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THIS FICTITIOUS LIFE: VIRGINIA WOOLF ON BIOGRAPHY, REALITY, AND CHARACTER

In the growing body of academic literature on biography that has developed in the last few decades, Virginia Woolf's essay, "The New Biography,"[1] has come to occupy a central place—mentioned, discussed and quoted from, I would estimate, more often than any other piece of writing on the subject. Virginia Woolf's distinctive view of the nature and limitations of biography has thus had, and continues to have, a deep and wide-ranging influence on the way the genre is discussed by critics and theorists. My aim in this essay is to present a detailed analysis of Virginia Woolf's thinking about biography in order to make clear why I believe its influence on contemporary theorising about biography is, on the whole, a misfortune.

As is often pointed out, Virginia Woolf's views on biography are closely connected with—indeed, to an extent that I hope to make clear, they are simply an application of—her views on fiction. In the light of this, I have tried to trace some of the most striking features of her thinking about biography back to her earlier thoughts on fiction, as presented in both her novels and her essays. The result, I hope, will be that, while the attractions of her way of looking at fiction and biography are recognised and revealed, the manifest flaws in her thinking on these subjects are clearly exposed.

I

First published in 1927, "The New Biography" was written to accomplish two rather different aims, much less closely related to each other than Virginia Woolf presents them as being. The first was to review

Harold Nicolson's book *Some People*.[2] The second was to assess the successes, failures, and limitations of the "New Biography," associated with Lytton Strachey and Nicolson himself, in comparison with the old, Victorian style of biography, which Woolf chose to be represented by Sir Sidney Lee. In the course of this assessment, Virginia Woolf offered some entirely general views on biography that have been regarded by both practitioners and theorists of the genre ever since as constituting a challenge that needs to be met.

Woolf's choices of authors and texts to represent the old and the new styles of biography are puzzling and unfortunate. As I shall argue later, Sidney Lee was an especially poor choice to represent the old guard, having himself, both in theory and in practice, set his face against the very features of Victorian biographies that Lytton Strachey had so famously ridiculed in his preface to *Eminent Victorians*; namely (in Strachey's words) "their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design"[3]

As a representative example of the "New Biography," Nicolson's *Some People* is hardly any better. Nicolson, it is true, was widely regarded in the 1920s as a Stracheyan biographer,[4] his biographies of Verlaine[5] and Byron,[6] striking something of the same detached and occasionally ironic tone with which Strachey discusses his "eminent Victorians." In Chapter 1 of his biography of Tennyson,[7] however, Nicolson strives to distance himself from the mockery of all things Victorian that was widely associated with Strachey,[8] and in his short but erudite history of biography,[9] published in 1928, the year after Woolf published "The New Biography," he showed that he had developed his own view of the genre, a view that was, in some important respects, directly *opposed* to Strachey's.[10]

It is possible to argue that, in the six years that separate his biography of Verlaine from his history of biography, Nicolson had fundamentally altered his views on the nature of the genre. What is not tenable is to try to extract Nicolson's conception of how biography could or should be written (either his old view or his new one) from *Some People*. For *Some People* is a deeply idiosyncratic work, representative neither of the New Biography nor of Nicolson's other biographical work. Ostensibly an autobiographical collection of brief sketches of people Nicolson had known, it is, in fact, largely fiction. "Many of the following sketches are purely imaginary," Nicolson warned his readers. "Such truths as they may contain are only half-truths."[11]

In a later edition,[12] he amplified this somewhat, explaining that, of

the nine brief character sketches contained in the volume, only one, that of Jeanne de Hênaut (a woman with whom Nicolson, as a young man, had lodged in France) was entirely nonfictional. Of the other characters, "Miss Plimsoll," "J. D. Marstock," and "Professor Malone," were fictional composites of real people; "Titty" and "The Marquis de Chaumont" were based on real people, whom Nicolson, however, placed in stories that were wholly his invention, and "Miss Codd," was an entirely fictional character, whose story centres on a journey through the desert that Nicolson had actually experienced. Of the remaining two (so we learn from Nigel Nicolson in the Introduction to the 1996 edition), "Lambert Orme" was based on a man Nicolson had known called Ronald Firbank and "Arketall" on a valet of Lord Curzon's called Chippendale.[13] The idea of *Some People,* Nigel Nicolson quotes his father once remarking, "was to put real people in imaginary situations, and imaginary people in real situations" (p. vii).

In summary, then, *Some People* contains six sketches of people who never existed, two fictional stories about people who, under different names, did exist, and just one story that is a more or less conventional reminiscence, describing a person who had actually existed and events that had, in fact, taken place. The book was, and remains, hard to classify. It was published and sold as nonfiction, and yet, as we have seen, announces itself on its very first page to be no such thing. Nigel Nicolson argues persuasively that the central topic of the book is Harold Nicolson's own intellectual and emotional development, the stages of which are personified by the characters Nicolson sketches:

> In fact the book is a record of how the precocious Harold gradually grew up, how he rejected in turn Empire-worship (Miss Plimsoll), the public-school spirit (Marstock), self-conscious aestheticism (Orme), snobbishness (de Chaumont), bland affability (Titty), and arrogance (Malone), finding on the way other delights like literature, travel, friendship, work and what he never specifically mentions, sex.[14]

