scene.

However, the modern impulse to downsize the biography for a modern audience was not purely a knee-jerk reaction to an (imagined) homogenous Victorian effusiveness. Instead, the shortening of the modern biography was intertwined with other critical discourses surrounding modern "progress." Thus the efficient streamlining of the New Biography took on distinct political dimensions.

Modern biography took great pains to associate itself with 'advancement' and 'progress.' Some critics, such as Lewis Mumford, associated biography's shrinkage with a wider matrix of scientific advancement, arguing that "the hormones in physiology, the vitamins in diet, have their equivalent in the writing of a modern biography."⁷ Just as modern technologies allow humans to examine the microscopic elements of life, some technical breakthroughs in the "science" of life writing, according to Mumford, allow biographers to develop theories of the whole subject from "stray bits of evidence."⁸

⁶ Lee, Hermione. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2009.

⁷ Mumford, Lewis. "The Task of Modern Biography." *The English Journal*, Volume 23, Number 1, 1934, pp. 1-9. p. 3.

⁸ *ibid*

Therefore, the best biographers needed an “eye for the little, [a] fine sense of infinitesimally small quantities.”⁹

In addition to the analogy between scientific progress and the aesthetics of compression, the notion of “debunking” in modern biography also served as a model for textual excision. Coined by American novelist and biographer William E. Woodward in 1923, the verb “to debunk” describes a process of removing the “bunkum,” or nonsense, from a familiar narrative. (Oxford English Dictionary’s citation for “debunking” clarifies this excision strategy: “De-bunking means simply taking the bunk out of things.”¹⁰) By 1935, when American critic E.H. O’Neill complained that New Biographical methods were too ubiquitous, he complained that the now-standard “debunking” biography “stripped [its subject] bare of every ability and every virtue.”¹¹ Such removing of “virtue” is exactly the project at hand, however, in New Biography. Lytton Strachey’s introduction to his *Eminent Victorians* argues that a biographer has only two moral obligations: brevity and “to lay bare the facts of cases.”¹² In practice, these textual strategies result in the same thing; the removal of “bunk” *is* the removal of a lot of the substance of the Victorian biography, at least as viewed in retrospect by the genre’s modern successors. Thus in the New Biography, two critical strands of thought—a “scientific” inclination to associate the ability to see fine detail with advancements in technology and an Oedipal impulse tied up in the textual strategy of “debunking,” removing any appearance of excessive glorification from the portrayals of the previous generation—coalesced to create short, critical life narratives.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ debunk, v. Second edition, 1989; online version March 2011.

<<http://www.oed.com.proxy.wm.edu/Entry/47950>>; accessed 04 April 2011.

¹¹ E.H. O’Neill, “Modern American Biography.” *The North America Review*, Vol. 240, No 3, December 1935, pp. 488-497

¹² Strachey, Lytton. *Eminent Victorians*. G.P. Putnam and Sons, New York, 1918. vii.

This particular rhetorical combination of technological advancement and emphasis on streamlined production parallels a similar ‘modern’ transformation in the early twentieth century: the move towards labor/industrial efficiency. Although his 1911 *Principles of Scientific Management* is purportedly about increasing productivity in a factory setting, Frederick Winslow Taylor universalizes his appeal for a streamlined, modern lifestyle by reminding his readers of “the great loss which the whole country is suffering through inefficiency in almost all of our daily acts.” Although it primarily cites “natural” worker laziness and unscientific, “rule of thumb” standards as reasons why America (but by extension, the industrialized West) does not produce to its full, modern potential, Taylor’s system of labor management is more than just a textbook for factory owners. “Taylorism” codifies a trend in both the United States and Britain to increase “national efficiency” by applying scientific rigor to all aspects of human social, political, and economic life.¹³

Two basic concepts from *Principles of Scientific Management* find their way most prominently into the early twentieth-century English literary scene. First, the idea that “greatest permanent prosperity for the workman, coupled with the greatest prosperity for the employer, can be brought about only when the work of the establishment is done with the smallest combined expenditure of human effort.” The second principle is, as Taylor himself knew, “the same thing in a different way:” the insight “that the greatest prosperity can exist only as the result of the greatest possible productivity of the men and machines of the establishment--that is, when each man and each machine are turning out

¹³ Maier, Charles S. “Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European ideologies and the vision of industrial production in the 1920s.” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1970. pp. 27-61

the largest possible output.”¹⁴ The basic structure of low-input, high-output systems is perhaps most obvious in a prominent ‘modern’ literary movement contemporaneous with the rise of “National Efficiency:” Ezra Pound’s Imagism. Raitt shows how Imagists sought to cut out as much of the textual middle-man between an object and its textual representation as possible by writing short, descriptive poems loaded with meaning. Pound’s manifesto urges that a poet must “use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation,”¹⁵ constructing what is, in effect, a low-input system with (he surely hoped) the outcome of high aesthetic value. Although Imagism and New Biography operate within distinct genres and employ a distinct set of aesthetic tools, the movements explore a similar set of “modernized” textual economies.

In his biographical work, Lytton Strachey uncritically adopts the textual glorification of low input/ high output systems that captivated mainstream efficiency cultures in the early twentieth century. His 1918 introduction to his own *Eminent Victorians* posits that “the *modern* eye,” unlike that of the previous century, “naturally” rejects the biography of “two fat volumes” in favor of the short and selective. By condensing the lives of four celebrated nineteenth-century figures into one brief book, Strachey eschews what he believes to be the excess of Victorian hagiography in favor of a modern aesthetic of efficiency. He situates himself at the forefront of a revival and revision of the entire genre: “To preserve, for instance, a becoming brevity—a brevity which excludes everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant—that, surely, is the first duty of the biographer.”¹⁶ The modern biographer, like the Taylorist factory

¹⁴ Taylor, Frederick Winslow. *The Principles of Scientific Management*. Dover Press, 1911. P. 6

¹⁵ Raitt, p. 841

¹⁶ Strachey, Lytton. *Eminent Victorians*, G.P. Putnam and Sons, New York, 1918. p. vii.

worker, is thus reimagined as a craftsman of machine-like precision, cutting out textual waste to produce a life story that exhibits both “convenience and...art.”¹⁷

Strachey’s close friend Virginia Woolf had read the drafts of this convenient work of art during 1916-1918, and had written to him with initial words of admiration. So what does one make of the fact that, ten years after *Eminent Victorians* espoused ‘a becoming brevity’ and only one year after she herself critiqued the ‘innumerable’ words of the Victorians in “The New Biography,” she produces *Orlando*, a voluptuous, verbose, digressive fantasy-“biography?” While the simple answer is that Woolf assumed the character of the Victorian biographer in order to critique the social and literary conventions of the previous generation, such a solution is complicated by the fact that Woolf openly skewers the ideologies underlying the New Biography as well. In one passage in *Orlando*, her faux-Victorian biographer/narrator writes that,

...really it would *profit* little to write down what [Shel and Orlando] said...For it has come about, by the wise economy of nature, that our modern spirit can almost dispense with language; the commonest expression will do, since no expressions do; hence the most ordinary conversation is often the most poetic, and the most poetic is precisely that which cannot be written down. For which reasons we leave a great blank here, which must be taken to indicate that space is filled to repletion.¹⁸

Here Woolf resists the pull of an aesthetic of “efficiency” by pointing out that economies of reduction, taken to their logical extreme, result in simply nothingness. “The

¹⁷ *Ibid*, vi.