The book might be, as many have claimed it to be, a minor masterpiece, but one thing it is emphatically *not* is a paradigmatic example of the New Biography inaugurated by Strachey. Strachey had argued for brevity, style, irreverence and an interest in character; he had *not* argued for fiction in biography. On the contrary, at the heart of his conception of the genre, with its insistence on the need to strip away the pieties of the Victorian age in order to reveal the reality that lay underneath, was

a concern to sharpen, not blur, the distinction between truth and illusion, fact and fiction. It is not, Strachey insists in the preface to *Eminent Victorians*, the business of the biographer to be complimentary: "it is his business to lay bare the facts of the case, as he understands them. That is what I have aimed at in this book—to lay bare the facts of some cases, as I understand them, dispassionately, impartially, and without ulterior intentions" (p. 10).

The qualifications "as he understands them" and "as I understand them" do nothing to weaken Strachey's commitment to the robust distinction between fact and fiction that is implied by his use of the expression "to lay bare the facts of the case." They are of a piece with his famous remark that the qualities that make a historian are: "a capacity for absorbing facts, a capacity for stating them, and a point of view"[15] Strachey's emphasis on the importance of a point of view has misled some into thinking that he was an adherent of some kind of relativism with regard to historical fact. It was not, however, his view that whether something was true or not (whether it was fact or fiction) depended on, or was relative to, the point of view from which it was seen. Rather his view was that the art of history and that of biography (and he was vehement, of course, in his insistence that both *were* arts) consisted, not in the *discovery* of facts, but in the *interpretation* of them. The two processes, discovery and invention, he regarded as quite separate from each other. His oft-quoted remark "uninterpreted truth is as useless as buried gold"[16] does not imply that gold is not gold until it is dug up. Rather, it *is* still gold, even when buried, only, so long as it remains underground, it is of scant use to us. Similarly, a fact is still a fact, even if no-one has discovered, absorbed or stated it, but it becomes useful to us *only* when it is interpreted, when, for example, it is put in context alongside other facts and its importance relative to those other facts is analysed and assessed.

It would, I believe, also be a mistake to think of Strachey's views on the importance of a "point of view" as anticipating the notion of "theory-laden observation" that is now familiar in the philosophy of science. According to adherents of this notion, it is impossible to distinguish sharply between observation and theory, because what we *see* is, in many cases at least, dependent upon what our governing theory tells us is there. Thus, for example, photographs showing the paths of positrons were, for many years, not seen by physicists for what they were because physical theory had not yet admitted the existence of positrons. Today,

undergraduate students of physics look at these photographs and have no difficulty in seeing them *as* pictures of the paths of positrons. In the 1920s, however, the greatest physicists of the day looked at them and tried to see them as something else (the paths of electrons, say). Both today's undergraduates and the great physicists of the past are looking at the same thing, and yet, it seems, they are seeing something quite different. In this and similar cases, it might be plausible to say that *what* one sees depends upon what theory one brings to bear upon one's observations, thus undermining the view that the interpretation of facts is something that can be done after, and separately from, the discovery or observation of them.

Whether this is plausible or not, however, it would be a mistake to regard it as Lytton Strachey's view. Indeed, far from anticipating this notion, Strachey's own views would be among those that are severely undermined by it. An unexamined assumption that the discovery of facts is separable from their interpretation lies at the very centre of his thinking about historical and biographical methodology. He thought of the discovery of facts as a mundane process of gathering hard information that almost anybody could carry out, and contrasted it sharply with what he considered to be the more creative activity of bringing to that information a "point of view" that would make sense of it, attributing to it neither too much nor too little importance. This, he thought, only a gifted few could achieve. He thus tended to use the ability to interpret facts as the measure that distinguished a first-rate from a second-rate historian. In his essay on Macaulay,[17] for example, he says of "the late Professor Samuel Gardiner" that, though he could absorb facts and state them, "he had no point of view; and the result is that his book on the most exciting period of English history resembles nothing so much as a very large heap of sawdust."[18] If Strachey thought that the identification of a fact was inseparable from its interpretation, if he thought that one *had* to have a "point of view" in order to grasp a fact, he clearly could not have made this complaint against Gardiner.

The alleged impossibility of distinguishing the discovery of a fact from its interpretation is often urged by postmodernist thinkers as a reason for thinking that fact and fiction cannot be distinguished as sharply as common sense and philosophical realism would like. Strachey, however, belongs with the realists rather than with the postmodernists in this dispute. His thinking about biography and history *required* a sharp distinction, both between the discovery of a fact and its interpretation

and between fact and fiction. It was emphatically *not* part of his programme—nor, more generally, that of the "new biography"—to blur the distinction between fact and fiction.

And yet, famously, it is this blurring that forms the central theme in Virginia Woolf's article, "The New Biography." An immediate reason for this is that the article is a review of *Some People*, the most striking and innovative feature of which is precisely its mixture of fact and fiction. However, she could have chosen to discuss this as a feature of *this particular book* rather than use it as her central theme in reflecting generally upon both the nature and limits of both Strachey's movement and the entire genre of biography. Why, then, does she choose to do the latter? The answer, I think, becomes clear when one reads the rest of Virginia Woolf's *oeuvre*, particularly the novels and essays she wrote before reviewing Nicolson's book. For there one sees a particular—and particularly strongly held—conviction about the unique importance of fiction, and the relative unimportance of *fact,* in the understanding of people and the *true* representation of life.

II

In much of her early work, especially the essay "Modern Fiction,"[19] the short story "The Mark on the Wall,"[20] and the novel, *Jacob's Room,*[21] one sees Woolf developing a theme that shapes her later writings on biography. Put briefly, one might describe this theme as the claim that life, *real* life (as she often puts it), is essentially *internal* and therefore (as facts are essentially external) beyond the reach of nonfiction. This presents the novelist, in Woolf's view, with opportunities denied to other writers, opportunities that carry with them obligations that ought not to be shirked.

In "Modern Fiction" she approaches this theme through an exploration of why it is that she finds the work of the Edwardian novelists, Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett, so deeply unsatisfactory. The answer seems to be that she feels they have betrayed the art of fiction by shirking the novelist's obligation to represent life *truly*, i.e., with a recognition of its essentially *internal* nature. The Edwardians, she writes, are "materialists," preoccupied with *external* facts: "It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us" (*CE 2*, p. 104). They describe everything, as it were, *from the outside,* and, therefore, they cannot hope to capture life as it is lived: "Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while . . . Whether we call it

life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide" (p. 105).

In their concern to describe the *things* in the world in all their solidity, in their preoccupation with plot and action, these novelists, Woolf claims, write works which arouse in their readers the thought: "Is life like this?" (p. 106), the answer to which, she insists, is a resounding "*No*," as anyone can testify by *looking within*: "Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this.' Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms."

Life, in her view, is something that *cannot* be seen from the outside; it is something that can *only* be understand from within. To represent life truly is to capture faithfully the thoughts, feelings, fleeting impressions, etc. that constitute our experience. And so, she famously recommends: "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (p. 106).

In the short story, "The Mark on the Wall," written two years before "Modern Fiction," Woolf had provided a model of what fiction would look like if the above advice were followed. In the story, almost nothing happens externally except that a woman sits in a chair gazing at a mark she notices on the wall opposite her. One of the most remarkable things about the story is how much about this woman we, the readers, do *not* know. We do not know her name, her age, what she looks like, where she lives, her social, cultural and educational background, etc.

The story, told in the first person, concerns itself almost exclusively with the train of thought aroused in the woman's mind by contemplation of the mark on the wall. True to her advice in "Modern Fiction," Virginia Woolf presents this train of thought as a complicated, non-linear pattern of "atoms"; the narrator's mind moves from wondering what the mark is to general reflections on life via a series of memories that are apparently unrelated, and then back to the mark again, and so on. Her ruminations about the mark—she decides, e.g., that it is not a hole left by a nail, for it seems to project from the wall and cast a shadow—are not driven by a desire for *knowledge,* for external facts, but rather by a delight in ruminating for its own sake. If she really wanted to know what the mark was, she could, of course, simply get up, examine

it closely and, if necessary, run her finger over it. But she decides not to, for, after all, she reflects, what would she gain? Knowledge? Matter for further speculations? But, she concludes, "I can think sitting still as well as standing up" (*SSS*, p. 58).

And so she goes on with her thoughts and speculations, until a man, presumably her husband, walks into the room and wrests her out of her private world to tell her that he is going out to buy a newspaper. "Though it's no good buying newspapers," he adds. "Nothing ever happens . . . All the same, I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall" (p. 60). And so ends speculation, reverie and the story, in the collision of (to use the famous contrast that Woolf makes in "The New Biography") the rainbow of the inner life with the granite of fact.

The contrasts, the polarities, set up by the story are stark and clear, perhaps a little *too* clear. On the one hand we have what the central character of the story refers to as "the masculine point of view which governs our lives" (p. 57). This is the point of view that wants to settle factual questions and which complains when nothing happens. It is, in other words, the *external* point of view, one which Woolf has her protagonist identify with order, with the past, and, perhaps above all, with death. It is, Woolf suggests, the point of view that led to the killing of the First World War and from which we must escape if we value life:

> . . . the masculine point of view, which governs our lives, which sets the standard, which establishes Whitaker's Table of Precedency, which has become, I suppose, since the war half a phantom to many men and women, which soon, one may hope, will be laughed into the dustbin where the phantoms go, the mahogany sideboards and the Landseer prints, Gods and Devils, Hell and so forth, leaving us all with an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom—if freedom exists. . . . (p. 57)

In direct opposition to the masculine point of view, we have thought, reverie, consciousness, the *internal* "shower of innumerable atoms" that Woolf equates with *life*, the "spirit, truth or reality, . . . the essential thing" (*CE 2*, p. 105) that the Edwardians had left out. This "feminine" point of view distrusts factual knowledge ("nothing is proved, nothing is known," p. 58) and has no great love of action, which it regards as the antithesis of thought ("Hence, I suppose, comes our slight contempt for men of action—men, we assume, who don't think," p. 59). It embraces flux and seeks to overcome all separateness, all hostility and all violence: "I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciously, never to be interrupted, never

to have to rise from my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle. I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard, separate facts" (p. 55).