¹⁸ Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 253. Emphasis mine.

modern spirit,” produced by the world of National Efficiency and “excluding everything that is redundant” would rather not hear the individualizing details of two characters in intimate conversation, since that sort of information is ‘unprofitable.’ If *Orlando* were a factory, bent on always reducing input cost, it would seem perfectly logical that such an excision would save time and energy by recording nothing rather than waste it recording “ordinary conversation,” especially given that ordinary conversation is “poetic” (metaphorical, abstract, and thus “un-write-able”) speech. Here Woolf is arguing that literary production must operate under different standards than mechanical production, satirically using a mock-syllogism that, while structurally illogical, still resonates within the rhetoric of compulsory reduction that demarcated movements like Imagism. However, Woolf also shows that that “efficiency” itself, like the above paragraph, is a logical impossibility masquerading as wisdom. Just as continuing to reduce labor input in a factory, imagined as an unqualified good, would ultimately result in *zero* input and thus produce nothing, the result of the economizing “modern spirit” in this passage is simply a “great blank.” By containing no information at all, this attempt at textual efficiency is ultimately the least efficient textual expression.

This passage in *Orlando* underscores the historical fact that Woolf’s relationship with Victorian biography is far more complicated than “The New Biography’s” Victorian waste/ Modern efficiency paradigm admits. For one thing, Woolf’s position towards the genre is one infused with personal sentiment. Her father, Leslie Stephen, famously edited the Victorian-era *Dictionary of National Biography*, an exhaustive encyclopedia of the famous figures of the age. Although Woolf often wrote in reaction, rather than in homage, to her father’s own biographical ventures (which also included freestanding

books on George Eliot and Jonathan Swift), she also was literally raised alongside the tradition of Victorian biography. When Frederic William Maitland published a biography of “innumerable words” about her father in 1906, two years after his death, Virginia (née Stephen) contributed a sizable portion of a chapter—and did so within the standard biographical style of the time.

For another thing, Woolf’s work as a reviewer for periodicals such as the *Times* and, later, *The Nation and Athenaeum*, demanded that she absorb an enormous amount of what was still predominantly a Victorian style of life writing. Although the exact ratio of biographies to novels is difficult to quantify—as Juliette Atkinson points out, in publisher’s data from the period “biography is sometimes given its own category, at other times listed alongside history, and sometimes grouped with geography, travel, and history”—the popularity of the genre had not entirely evaporated from its late nineteenth-century heyday. For example, in 1926, two years before her long faux-biography *Orlando* was published, Woolf reviewed forty-two long biographies for the *N&A* alone. While her reviews tended more towards narrative description than critical instruction, she did sometimes use her column space to *praise* books of the type that Strachey et al belittled. “The Cosmos,” her 1926 review of *The Journals of Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson, 1879-1922*, deals with the length of this “Life and Letters” style biography, but in vivid language that may even creep into praise: “These two large volumes are full of the sparks that fell from [a] constantly recurring explosion.”¹⁹ It seems, at least in this case, the length of the text is necessary to contain the highly reactive content: not “excess” or “waste” at all.

¹⁹ *The Nation and Athenaeum*, October 9, 1926

Just as Woolf's apparent dissatisfaction with the "prodigious waste" of Victorian biography is complicated by a broader look at her position toward the genre, so her praise of "New Biography" is more tepid than that essay alone reveals. In order to situate the relevance of Woolf's critiques of this form, it is important to note that Woolf views her close friend Lytton Strachey and his multi-subject biographical work *Eminent Victorians* as the origin of the modern biographical method. This perspective, however, is hardly a purely personal one.

It would be difficult to overestimate the effect that *Eminent Victorians* had on the late Edwardian literary scene. Reviews of Lytton Strachey's work appeared in many unlikely, and non-literary, places. During the 1920s, for example, four prominent American political science journals each reviewed Strachey's books as they did scholarly historical works. A long, critical essay on *Eminent Victorians* that appeared in the *International Journal of Ethics* in 1919, bravely "exposes" the fact that Strachey's book is not, in fact, a work of history, revealing with frustration the fact that, "[The Victorian era's] scientific achievement, its economic expansion, its potent and prolix literature are not weighed by Mr. Strachey."²⁰ The author implies that Strachey's book would have been, if Strachey hadn't muddled it, a study of the Victorian *period*. In this context, Strachey's preoccupation with "the personal and biographic" is an unwelcome diversion from standard historiography and historical methodology.²¹ The biography, in the short, multi-faceted, politically satirical form of *Eminent Victorians*, seemed to be such a departure from the biographical standards that these critics seemed to think that Strachey was simply doing history wrong: this interpretation of the literary genre of biography was

²⁰ Jourdain, Margaret. "The Victorian Spirit." *International Journal of Ethics*, University of Chicago Press, Vol 29, No. 3. 1919. p. 366

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 367

so new as to be unrecognizable. In fact, only one of the four reviews, written in 1922 by David Muzzey for *Political Science Quarterly*, reads Strachey's work as "not the history of the Victorian age but [...] portraiture."²² Yet, despite this admission, this review of what Muzzey calls in part a "prose poem" still appears in a political science journal, alongside reviews of professional, non-fictional historical works, and other journals such as *The American Political Science Review* and in *The Journal of Modern History* review Strachey in earnest. Such an observation not only provides insight into the transnational popularity and influence that Strachey enjoyed during the late 1910s and into the 1920s, but indicates the novelty of the New Biography.

That novelty, plus the positioning of these reviews in older political and historical journals, also indicates a willingness on the part of some contemporary readership to read Strachey's biographies as they perhaps would have Victorian biographies of great men: mining them for political guidance and insight. For example, A.G. Porritt writes of Strachey's later work *Queen Victoria*,

Nine out of ten will be attracted to Mr. Strachey's book by the glimpses of royalty at close range, and by the interesting story of the greatest queen of modern times, or indeed of any times, seen with all her limitations, and her littleness, as well as with her prestige, wealth, her glory and her happiness. But the tenth reader will find more than story-book interest in Mr. Strachey's pages. He will see

²² Muzzey, David S. "Queen Victoria." *Political Science Quarterly*. The Academy of Political Science, Vol. 37, No. 1, 1922. p. 122

the working out of opposing forces which resulted in the development of the British Constitution.²³

While it is not surprising to learn that readers who were also political scientists privileged a political reading of this New Biography, it is important to note that they did so despite acknowledging, as Porritt does, that Strachey “adds little new material to what was already available in biographies or histories.” The fact that these political scientists and historians, or at least their editors, bothered to write and publish reviews of Strachey’s work in the first place, especially given the general consensus that he contributed no original scholarship on his subjects, speaks to the seriousness with which his work was taken as a political, as well as literary, document.

Unlike the journal reviewers above, Virginia Woolf was hardly shocked by the anti-establishment ethos behind Strachey’s work. However, as a fellow writer she took issue with Lytton Strachey’s concept of biographical “brevity.” On April 17th, 1921, she writes to him concerning his second book, *Queen Victoria*, which was written in the same compressed, “selective” style as *Eminent Victorians*, to tell him that “occasionally one is a bit too conscious of being entertained.” Although the letter praises Strachey’s ability “to have reduced it to the last possible ounce,” Woolf finds that Strachey’s devotion to textual efficiency in fact makes his work *too* smooth, so much so that it becomes “a little on the surface.” Careful to balance her critique with praise for Strachey’s gifted characterization, she ultimately finds *Queen Victoria* to be “a little too luxurious

²³ Porritt, A.G. “Queen Victoria.” *American Political Science Quarterly*. American Political Science Association. Vol 15, No. 4, 1921. p. 608.

reading—I mean, one is willing perhaps to take more pains than you allow.”²⁴ Here Woolf resists writing that is produced for easy, quick consumption, arguing instead for text that requires work on the part of the reader as well. In “taking pains” with a book, a reader actively shares in the satisfaction of producing the work, rather than passively “being entertained.”