An apparent paradox here is that what Woolf depicts as an attempt to overcome separateness seems guaranteed to create it. If each of us "looks within," we will be directing our attention *away* from each other and separating ourselves from those around us. The woman sitting in her armchair sinking "deeper and deeper, away from the surface" is, in an obvious sort of way, precisely *not* connecting with anything or anybody. Indeed, as she herself seems to recognize, she is in danger of slipping into a kind of solipsism, needing proof that things *outside* her mind really do exist: "Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror, one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is a proof of some existence other than ours. That is what one wants to be sure of" (p. 59).

Disconcertingly, Woolf does not offer a complete resolution of this paradox. Switching the light on allows us to see the *objects* in the world, thus satisfying us of their (external) existence, but she seems to deny the possibility of seeing other *people* except as reflections of ourselves, which means that, in order to preserve our selves we have to be perpetually vigilant in guarding it against the perceptions of others. What other people see when they look at me is not *me*, but a reflection of themselves. Therefore, it is (literally) fatal to see myself as others see me; to do *that* is to disappear.

This is illustrated early in the story when the central character muses on the importance of protecting her image of herself—the self she sees when she looks in the mirror—from the distortions of other people, whether those take the form of idolatry or ridicule. Suppose, she reflects, the mirror smashes and the self-image disappears, then all that one would be left with is "that shell of a person which is seen by other people" (p. 56). And then: "what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes! A world not to be lived in." We are all, it seems, "looking within," even when—perhaps *especially* when—we are looking at each other: "As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes."

"The novelists of the future," the narrator suggests (and here, as in many places throughout the story, the tone and content seem almost indistinguishable from those of Virginia Woolf's essays) "will realize more

and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories" (p. 56).

This introduces yet another polarity (or perhaps just another facet of the central polarity described earlier): on the one hand, we have the "description of reality," which novelists will increasingly leave out of their stories (presumably because it is a job that is best left to the masculine, nonfictional, fact-seeking point of view), and on the other we have the pursuit of phantoms, which novelists of the future will take on as their task. As phantoms are unreal, their pursuit is, of course, by necessity, a task for fiction.

In *Jacob's Room*, Virginia Woolf set out to write the kind of novel that her central character in "The Mark on the Wall" predicts will be written by the novelists of the future, one that would pursue the phantoms that are people as seen from the outside, that would explore the shells that exist in the "airless" world of endless reflections. The image that dominates the novel is that of an empty room. In a passage that occurs twice, word for word, in the book, Woolf writes: "Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker armchair creaks, though no one sits there" (*JR*, p. 49 and p. 247). The second time these sentences appear, Jacob's room is empty because Jacob is no longer alive—he has been killed in the war—but, throughout the novel, Jacob is absent in another sense, the sense alluded to by the narrator of "The Mark on the Wall" when she talked about "the shell of a person that is seen by other people." The novel allows us to see Jacob *only* through the eyes of others, which is to say, we hardly see *him* at all; all we see is the "airless" world that is his room.

The novel begins with a scene from Jacob's childhood. Jacob has run off somewhere and his mother is trying to find him: "Where *is* that tiresome little boy? I don't see him" (p. 3). His mother's exasperation is to be shared throughout the novel by the other characters, by the readers and even by the writer: *nobody* sees Jacob. At a pivotal moment in the novel, Jacob is on his way to Cambridge on a train. He sits opposite a woman called Mrs Norman, who tries to determine what sort of boy he is by looking at him closely. She notices that his socks are loose, his tie shabby, his lips shut, his eyes bent down, reading a newspaper: "All was firm, yet youthful, indifferent, unconscious" (p. 36). But it is no good. Her attempts to *see* him are futile. "Nobody sees any one as

he is," writes Woolf, echoing her character in "The Mark on the Wall," "let alone an elderly woman sitting opposite a strange young man in a railway carriage. They see a whole—they see all sorts of things—they see themselves."

Later on, the situation of Mrs Norman is explicitly identified with that of Virginia Woolf herself. When Jacob sees the girl he has fallen in love with in the arms of another man, Woolf confesses herself unable to describe his thoughts. She describes instead what he looks like: "The light drenched Jacob from head to toe. You could see the pattern on his trousers; the old thorns on his stick; his shoe laces; bare hands; and face" (p. 128). The face, of course, provides clues: "It was if a stone were ground to dust; as if white sparks flew from a livid whetstone, which was his spine; as if the switchback railway, having swooped to the depths, fell, fell, fell. That was in his face" (p. 128). However, Woolf adds: "Whether we know what was in his mind is another question. Granted ten years" seniority and a difference of sex, fear of him comes first."

Woolf, it is suggested, can describe *her* thoughts, her feelings, and possibly those of a woman the same age as herself, but the thoughts of a young man like Jacob are closed to her. Jacob's mother, too, is shut out, so to speak, from Jacob's room. She can send him letters, but, describing these letters lying on Jacob's table, Woolf describes them as evidence of "how soon deeds sever and become alien" (p. 125). The letters are mere phantoms of Mrs Flanders's attempts to reach her son, to penetrate his mind, his heart. "Try to penetrate," Woolf writes, "for as we lift the cup, shake the hand, express the hope, something whispers, Is this all? Can I never know, share, be certain? Am I doomed all my days to write letters, send voices, which fall upon the tea-table, fade upon the passage, making appointments, while life dwindles, to come and dine?" (p. 126). We write letters, she suggests, in attempts to accomplish the task of "reaching, touching, penetrating, the individual heart. Were it possible! But words have been used too often; touched and turned, and left exposed to the dust of the street."