Part II: Wasteful Empire, Efficient Empire

As would be expected of someone who acknowledges the flaws of Victorian biography and yet nonetheless denies New Biography’s neat positivist narration of the history of genre, Woolf’s own “biographical” project aligns itself with neither camp. A fantasy-biography, *Orlando* is not a biting polemic. A lengthy, poetic work about a noble seventeenth-century youth named Orlando, Woolf’s book handles three hundred years of English literary and political history with largely gentle, humorous satire. In addition, *Orlando* is a novel explicitly based on the life and family history of Vita Sackville-West, a contemporary author and “confirmed Sapphist” with whom Woolf had an affair during the years leading up to the book’s publication. The resonances of queer sexuality and gender expression are made explicit in the middle of the novel, in which Orlando is magically transformed from a man to a woman. All of these events are rendered in thick, voluminous prose, a prose that is perhaps as far from Lytton Strachey’s clipped and accessible “sketches” as possible.

²⁴ *Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey: Letters*. Ed. Leonard Woolf and James Strachey. Harcourt, Brace, and Company, New York, 1956. p. 129

That Woolf eschews the structures offered by both Victorian and New Biography, both the verbose and the brief, does not reflect a purely aesthetic preference, nor does it problematize the New Biography's efficiency argument purely for the sake of pointing out its unsustainable logics. Instead, it seems that Woolf's primary compass, in seeking out an optimal construction of biography, is pointed towards a politics and economics of anti-imperialism. While this particular argument does not appear in "The New Biography," Woolf had, by the time *Orlando* was published, fully formed the linkage between the economies of Empire and the waste/efficiency binary that propped up the Stracheyan biography. I have already discussed the ways in which the move from profusion to brevity with respect to textual products (volumes, pages, words) reflects a larger cultural movement towards efficient production during the early twentieth century. In this second section, I will show how *Orlando* condemns the economic structures of British imperialism, both the Victorian-era Empire and its Modern industrialized expansion.

Woolf's political inclinations, while nuanced and shifting, were unmistakably anti-imperialist. Both she and her husband, Leonard Woolf, were engaged with local, national, and international leftist movements of the day, as much of her major non-fiction work, such as *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* suggests. Anti-imperialist thought is especially prominent, and personal, for Woolf: Virginia's husband Leonard began his career as a bureaucrat in the territory of Ceylon. Having experienced firsthand many of the injustices and absurdities of British imperial doctrine, Leonard Woolf returned to England in 1911 with an interest in alternative political and economic systems. He came into direct contact with one such system when, via Virginia's friend

Janet Case, he became acquainted with Women's Cooperative Guild Secretary Margaret Llewelyn Davies. At the time, Leonard was working as a freelance journalist; Davies's WCG was a 30,000-member strong organization, dedicated to the inclusion of women within a wider reformist Socialism.²⁵ Impressed (and also a bit intimidated) by Davies, as well as drawn to the WCG's strong anti-imperialist doctrine, Woolf began writing for the *Co-operative News*, a journal distributed to organizers and co-operative units throughout Britain.²⁶ As Leonard Woolf wrote anti-imperialist theory and non-fiction, Virginia Woolf not only contributed—she “helped Leonard research *Empire and Commerce in Africa*”—but invented ways to expand her politico-economic critique of the British Empire into fiction.²⁷

For example, the shadow of colonialism and empire looms over *Orlando* from the opening paragraph. Orlando is in his country mansion, striking at the dried head of a “Moor.” The reader is immediately initiated into a world in which it is simple fact that “Orlando's father, or perhaps his grandfather, had struck it from the shoulders of a vast Pagan [...] in the barbarian fields of Africa.” Orlando's family's wealth, it becomes clear, is predicated on the conquest of foreign lands and peoples, a conquest which Orlando “vowed” to one day join. England's violent takeover of other states is often conflated, textually, with decadence and wealth, heavily imply that such conquest is profit motivated: “Great statesmen, in their beards and ruffs, dispatched affairs of state under the crimson awning of the Royal Pagoda. Soldiers planned the conquest of the Moor and

²⁵ Wilson, Duncan. *Leonard Woolf: A Political Biography*. Hogarth Press, London, 1978. p. 49

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ Froula, Christine. *Virginia Woolf and the Avant-Garde: War, Civilization, Modernity*. Columbia University Press, New York, 2007. p.31

the downfall of the Turk in striped arbours surmounted by plumes of ostrich feathers...Frozen roses fell in showers when the Queen and her ladies walked abroad.”²⁸

However, after Orlando’s transformation into a woman, she begins to see such attainment of wealth at the expense of non-English people from the point of view of an “other.” She finds that, “looked at from the gipsy point of view, a Duke [...]was nothing but a profiteer or robber who snatched land and money from people who rated these things of little worth, and could think of nothing better to do than build three hundred and sixty-five bedrooms when one was enough...”²⁹ Although a playful jab at Vita Sackville-West’s family estate, Knole, this line nonetheless functions as clear critique of the exploitative nature of British imperial hierarchy generally. This critical realization is short-lived, but only, it seems, because Orlando “sought to answer such arguments by the familiar if oblique method of finding the Gipsy life itself rude and barbarous,” itself a further avenue for Woolf to expose how the intersections of racism, profit-motive, and Empire affect individual subjectivity. In order to work through the fact that her economic privilege has been delivered by colonial exploitation, Orlando has to internally construct a racist narrative, to imagine her Gipsy acquaintances not as people but as the shrunken head of her youth.³⁰ She leaves the gipsies, then, because she wants to live in a place where there *is* “respect for a multiplicity of bedrooms,” reasserting her now-vulnerable desire to benefit from an imperial state. But the severance has occurred: the violent economic machinations of the British Empire continue to be critiqued as the novel progresses, although in a more tangential, less overt, fashion.

²⁸ Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 35

²⁹ Woolf, *Orlando*, p.148

³⁰ Woolf switches between capitalizing and not capitalizing “Gipsy,” and I haven’t been able to discern the pattern.

For Woolf's Empire is not just a tangible, economic reality—it also establishes the boundaries of an aesthetic period. *Orlando* draws implicit connection between proliferation of material goods and the expansion of text. As the Victorian Age arises, Woolf notes that,

...coffee led to a drawing room in which to drink it, and a drawing-room to glass cases, and glass cases to artificial flowers, and artificial flowers to mantelpieces, and mantelpieces to pianofortes, and pianofortes to drawing-room ballads, and drawing-room ballads (skipping a stage or two) to innumerable little dogs, mats, and antimacassars...³¹

Woolf's description of the "unparalleled profusion" of the age links to her description of Victorian textual economy. It is because of the explosion of growth in goods that text, likewise, expands, but with an *imperial center*:

Thus the British Empire came into existence; and thus...it gets into the inkpot as it gets into the woodwork—sentences swelled, adjectives multiplied, lyrics became epics, and little trifles that had been essay a column long were now encyclopaedias in ten and twenty volumes.³²

³¹ Woolf, *Orlando*, p.228

³² Woolf, *Orlando*, pp. 229-230

These two passages utilize a similar additive strategy, a piling-on of clauses to mimic the abundance of goods/words. This mirroring is designed to link the two passages, together constructing an argument that the economic/material culture of a time period is not separate from the literary form used during it.

Woolf is clearly critical of this Imperial Victorian culture of excess—for proof, one must look no further than her line about the effect of Empire economies on females, in which she states that during this time, “the life of the average woman was a succession of childbirths.”³³ Here, once again, Woolf presents a waste/efficiency dilemma. Victorian textual excess, in this passage, is rendered as complicit with imperial, outdated, and anti-feminist ideas. However, Woolf *herself* utilizes this problematic, voluptuous writing style in *Orlando*. Furthermore, she does so, not just during the “Victorian” section of the novel, but throughout the text. For example, this too-long sentence from “the present moment” section of the biography mimics the listing of goods from the birth of the Empire, yet in a modern milieu:

Vast blue blocks of building rose into the air; the red cowls of chimneys were spotted irregularly across the sky; the road shone like silver-headed nails; omnibuses bored down upon her with sculptured white-faced drivers; she noticed sponges, bird-cages, boxes of green American cloth.³⁴

I’d like to suggest that the key to unraveling the apparent contradiction between Woolf’s economic critiques of Victorian-era Empire and her seemingly enthusiastic engagement

³³ Woolf, *Orlando*, 229.

³⁴ Woolf, *Orlando*, 299.

of a literary style that is intertwined with it lies in her lukewarm relationship with *modern* capitalist and imperial doctrines. Writing just ten years after the slaughter of the Great War, Virginia Woolf was skeptical of claims that modernization, even in its unarmed, literary form, was an unmitigated good. Claims to efficiency in literature, in addition to ultimately resulting in an inability to record anything at all, sometimes reflected a doctrine of stricture and compression that was in fact more restrictive than libratory. For example, recall Ezra Pound's efficient Imagism, which was indelibly intertwined with his anti-democratic politics: for Pound, a poet's tight and total control of highly-wrought phrases is not just analogous to, but actually constitutive of, a strong, powerful ruler's control of a unified state.³⁵

Of course, Strachey is hardly Pound; *Eminent Victorians* is highly critical of the imperial system. His stinging portrayal of imperial Victorian "hero" General Gordon leaves little room for a glorious British Empire: he is described, not as a stern warrior, but as a media-ready persona with "his facile speech and his free-and-easy manners."³⁶ Of course, the imperial mission that Gordon was sent to do—prevent the fall of Khartoum to African resistance—was a massive failure, and "Gordon himself, so far from having effected the evacuation of the Sudan, was surrounded by the enemy."³⁷ Given this evidence, in conjunction with Strachey's association with pacifist and leftist causes (not to mention the ways in which his homosexuality cemented him as a marginalized figure

³⁵ Coats, Jason M. "'Part of the war waste': Pound, imagism, and rhetorical excess." *Twentieth-Century Literature*, Hofstra University, 2009.

³⁶ Strachey, Lytton. *Eminent Victorians*. Modern Library, New York. 1918. p.285

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.304.

within both Victorian *and* Modern constructions of a productive state), it would be absurd to imply the Strachey is intentionally complicit with imperialism.

However, despite the fact that Strachey and Woolf both agree, in theory, that the Victorian colonial system is deserving of criticism, Woolf is more in tune with the ways that reading is a type of labor, that readers' subjectivities exist within and respond to the economic system in which they live, and how aesthetic representations and textual economies mirror and constitute those economic systems. In other words, Strachey's anti-imperialism is in content only, whereas Woolf sees an importance to reflecting it in the form of her work as well. Although it is true, as Jennifer Wicke argues, that "neither art nor economics can be separated out... or given an artificial primacy as instigator or reflector,"³⁸ the textual and political marketplaces that exist inside and outside *Orlando* structure its form as an inefficient, yet still not wasteful, biography.

Thus Woolf's decision to write *Orlando* in an un-Stracheyian mode was in part a textual manifestation of this economic critique. In writing *Orlando* like a *pre-Modern* biography, she subtextually espouses an economic policy of her own: one that relishes in the unparalleled profusion of material/textual "goods" but could continue without necessitating sustenance in the form of British imperial "profiteering" and "robbery." Additionally, Woolf argues for a literary mode that engages with the consumers of the text, which requires them to expend (input) mental effort to create the effects of the text rather than simply be told what to think and enjoy. These aesthetic principles—allowing for some forms of multiplicity and excess and desiring work on the part of the reader—dovetail with the doctrines of the Co-operative Societies in which both Virginia Woolf

³⁸ Wicke, Jennifer. "“Mrs. Dalloway” Goes to Market: Woolf, Keynes, and Modern Markets." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 1994. p. 12

and her husband Leonard were active in the years leading up to the publication of *Orlando*.

Part III: The Woolfs and Co-Operation

In order to explore how Co-operative principles inform *Orlando*, it is necessary to outline the tenets of this economic system, as well as to examine the Woolfs' own direct involvement in it.

Co-operative Economics, in the form espoused in Leonard Woolf's writing, is a response to the pitfalls of industrialized capitalism that strives to avoid the violence and futility of revolutionary socialist doctrine. Inspired by the Bolshevik revolution, many left-leaning thinkers in England were imagining a similar workers' overthrow of capital ownership and a redistribution of wealth. Woolf, however, saw this as a destructive, violent method with too many uncertain outcomes: in other words, too similar to the Great War itself. Additionally, Woolf was skeptical that new owners, even owners who were also committed Socialists, would be able to avoid the temptation to consolidate their power and industrial control. Instead, he argues that the biggest concern in contemplating economic reform is not who controls the means of production, whether it is individual business owners or people's collectives. For Leonard, the problem is the assumption that producers are the drivers of market forces in the first place. He argues in his *Co-operation and the Future of Industry* that there will be more consumers in any given society than producers, since all producers must also be consumers of something. Thus, assuming that the aim of an increasingly liberal modernity is to put power in the hands of

as many people as possible, it stands to reason that *consumers* must become the power-centers of a truly democratic economy. Unlike a capitalist economy, in which a single factory owner may control the ability of an entire population to buy the products they truly desire, or a socialist economy, in which representatives of a state agency may do exactly the same thing, a co-operative, consumer-driven economy holds that there can be no factory in the first place without potential buyers getting together and deciding what they'd like made there.

Although shifting the power centers of markets from producers to consumers may not, at first, seem to be a dramatic reversal of economic norms, such reorganization actually demands a total defamiliarizing of the basic structures of industrial production. Perhaps the greatest aspect of “normal” industry with which Woolf takes issue is the claim, central to the founding texts of market capitalism, that economies depend on both supply *and* demand, with the demand obviously originating in the consumer. Woolf, however, believes this optimistic balancing-act of product-availability and product-desire to be a wholly unrealistic portrayal of the reality of industrial production. Instead, Woolf focuses on the very real power of the factory-owner to determine the type and number of any factory-produced object, a choice in which the actual demand of a consumer for a *specific* product is irrelevant. To Woolf it is irrational that the person who determines the specifications of the product is neither “the man who makes [products] in the factory” nor the person “who buys and uses the [products].³⁹” Where is the logic in such a system? Why do the people who actually physically handle and utilize a commodity have less input into the final product than investors who may never have visited the factory?