One can write letters, one can scrutinise faces, one can look as closely as one likes at someone, and yet, suggests Woolf, unless they are as similar to us as the fictional Mrs Norman is to the real Virginia Woolf, their inner lives, their hearts, will remain inaccessible. "It seems," she writes in *Jacob's Room*, "that a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow creatures is utterly unknown. Either we are men, or we are women. Either we are cold, or we are sentimental. Either we are young, or growing old. In any case, life is but a procession of shad-

ows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows . . . Such is the manner of our seeing. Such the conditions of our love" (p. 96).

Life, "Modern Fiction" argues, is not to be found in the material objects that make up the fabric of external reality, but in the "myriad of impressions" that one finds when one "looks within." But, "The Mark on the Wall" suggests, that "myriad of impressions" leads a precarious and shadowy existence, perpetually vulnerable to encroachment from outside, particularly from the distorted images of ourselves that are reflected back to us from other people. As the narrator in "The Mark on the Wall" remarks, and as *Jacob's Room* attempts to illustrate, we are to others mere phantoms, as they are to us. And yet, it is the pursuit of those phantoms, those shadowy constructs, that is the task of the novelist.

To put it another way: in order to represent life as it *really* is, in order to present people as they *really* are, we must conjure up phantoms; in order to capture the *truth* about reality, we must write fiction.

III

It is a distinctive and challenging view both of the metaphysics of persons and of the nature of fiction, though one that is beset with difficulties at every turn. One of the central problems it faces was pointed out by Woolf's old adversary, Arnold Bennett in an article he published in *Cassell's Weekly* in March 1923 called "Is the Novel Dying?"[22] Bennett's central theme in this piece is that novels cannot survive and achieve greatness unless the characters in them are real and convincing, since "the foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else."[23] In the course of arguing for this view, he devotes a short paragraph to *Jacob's Room*, explaining why, though he admired the book in some ways, he believed that it failed this key test of good fiction: "I have seldom read a cleverer book than *Jacob's Room*, a novel that has made a great stir in a small world. It is packed and bursting with originality, and it is exquisitely written. But the characters do not vitally survive in the mind because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness" (Drabble, p. 292).

What Bennett says here about the characters in *Jacob's Room* seems obviously true. Indeed, it seems to follow directly from Woolf's avowed aims in writing the book. If the characters were more vital, they could not, one might have thought, have served their purpose of illustrat-

ing Woolf's view of the phantom-like nature of selves as they appear in the reflections of other people's mirrors. The fact that the characters—and, especially, the central character—are insubstantial, elusive and unknowable is, surely, due to authorial design, rather than to a failure of execution.

Woolf, however, was evidently stung by Bennett's criticism and, in what has become one of her best known essays, "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,"[24] she provides a spirited and robust defence of the reality of her characters. In some ways, this essay is just a re-working of her attack on Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy in "Modern Fiction," though, whereas in the earlier essay she had fought with these authors over competing conceptions of *life*, this time she takes issue with them over their—and, in particular, Bennett's—understanding of *character*.

The essay begins with an emphatic acceptance of Bennett's view that the foundation of good fiction is character-creating "and nothing else." "If the characters are real," Woolf quotes Bennett as saying, "the novel will have a chance; if they are not, oblivion will be its portion" (*WE*, p. 69). Woolf professes her agreement with this and adds to it the view that the very rationale of novel-writing is the capturing and the expressing of character. "I believe that all novels . . . deal with character," she writes, "and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved" (pp. 74–75).

What interests her, though, as she had made clear in "The Mark on the Wall" and *Jacob's Room*, is how character appears when reflected through the minds, the perceptions, the assumptions, the cultural backgrounds of various observers. To illustrate this point she describes being on a train and overhearing snatches of a conversation between an elderly woman—to whom she gives the name Mrs Brown—and a middle-aged man, whom she calls Mr Smith. Woolf did not hear enough of the conversation to know exactly what it was about, but it seemed to her that Mr Smith exerted some power over Mrs Brown, and her curiosity was aroused as to what sort of person Mrs Brown could be. She looked small and frail and at the same time tenacious, even heroic. "Here," Woolf says, "is a character imposing itself upon another person" (p. 74). And it is in response to such impositions, she suggests, that people become novelists. "Some Brown, Smith, or Jones comes before them and says in the most seductive and charming way in the world, 'Come and catch me if you can'" (p. 69). As she had emphasised in her earlier

writing, however, these characters are extremely elusive: "Few catch the phantom; most have to be content with a scrap of her dress or a wisp of her hair."