³⁹ Woolf, Leonard. *Co-operation and the Future of Industry*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1919.

Woolf sees a producer-driven industrial economy as an anti-democratic absurdity, a world in which no mere consumer can ever truly have the type of product he would really desire. Instead, owners and investors (or, in revolutionary Socialism, people's governing bodies) make a set of generalizations and guesses about what individual consumers might possibly want. Such guesses, since they do not actually receive direct input from those for whom the products are made, are at best an appeal to the broadest possible customer base, and at worst a completely top-down decision based on whatever design the producer wants to impose. A group of consumers may have some say in determining the long-term availability of these products (for example, by generally buying more blue boots than red boots, a consumer group may persuade a rational business owner to produce more and more blue), but is still dependent on the initial will of others, of a detached set of producers, to offer up red and blue as the choices for boots in the first place. It is for this reason that Leonard Woolf argues that producer-driven economies only allow buyers to want "what the capitalist makes him think he wants;" without any way of influencing the means of production, the average consumer can only choose between a limited, and perhaps arbitrary, set of options. Even a consumer who imagines, or even designs and gathers material for, a pair of yellow boots, may never own a pair; the factory owner could simply decide to not grant that particular designer access to the machinery needed to make them. Over time, posits Woolf, consumers become accustomed to having their desires stymied and determined for them and, so often repeatedly denied decision-making economic power, eventually stop imagining other options altogether. This sort of economic system, in which the product-desires of the majority are always dictated by (and eventually wholly subjugated to) a distant and

powerful minority, is to Leonard Woolf anathema to all of the ideals of a modern democratic state. Only in a world in which consumers can imagine themselves as sites of economic power can individuals wield the necessary political agency to resist tyrannical government. In the wake of World War One, such analogues to anti-authoritarian rhetoric were especially potent, and comprise perhaps the most crucial piece of Woolf's economic theory: the inevitable imperialist leanings of producer-driven economies.

Perhaps an even more crucial aspect of a producer-driven system is that not only is the type of product arbitrarily decided by a few indirect agents, but they also decide the number of products that are made—a fact that, according to Leonard Woolf's critiques of non-Co-operative economies, ultimately results in a constant need for "expansion" to new markets. In a highly developed industrial factory system, the owners of a factory can only guess at the number of people in a given community who are willing to purchase a new product. At the same time, mass-production methods such as assembly lines have become, by the time Woolf writes *Co-operation and the Future of Industry* in 1919, exceedingly efficient, allowing factories to churn out huge numbers of items per day. Thanks to the advancements of "production science" such as Taylorism, factories were able to easily produce more items than there were customers willing to buy them.⁴⁰ The market then becomes flooded, and thus each individual item loses its value, which in turn dramatically decreases the capitalist's profit margin—unless, of course, a producer is able to find new customers, living outside the regions whose citizens whose desires have already been fulfilled, who are thus willing to pay full price. This simple mechanism, of expanding into new market "territory" so that a business owner may shed excess goods without having to cut prices, is what Vladimir Lenin recognized as the "highest stage of

⁴⁰ Woolf, Leonard. *Co-operation and the Future of Industry*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1919.

capitalism,” the inevitable outcome of the twin doctrines of streamlining mass-production and needing to maintain inflated prices.⁴¹ This “highest stage” is, of course, imperialism, a doctrine that depends upon expanding into new economic arenas in order to stay competitive, upon businesses being able to find a place for excess products without having to sacrifice the illusion of scarcity that creates high item cost and therefore big profits.

By 1914, the intimate connection between authoritarian political and social systems and economic imperialism had reached what many contemporary British leftists, Woolf included, would consider the natural telos of capitalist violence: The Great War. The violence and destruction doled out by this war was, to both Woolfs, an inexcusable loss. Leonard’s interest in Co-operative societies swelled as he was simultaneously repulsed by the bellicose rhetoric of post-war revolutionary Socialism. Co-operative economics, it seemed, could offer a non-violent solution to many of the problems that led to the war in the first place.

Co-operative economies function on three basic principles. Firstly, in Co-operation economic decision-making power must belong primarily to the *consumer*, not the capitalist owner. Secondly, economies must be reimagined by people’s *desire* for certain products, not a simple matter of owner-dictated availability and cost. Thirdly, no goods are produced that are *undesired*, thus eliminating the necessity of expanding markets for excess products. In a Co-operative economy system, members of a co-operative unit collectively decide on the number and type of a certain product they desire, pool their money, and fund the manufacture of that product. That fixed number of goods

⁴¹ Lenin, Vladimir. *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Foreign Language Publishing House, 1920.

is then sold back to the community that initially commissioned it; any remaining profit is either equally redistributed to the consumers or invested for a community-driven public project.

It is important to note that Co-operative societies are *not* attempting to create a world with a narrower variety or, even really significantly higher quality, of products. In fact, Leonard Woolf clarifies that “a great many of the products of co-operative industry do not differ materially in quality from those of non-cooperative industry...if middle-class people became the co-operators, the stores would also supply goods to meet their demands.”⁴² Co-operation merely argues that, as long as everyone within a certain society actually wants the products and has the means of purchasing them, those products should be made. Production can still occur *en masse*, in factories, using mechanized systems of labor. Such a system, in which value is determined on a micro-level based on the desires of a few individuals, actually, as Jennifer Wicke suggests, allows for investment in the production of items that society at large would otherwise deem “valueless.” The fact that the products themselves do not undergo a radical improvement of kind or quality reveals that Co-operative economics must lead one to ask the question: what tangible impact would Co-operation actually have on a society?

Although Leonard Woolf’s writing begins to answer this question, it is Virginia who fully conceptualizes a Co-operative social world. Leonard’s argument focuses on the macro-level political reorganization that the reversal of power from producers to consumers would constitute. However, even he admits that, by and large, this democratization has already occurred, at least with the decline of monarchy and empire

⁴² Woolf, Leonard. *Co-operation and the Future of Industry*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1919. p. 98

after the war. Thus Leonard's social writing is limited to broad generalizations about empowered consumers and anti-imperialist outcomes. Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, uses her fictional work to explore the ordinary, social implications of Co-operative systems.

Part IV: Co-Operation and *Orlando*

In her novel *Orlando*, Woolf applies the three broadest principles of Co-operation—a reversal of decision-making power from producer to consumer, a system driven by expressed desire rather than top-down coercion, and a dedication to producing only that which already has a built-in buyer—and ends up producing a novel that is dependent upon the input of one of its primary consumers, intensely eroticized and pleasure-driven, and intended to be consumed by a specific audience.

Analyzing *Orlando* with Co-operative principles in mind solves the “problem” of why the novel is written in a faux-Victorian style, despite Woolf's clear criticism of the “ten and twenty volumes” and the excessive production of goods and the subjection of women that were the result of Empire economics. While Woolf *is* clearly satirizing Victorian biography in her novel, she is also using the overblown Victorian “biographer”-narrator and hagiographic style for the express purpose of undermining the popular dominance of the contemporary, efficient, Stracheyan “debunking” biography. *Orlando* is full of “bunk,” as it were, but it is “bunk” that is desired, that is meaningful, that was (as we shall see) added for the purpose of pleasing the novel's primary consumers. *Orlando* offers a Co-operative alternative to Lytton's modern, skeletal, factory-like text; one in

which “proliferation” and excess and inefficiency are all excusable, even positive, as long as the products are guaranteed to be consumed.

Co-operative principles, however, do more than just offer *Orlando* a way to escape from the limiting binary of dull Victorian “two fat volume” biography and too-delightful Modern “brevity.” They also form a sort of unspoken *telos* to structure Orlando’s unending life. Whereas the traditional life cycle of a biography runs from birth to death, Woolf structures *Orlando* to move from less to more Co-operative, mirroring a move that, one must assume, Virginia Woolf wishes the industrialized world would make. This is perhaps most clear in context of Orlando’s intimate relationships.

Shortly after he is first introduced, Orlando finds himself engaged in a lavish yet pleasure-less sexual congress. When Orlando first meets the Queen, she sees of him only his head, and he sees only her hand, yet these two body parts function as synecdoche for the dynamic of sexual and monetary exchange that will soon be established between them. Queen Elizabeth’s expressions of desire for Orlando take the form, initially, of “gifts” of titles and wealth, beginning with the gesture by which the Queen “made over formally, putting her hand and seal finally to the parchment, the gift of the great monastic house that had been the Archbishop’s and then the King’s to Orlando’s father.”⁴³ She next gives the youth a jewel signifying his entrance into knighthood and the aptly-named “chains of office,” after which the biographer states that “nothing... was denied him.” This statement of absolute freedom, however, is soon revealed to be Woolf’s ironic joke. Orlando’s biographer tells us that when the Queen “rode in state he rode at her carriage door,” indicating that Orlando was obliged to relinquish his individual freedom in order to be an accessory at court. His position of favor with the Queen even forces Orlando to

⁴³ Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando*. Harcourt, New York, 1928. p. 23.

break his childhood vow to ride in foreign battle like his fathers and grandfathers, for “he was about to sail for the Polish wars when she recalled him.”⁴⁴ In accepting material wealth and social privilege, Orlando has unwittingly handed over his personal freedom in return. That fact that Orlando would rather have been a soldier in Poland than a decorated member of the English court in the first place is a clear indication, despite the biographer’s mock respect for the royal relationship, that he found the Queen’s material attention oppressive rather than liberating.

The Queen’s oppressive behavior, however, is not simply an economic exchange. Orlando’s freedom is constrained by the Queen’s erotic aims: he must refrain from war not just because he is a decorated aspect of the court, but also because she could not “bear to think of that tender flesh torn and that curly head rolled in the dust...she kept him with her.” Orlando’s casual consumption of social and economic luxuries “requires” eventual payment in the form of physical intimacy. Although Orlando, “half suffocated from the embrace,” tries to resist, the Queen, in celebration of a military victory, “pulled him down among the cushions...and made him bury his face” in her bosom.⁴⁵ The grotesque amalgamation of imperial power, unwanted sex, and the paraphernalia of excessive wealth and class privilege — for the Queen rested “among the cushions where her women had laid her”—is the first of Orlando’s sexual experiences that “the biographer” can record. This is the reader’s first contact with Orlando as a sexual being, despite the fact that he is not “innocent” at the time of this encounter; it therefore acts as the starting point of Orlando’s journey towards fulfilling, co-operative interactions.

⁴⁴ Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando*. p. 25.

⁴⁵ *ibid*

Of course, the confluence of sexual violence and economic exchange is complicated by Woolf's reversal of the traditional male-aggressor/female-victim narrative. Here, state power is figured as *feminine*, an inversion of the typical significations of patriarchal power that Woolf herself so often employs. On one hand, however, this is hardly surprising in the context of a novel that is partially about reversing and destabilizing gender. On the other hand, I would argue that this gender reversal serves as a way to denaturalize the entire structure of sexual coercion. By centering the sexual threat on a male body, Woolf is explicitly calling attention to how unfamiliar this role-reversal seems to a reader. Ultimately, this denial of reader expectations calls attention, by its absence, to the usual *naturalized* system of women's oppression within an imperial order. The basic point is the same whether or not Orlando yet appears as a woman: by portraying this coercive interpersonal relationship, Woolf sarcastically indicts the state as an instrument of sexualized oppression. However, *Orlando* is a novel that explicitly employs gender switch in order to reveal social inequalities that face women in a patriarchal, capitalist culture; opening with a female perpetrator of sexual and economic blackmail begs a reader to find it grotesque, or strange, thus challenging him or her to question whether or not such an arrangement is as disgusting when the perpetrator is a male/ the male state.

Such a radical, feminist argument invokes the Women's Co-operative Guild, a feminist socialist society that Leonard Woolf called "the grassroots of Labour politics."⁴⁶ Virginia and Leonard Woolf became involved with the Guild branch in Rodmell in the early 1910s, around the time that Virginia was working on her first novel, and remained

⁴⁶ Berman, Jessica Schiff. "Splinter and Mosaic: Towards the Politics of Connection." *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of Community*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. p.116

so through the 1930s.⁴⁷ The WCG's model was based on the assertion that the combination of cooperative labor and feminist politics represented Co-operative's Movements ideal form, since as Jessica Schiff Berman argues, it was "because women were perceived to control their families' consumption [that] they became central to the Co-operative Movement and vitally important actors for social change."⁴⁸ The Women's Co-operative Guild argued that economic inequality and gender inequality were intertwined, and thus sought to collectivize under a loosely-associated anti-war, anti-imperialist, pro-equality "platform." Although the influence of this political/economic organization would be most evident in *Three Guineas*, not published until ten years after *Orlando*, the subtextual argument that Orlando must not only resist bad lovers, but also oppressive political and economic systems, in order to build a Co-operative relationship, resonates with the ideologies of the WCG.

Orlando does finally find a Co-operative relationship with Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, her final love relationship. As antithetical as it could be to the bizarre, coercive relationship that he had to carry on with the Queen, the partnership into which Orlando settles is one of genuine desire and mutual cooperation. Orlando's marriage to "Shel," despite its apparent normativity, actually constitutes a revision of Victorian marital norms. Her initial resistance to narrowing her relationships to one person already indicates a social rebellion: Orlando characterized her decision to get married as one to "yield completely and submissively to the spirit of the age."⁴⁹ Despite her unwillingness to "be mated," Victorian social conventions do not allow Orlando to continue to be the

⁴⁷ Glendinning, Victoria. *Leonard Woolf: A Biography*. Free Press, New York, 2008. p.146

⁴⁸ Berman, p. 130

⁴⁹ Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 243

“mistress of it all,” as she describes herself.⁵⁰ The nineteenth century in which Orlando finds herself has no job for a single female. As Joan Burbick puts it: “In the economic language of sexual frugality, the unmarried woman represented a puzzling, if not disturbing, cultural fact.”⁵¹

However, as the book speeds towards “the present moment,” the essential social change that Woolf believes allows for the possibility of equal economic and erotic partnerships occurs. In the early days of Orlando and Shel’s engagement and marriage, two crucial events occur. Firstly, Orlando becomes, in Woolf’s oxymoronic turn of phrase, “excessively poor,” an event which prevents any connection between her and Shel from being blemished by economic coercion. When Orlando and her lover hold equal economic status, neither of them can exert the power of owed wealth over the other. Secondly, when Shel and Orlando marry “there was a clap of thunder, so that no one heard the word Obey spoken.”⁵² Woolf situates this couple as the “solution” to coercive, economically exploitative relationships.