A point to which Woolf keeps returning, throughout the essay, is this: when a character imposes itself upon another person, the kind of impression it makes depends, not only on the character but also on the person upon whom the impression is made. Suppose, for example, that three novelists, one English, one French and the third Russian, attempt to "catch" Mrs Brown, what would be the respective results? According to Virginia Woolf, in the hands of an English novelist, old Mrs Brown would be turned into a "character" and the emphasis would be on "her oddities and mannerisms; her buttons and wrinkles; her ribbons and warts" (p. 75). The French writer "would sacrifice the individual Mrs Brown to give a more general view of human nature," while the Russian "would pierce through the flesh; would reveal the soul." And it is not just different nationalities that would produce different Mrs Browns: a man would see her differently to a woman; a young person differently from an old person, and so on. In short: "Mrs Brown can be treated in an infinite variety of ways according to the age, country, and temperament of the writer" (p. 75). Or, to put the point as she had already expressed it in *Jacob's Room*: "a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow-creatures is utterly unknown. Either we are men, or we are women. Either we are cold, or we are sentimental. Either we are young, or growing old. In any case, life is but a procession of shadows" (*JR*, p. 96).

Her previous accusation in "Modern Fiction" that Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett write books from which life escapes is transformed in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs Brown" into the charge that, because they have failed to grasp the elusive, shadowy nature of selves, they do not even begin to solve the problem of character-creation that lies at the heart of the attempt to write fiction. It is not that they have tried and failed to capture character as it really presents itself in life, it is rather that they have avoided the issue altogether. They are not even trying to, as it were, catch Mrs Brown. And, as the attempt to catch her and her like is the very essence of fiction, Woolf expresses doubts (and here, I think, she is not entirely joking) whether the works of Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett ought to be regarded as novels at all:

> Sometimes I wonder if we are right to call them books at all. For they leave one with so strange a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction.

> In order to complete them it seems necessary to do something—to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque. . . . Both Sterne and Jane Austen were interested in things in themselves; in character in itself; in the book in itself. Therefore everything was inside the book, nothing outside. But the Edwardians were never interested in character in itself; or in the book in itself. They were interested in something outside. (*WE*, p. 77)

This is, of course, extremely unfair, especially on Bennett who was immensely "interested in character itself." The unfairness is compounded when, in a series of crudely drawn caricatures, Woolf attempts to imagine how each of the Edwardians would describe the scene in the railway carriage involving Mrs Brown and Mr Smith. Wells, she says, would instantly project onto the situation a vision of a better world, a world in which "these musty railway carriages and fusty old women do not exist" (p. 77). "Indeed," she writes, "I do not think that Mr. Wells, in his passion to make her what she ought to be, would waste a thought upon her as she is" (p. 77). Galsworthy would turn his attention to the factory in which Mrs Brown worked. "Burning with indignation, stuffed with information, arraigning civilization, Mr Galsworthy would see in Mrs Brown a pot broken on the wheel and thrown into the corner" (p. 78). And what would Bennett do? He, according to Woolf, would keep his eyes on the train carriage and observe every detail with immense care: "He would notice the advertisements, the pictures of Swanage and Portsmouth, the way in which the cushion bulged between the buttons, how Mrs Brown wore a brooch which had cost three-and-ten at Whitworth's bazaar, and had mended both gloves" (p. 78) and then he would tell us what kind of house Mrs Brown lived in, and so on and so on.

To illustrate her point, she quotes extensively from Bennett's novel, *Hilda Lessways*, where Bennett, she alleges, introduces the character of Hilda with a long and tedious description of the row of houses she can see from her bedroom window. In this description, Woolf complains, we cannot hear Hilda's voice in this description: "we can only hear Mr. Bennett's voice telling us facts about rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines" (p. 80). Bennett "is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there."

In their different ways, Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett would have missed the most important thing: Mrs Brown. "There she sits," writes Woolf, "and not one of the Edwardian writers has so much as looked at her. They have looked very powerfully, searchingly and sympathetically out of the window; at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of

the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature" (p. 80). The descriptive tools the Edwardians have fashioned, she insists, are the wrong ones: "They have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there" (p. 82).

With regard to the question Bennett had raised about the *reality* of the characters in a novel, Woolf's claim is that, faced with the problem of making us believe in the reality of Hilda Lessways, Bennett "began, being an Edwardian, by describing accurately and minutely the sort of house Hilda lived in, and the sort of house she saw from the window. House property was the common ground from which the Edwardians found it easy to proceed to intimacy" (p. 81). In fact, however, Bennett does not *begin* by describing Hilda's house; the novel begins, rather, like this:

> The Lessways household, consisting of Hilda and her widowed mother, was temporarily without a servant. Hilda hated domestic work, and because she hated it she often did it passionately and thoroughly. That afternoon, as she emerged from the kitchen, her dark, defiant face was full of grim satisfaction in the fact that she had left a kitchen polished and irreproachable.[25]

The passages about houses that Woolf quotes occur *after* Bennett has introduced Hilda and provided the reader with several illustrative hints about her character, her relations with her mother and her frustration with the dullness of her life.[26] It is true that we learn a few hard facts about Hilda—that, in the year that the novel is set, 1878,[27] she is twenty-one years old, that she comes from a reasonably well-off, though still lower middle-class family, and so on. But these facts, clearly, are not *irrelevan*t to an understanding of her character. Neither, indeed, is the description of the row of houses that Woolf quotes, which, when read in its context, is an entirely successful device for conveying something *internal*, namely the contempt Hilda feels when she gazes out of her window at houses that have become for her a symbol of the drabness, the narrowness, the uniformity and the conformity of her life.