However, a systematic reconstitution of both social and economic possibility is necessary to make Orlando and Shel’s new form of “marriage” a legible one. While it does not reject the *word* “marriage,” their relationship cannot be described within the normative bounds of frugal, state-sanctioned marriage and productive family units. While still living in the Victorian era, Orlando questioned, “...if one’s husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 246

⁵¹ Burbick, Joan. “Emily Dickenson and the Economics of Desire.” *American Literature*, Vol. 58, No. 3. Duke University Press, 1986. p. 362.

⁵² Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 262.

whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts.”⁵³ Before Orlando finds herself in the twentieth century, her lack of conformity to the social values and economic meanings of Victorian marriage causes her significant worry: if love “is a woman’s whole existence” in that time, is Orlando to conceive of herself as “one of those monsters of iniquity who do not love?”⁵⁴ Orlando’s non-normative relationship is, in an age before the invention of a Co-operative ethos, unwritable: Woolf (as the biographer) writes that, while she cannot love in a Victorian-approved fashion, “she is no better than a corpse.”⁵⁵

However, in the modern era, cooperative, consumer-centered economics offers a reevaluation of the social norms that threaten to constrict Orlando’s non-traditional relationship. Here, the work of prominent modern economist and Bloomsbury friend John Maynard Keynes may prove instructive. Keynes’ economic treatise *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, which upended classical economics by arguing that consumption, not competition, is the primary force behind modern markets, is considered a canonical work of practical macroeconomics. What is most useful for the purposes of this analysis, however, is that Keynes himself gives his own theory of economic consumption an affective, or what he deems “subjective,” nature: he associates consumption with the human characteristics of “Enjoyment, Shortsightedness, Generosity, Miscalculation, Ostentation, and Extravagance,” as opposed to the principles of “Precaution, Foresight, Calculation, Improvement, Independence, Enterprise, Pride, and Avarice” that mark non-consumption, or saving.⁵⁶ Keynes’ strategy is to illustrate

⁵³ Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 264.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 246

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 269

⁵⁶ Keynes, John Maynard. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, 1936. p. 97

why his readers may find his advancement of spending beyond one's immediate needs to be initially repulsive; Victorian social norms essentially mandate that one consider consumption to be a perverse "extravagance." In urging readers to think critically about their potential opposition to his theories by exposing and reversing their expectations, Keynes performs a Wildean moral reversal. Like Oscar Wilde, Keynes exposes the illogic of Victorian social norms by arguing that the most productive, economically solvent, and thus "prudent" plan is levels of consumption that would seem at first to be most "imprudent." As Jonathan Dollimore points out, "inversion as a strategy of cultural struggle...already constitutes a displacement, if not of the binary itself, then certainly of the political and moral norms which cluster dependently around its dominant pole."⁵⁷ Theorizing a new, consumer-based economics thus displaces the moral system that Keynes situates at the heart of a frugal, produce-and-save Victorian capitalism, a moral system that inherently privileged the limited exercise of procreative sexual power. New possibilities, in life and in text, became legible once pleasure supplanted precaution in the economic matrix.

It is only within this shifting norm that Orlando can marry Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine and complete the novel's search for the perfect cooperative relationship. Michael Tratner argues that, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, "Woolf is trying to find a way to allow for pleasure, but finds that pleasure is so tied up with luxury, with excess, that it is difficult to recognize the value of pleasure, its role in the development of the human

⁵⁷Dollimore, Johnathan. "Different Desires: Subjectivity and Transgression in Wilde and Gide," *The Lesbian and gay studies reader*. Ed. Abelove, Henry, Michèle Aina Barale, David M. Hallerpin. Routledge, New York, 1993. p. 635

senses.”⁵⁸ In *Orlando*, Woolf shows that pleasure is not tied up in luxury as it is tied up in choice, in agency, in refusing to submit to any socio-economic system except a Co-operative, consumer-based model that gives women agency and finds extravagance “productive.” The Women’s Co-operative Guild would approve of Orlando’s marriage to Shel, since Orlando is still driven by the fulfillment of “natural desire, whether it is what the male novelist says it is.”⁵⁹ Keynesian and Co-operative economic strategies ensure that Orlando’s “natural desire” is given primacy within a marketplace run by consumer choice. Thus Orlando can choose the products she buys, the man she marries, and the type of marriage (even one where her husband is “always sailing round the Cape Horn” and no one heard the word “Obey”) that she desires.

Of course, this non-normative, yet Co-operative, sexual desire within the text may signal the knowing reader to the relationship that birthed the novel in the first place. The Co-operative loosening of the mores of intimacy as written into the biography may offer another way to read the relationship of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf vis-à-vis the creation of *Orlando*. Although *Orlando* could not be considered a case of mutual authorship, the book was undoubtedly the product of close communication between Virginia Woolf and her intimate friend and lover Vita Sackville-West. Woolf does not even begin the project before asking permission from Vita: she writes, “*If agreeable to you I would like to toss this up in the air and see what happens.*”⁶⁰ In 1927, when the novel was barely underway, Woolf wrote to Sackville-West, “In fact, I have never more wanted to see you than I do now—just to sit and look at you, and get you to talk, and then

⁵⁸ Tratner, Michael. *Deficits and Desires: Economics and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Literature*. Stanford University Press, 2001. p. 103

⁵⁹ Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 295.

⁶⁰ 9 Oct. 1927, *Letters* 3, p. 427-9, emphasis mine

rapidly and secretly, correct certain doubtful points...⁶¹ Although Sackville-West was not permitted to see to final product until it was published, the two women were in regular communication about the novel as it was being written. Just as a product in a Co-operative-owned factory would be created with a specific consumer already willing to purchase it, *Orlando* becomes a product that Woolf produces specifically with Vita in mind.

In forming a textual partnership, Woolf reverses Strachey's "efficient" biography, a method which, as "The New Biography" argues, must operate upon subjects who cannot complain of being oversimplified or reduced—not least because they are dead. Instead, Woolf takes the opposite tactic; instead of sifting and dissecting her subjects, transforming them from their Victorian heroic status into compact, easily consumable products, she chooses to expand and elaborate her subject's life. She introduces fantastical occurrences such as Orlando's change of sex, constructs elaborate set pieces for the atmosphere and authors of almost four centuries of literary history, and even increases her subject's life tenfold from thirty-six years to about three hundred and sixty.

The fantasy elements of the text liberated Woolf from one of the restrictive power dynamics that heretofore seemed inherent in the genre: the power of the life of the subject to determine what a biographer may write. In this additive, collective process, Woolf eschews not only textual efficiency but its imperial undertones: Vita Sackville-West, as written by Woolf as Orlando, becomes a much more complex, difficult-to-consume product, but one that is created out of on pleasure.

⁶¹ Letters 14 Oct. 1927, qtd in Sproles, Karyn Z. *Desiring Women: The Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2006. p. 158.

Orlando is a project that necessitated cooperation: Woolf's expansive, hyper-productive life-writing method could not have been sustainable without both a research partner and a built-in audience, an assistant producer and a guaranteed consumer. Sackville-West gave Woolf access to a vast amount of family history and lore, and even invited her to visit her ancestral home at Knole to take pictures for "Orlando's" photographs. Sackville-West's active role as the subject of the novel/biography made her more invested in the text and its well-being; on January 6, 1928, Vita writes, "My fingers itch to suggest that you should come down for a night...It would be very good for Orlando, (say I tentatively)..."⁶² Within the context of Vita and Virginia's erotic, as well as textual, partnership, this letter takes on a double meaning: upon learning that Virginia planned *Orlando* to be based upon her life, Vita adopted the nickname. The finger-itching suggestion that Virginia staying the night "would be very good for Orlando" is both an offer for a writing space as well as a not-so-subtle erotic gesture. The dual meaning of "Orlando" in this seductive letter, as in others from late 1927-early 1928, implies an intimacy of both author and subject to text that re-imagines the biography. *Orlando* is not the post-mortem paring down to "meat and bone and guts" that Woolf saw in Strachey's method, but rather a growth product, a love child.⁶³

The intimacy between Woolf and Sackville-West did not just facilitate the exchange of the raw materials like historical data and photographs. Although the editor of Vita's letters to Virginia notes that Vita was "not allowed to read a word" of *Orlando* until it was available to the general public, the letters themselves indicate that, at least for a time, there existed a close system of communication and influence, even down to

⁶² *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell A. Leaska. William Morrow and Company, New York, 1985. p. 249

⁶³ *The Letters of Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf*. Hogarth Press, 1958. p. 129.

individual plot points in the work. For example, on February 28, Vita writes to Virginia from Berlin to tell her that “Harold now says he wants to be an Ambassador—but can you see your poor Vita as an ambassadress? I can’t—and the prospect fills me with dismay.”⁶⁴ A letter three weeks later reveals that Woolf had told Vita about the section of *Orlando* in which Vita, as the titular character, holds diplomatic office. In return, Vita reiterates her desire to *not* be “an Excellency:” “I feel that the next person who kisses my hand will get his face smacked.”⁶⁵ In the finished novel, Orlando’s transformation into a woman (or revelation as a woman) coincides with the absolute end of her ambassadorial career. Amidst the diplomatic meltdown of Orlando’s ambassadorship, Orlando “carefully examined the papers on the table; took such as seemed to be written in poetry, and secreted them in her bosom.”⁶⁶ The gesture is clear: Orlando wholesale abandons the affairs of state in favor of art. Therefore “Poor Vita,” true to her request, “can’t” be an ambassadress, at least not once she assumes her “true” female form in the novel; Woolf makes sure of it. Thus Vita, as the consumer of the text, defined the terms under which the text was produced; a genuinely Co-operative strategy. Woolf both eliminates the power of the biographer to define the life of the subject as well as that of the subject to define the writing of the biographer. In doing so, she devises a new biographical form that neither includes undesired, wasteful material nor undersells the subject by eliminating too much. Jennifer Wicke identifies a collective, cooperative economics, formulated as “the market,” as a guiding “aesthetic phenomenon” in *Mrs. Dalloway*.⁶⁷ If there is a similar aesthetic phenomenon in *Orlando*, it is the constant resistance to settling

⁶⁴ *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, p. 259

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 263

⁶⁶ Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando*. Harcourt, Brace, and Co. New York, 1928. pp. 139-140

⁶⁷ Wicke, p. 12.

for either “wasteful” or “efficient” relationships and instead insisting upon Co-operative ideals as often as possible. *Orlando*, from its erotic, collaborative inception to the reimagined marriage partnership at the conclusion, finds a middle path between the cult of imperial excess and capitalist efficiency.

To return here to my starting point: the “middle path” that *Orlando* forges more closely resembles, in form, a long, rapturous Victorian biography than a concise, biting New one. However, the ultimate position on biographical composition is critical of *both* interpretations of the genre, and the underlying ideologies of each. The biographer-narrator of the book, for example, uses unabashedly Victorian diction (duty, “truth,” nature imagery, the formal Latin ending) all the while arguing, as did Strachey in *Eminent Victorians*, that his/her duty is straightforward:

The biography 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 fulfil [sic] the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads. (65)

The stated emphasis on avoiding digression, and “flowers” (which here, within the extended metaphor, also signify florid prose) is quite in line with a biographical strategy that wishes to eliminate “bunk.” Of course, the passage itself is too long for a truly

concise summation of the thought (does a reader need to be reassured that a biographer will be *both* “unenticed by flowers” and “regardless of shade” in order to get the general idea of one recording only the “truth?”); it is, in the Moderns’ negative connotation, a Victorian-sounding passage. Here, the florid/Victorian and the slim/Modern are hardly a binary: instead, the “biographer” seems to have a double consciousness, both old and New.

For example, Woolf’s biographer ambiguously discusses the relationship between the reader and excision in the following passage. On one hand, the biographer is stating that a good reader can handle a very pared-down style by supplying the added facts him/herself. On the other hand, the facts that he implies the reader can imagine himself are not only things that are, of course, being said in the passage itself, but are also things that are so general that they could be assumed about *any* human being.

For though these are not matters on which a biographer can profitably enlarge it is plain enough to those who have done a reader’s part in making up from bare hints dropped here and there the whole boundary and circumference of a living person; can hear in what we only whisper a living voice; can see, often when we say nothing about it, exactly what he looked like, and know without a word to guide them precisely what he thought and felt and it is for readers such as these alone that we write—it is plain then to such a reader that Orlando was strangely compounded of many humours—of melancholy, of indolence, of passion, of love of solitude, to say nothing of all those contortions and subtleties of temper which were indicated on the first page, when he slash at a dead nigger’s head; cut it

down; hung it chivalrously out of his reach again and then betook himself to the window-seat with a book.⁶⁸

The voice of the biographer, then, embodies not only a certain presumed Victorian excess, but also uses that vantage point to expose the fact that the New Biography's answers to that excess are so oversimplified as to be valueless. Really, argues Woolf, there is no way to make a truly pared-down biography, no way to take out all of the "bunk," since that "bunk" is the very stuff that creates personalizing details, that makes humans individual. Otherwise, all that is left is the assumption that a biographical subject will be "compounded of many humours:" who isn't?

Woolf argues that, in a biography, a certain profusion of words, of digression, of detail, is not a Victorian vice, but a textual necessity. Re-reading *Orlando* through the lens of Co-operative principles—specifically: the role of desire/consumption, the collaborative ethos, the allowance for aesthetic models of profusion and florid prose—allows a conceptual framework for examining the position of Woolf's fantasy novel vis-à-vis New Biography. *Orlando* is not a "wasteful" Victorian text—it cannot be, without implicating *itself* in the creation of the British Empire, with its traditional patterns of gender domination and imperial subjection—but neither is it a streamlined, efficient Modern text, which would place it on the same capitalist, commodified shelf as *Eminent Victorians*. Instead, Woolf constructs a text that is a hybrid, not just of biography and fiction, but also of two hypothetically oppositional time periods. Utilizing Co-operative principles, Woolf finds a way to safely allow the "excessive" language of the Victorian era into the literary marketplace, while guaranteeing that it has a built-in consumer.

⁶⁸ Woolf, *Orlando*, p.73

Ultimately, Woolf's primary satirical target in *Orlando* is neither Victorian biography nor New Biography. Instead, the text aims at whatever textual strategies might be found complicit in imperialism, war, and gender oppression—whether that means excessive language with no “consumer” or pared-down, too-thin lines. Co-operative principles, which allow for the best in Victorian and New biographical aesthetics, offer a way out of a waste/efficiency binary that is ultimately the most productive. Thus, in *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf constructs a biographical strategy that has the capacity to balance granite and rainbow, to imagine a way to portray a life that neither aggrandizes a subject out of proportion nor reduces one down to merely an efficiently-made product.