Woolf's impatience with what she sees as the Edwardians' excess in describing the things in the world and the outer appearances of people leads her, not only into gross caricatures of their novelistic methods, but also into an excessive and intemperate reaction *against* factual descriptions. In imagining how the readers of the Edwardians would react to her way of conveying character, she writes:

> Here is the British public sitting by the writer's side and saying in its vast and unanimous way, "Old women have houses. They have fathers. They have incomes. They have servants. They have hot water bottles. That is how we know that they are old women. Mr Wells and Mr Bennett and Mr Galsworthy have always taught us that this is the way to recognise them. But now with your Mrs Brown—how are we to believe in her? We do not even know whether her villa was called Albert or Balmoral; what she paid for her gloves; or whether her mother died of cancer or of consumption. How can she be alive? No; she is a mere figment of your imagination."
>
> And old women, of course, ought to be made of freehold villas and copyhold estates, not of imagination. (*WE*, p. 83)

What, exactly, is wrong with the Edwardian method described here? If we are not to bring people to life by describing, for example, their houses, fathers, incomes, servants, and hot water bottles, by saying what their house is called or how their mother died, then how *are* we to do it? The character of Mrs Brown evidently made a great impression on Virginia Woolf, but how was she to transmit that impression? "All I could do," she writes, "was to report as accurately as I could what was said, to describe in detail what was worn, to say, despairingly, that all sorts of scenes rushed into my mind, to proceed to tumble them out pell-mell, and to describe this vivid, this overmastering impression by likening it to a draught or a smell of burning" (pp. 81–82).

Attempting to convey character through describing what was said and what was worn hardly distinguishes Woolf from the Edwardians; Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett all do a good deal of *that.* What they don't do is attempt to bring a character to life through a description of the impression that character makes on another mind, which is indeed the most striking feature, both of *Jacob's Room* and of the way Woolf tells her anecdote about seeing Mrs Brown on the train:

> One night some weeks ago, I was late for the train and jumped into the first carriage I came to. As I sat down *I had the strange and uncomfortable feeling* that I was interrupting a conversation between two people who were already sitting there. Not that they were young or happy. Far from it. They were both elderly, the woman over sixty, the man well over forty. . . . She was one of those clean, threadbare old ladies, whose extreme tidiness—everything buttoned, fastened, tied together, mended and brushed up—suggests more extreme poverty than rags and dirt . . . *I felt that* she had nobody to support her; that she had to make up her mind for herself; that, having been deserted, or left a widow, years ago, she had led

> an anxious, harried life, bringing up an only son, perhaps, who, as likely as not, was by this time beginning to go to the bad. *All this shot through my mind* as I sat down. (pp. 71–72, italics added)

In attempting to capture the spirit of Mrs Brown, Virginia Woolf does here offer us some facts, of exactly the kind (though not, perhaps, in the same *quantities*) that Bennett might have provided: that, for example, she was over sixty, and that, though clearly not wealthy, she was neatly dressed. And these are, like the facts Bennett offers about Hilda in the opening pages of *Hilda Lessways,* helpful in bringing Mrs Brown to life. It would also be helpful to know that she had been deserted by her husband or widowed and was bringing up an only son on her own. But we don't know these things; we know only that these things went through Virginia Woolf's mind as she sat down. Does knowing this help to capture Mrs Brown? One thinks here of the exactly analogous situation in *Jacob's Room*: did knowing what was going through Mrs Norman's mind as she sat opposite Jacob on a train help to capture Jacob? And one thinks of Virginia Woolf's own implied answer to that question: "Nobody sees any one as he is . . . They see a whole—they see all sorts of things—they see themselves" (*JR*, p. 36).

The snatches of conversation between Mrs Brown and Mr Smith that Woolf reproduces could have come out of any novel, including those by Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett. But, after Mr Smith gets out of the train, and Mrs Brown is left alone in the carriage with Virginia Woolf, we get some sentences that could *only* have come from Woolf herself:

> The impression she made was overwhelming. It came pouring out like a draught, like a smell of burning. What was it composed of—that overwhelming and peculiar impression? Myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas crowd into one's head on such occasions; one sees the person, one sees Mrs Brown, in the centre of all sorts of different scenes. I thought of her in a seaside house, among queer ornaments: sea-urchins, models of ships in glass cases. Her husband's medals were on the mantelpiece. (*WE*, p. 74)

The shift in focus here from Mrs Brown to Virginia Woolf herself compels one to ask: does any of this help us to understand *Mrs Brown* better, to conjure *her* before our minds more vividly? To be sure, the seaside house full of sea-urchins and ships in glass cases helps us to conjure up *something*, but that something is not the person who sat opposite

Virginia Woolf on the train into London, but rather the contents of Virginia Woolf's mind as she contemplated that person.

To put it another way, what is being conjured up here is not the woman on the train, but rather "Mrs Brown," a fictional character who exists only in the imagination of Virginia Woolf. The reader of "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" might naturally think that Virginia Woolf, having had an encounter on the train with a woman who excited her curiosity, is concerned to capture the spirit of that woman. However, on closer inspection it seems that what Woolf is *really* concerned to transmit is not the character of the woman she met on the train, but the impression that that woman made on Virginia Woolf herself—or, to give that impression its name: Mrs Brown (which is, after all, probably *not* the name of the actual person that Virginia Woolf saw on the train, but the name of the fictional character inspired by that person).

Woolf's central concern—which lies at the heart of her rejection of the methods of the Edwardians—is to preserve Mrs Brown *as an impression* inside the mind of Virginia Woolf. That is why she says that if she were to take the implied advice of the Edwardians about how to make her character real ("Begin by saying that her father kept a shop in Harrogate. Ascertain the rent. Ascertain the wages of shop assistants in the year 1878. Discover what her mother died of," p. 82), she would fail to achieve her aim: "my Mrs Brown, that vision to which I cling though I know no way of imparting it to you, would have been dulled and tarnished and vanished for ever" (p. 82). It would have dulled and vanished because these facts are too external; they are not of Virginia Woolf's own invention and therefore not part of her vision. She does not want to make Mrs Brown real by bringing her into the "real world"; she wants to preserve her "reality" by keeping her *as* a vision. Mrs Brown's house is not, like the houses described by Bennett, made of bricks and mortar; it is, rather, one of the "myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas" out of which Mrs Brown herself is constituted. It, like Mrs Brown, exists only in Virginia Woolf's mind.

Mrs Brown, like Jacob and like all fictional characters, is a "phantom," and only, Woolf suggests, by preserving her imaginary, phantom-like nature can her "reality" be preserved. From this perspective (and, one is tempted to add, *only* from this perspective), Jacob in *Jacob's Room* and Mrs Brown as described (and created) by Virginia Woolf are more real than Bennett's Hilda Lessways.

The key question, as Woolf herself says, is: "What is reality?" (*WE*, p.

75). On her understanding, a character is real, not when it is "lifelike" (p. 76), but when "it has the power to make you think not merely of itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes—of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in county towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul." In all the novels widely considered to be great, she says, "these great novelists have brought us to see whatever they wish us to see though some character. Otherwise, they would not be novelists, but poets, historians, or pamphleteers" (p. 76).

How should we apply this to Virginia Woolf's own work? In *Jacob's Room*, we hardly see *anything* through Jacob's eyes; rather, we see Jacob himself through the eyes of, for example, Mrs Norman (who declares herself incapable of really seeing him), Jacob's mother (who despairs of ever penetrating his heart) and Virginia Woolf herself (who, though she created him, admits that she can form no idea of what was in his mind at a crucially important moment of his life). What we are made to think of, then, through the eyes of these characters is the impenetrability of Jacob's soul, the impossibility of ever getting to know him—the impossibility, in fact, of accomplishing the very thing that, according to Virginia Woolf, is necessary in order to make him real: namely, seeing the world through his eyes. On Virginia Woolf's own criterion, therefore, Jacob is not real, nor could he possibly become so in any account narrated by her. Mrs Norman and Jacob's mother, however, *are* real, as is the central character in "The Mark on the Wall," through whose eyes we are made to think of, among other things, the "masculine point of view," the intrinsic value of states of mind and the fact that when we look at another person (when, say, like Mrs Norman and Virginia Woolf herself, we are sitting opposite another person on a train), we do not really see *them*; we see only ourselves.

When this latter thought (versions of which recur throughout Virginia Woolf's work) is combined with Woolf's criterion of reality, the resultant conclusion is that, other than ourselves, the *only* characters we can regard as real are *fictional* characters, and, even then, only those fictional characters whose creators are sufficiently confident (as Virgina Woolf is not in the case of Jacob) that they *can* describe the world as seen through those characters' eyes. We can see the world through our own eyes and through the eyes of (some) fictional characters, but we cannot, no matter how hard we try, look through the eyes of the people around us. To that extent, a successfully drawn fictional character is *more* real to us than our friends, our relations, our colleagues and the people we meet on trains.

Perhaps surprisingly, Virgina Woolf is not entirely alone in holding views of this sort. A somewhat similar view was expressed by her friend, E. M. Forster, in his widely-read and influential series of lectures, *Aspects of the Novel*,[28] which were given at Cambridge in the spring of 1927 and published as a book in the very same month that Woolf published "The New Biography."[29] In the lecture entitled "People," Forster contrasts the partial understanding that we have of each other with the "complete" understanding that we may have of fictional characters. "In daily life we never understand each other," he says, "neither complete clairvoyance nor complete confessional exists":

> We know each other approximately, by external signs, and these serve well enough as a basis for society and even for intimacy. But people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed. And this is why they often seem more definite than characters in history, or even our own friends; we have been told all about them that can be told; even if they are imperfect or unreal they do not contain any secrets, whereas our friends do and must, mutual secrecy being one of the conditions of life upon this globe. (*AN*, pp. 67–68)

"It is the function of the novelist," Forster writes, "to reveal the hidden life at its source" (p. 66). As Forster uses the phrase, "the hidden life" is almost synonymous with "the inner life," though he concedes that the latter *sometimes* finds external expression and thus ceases to remain hidden: "The hidden life that appears in external signs is hidden no longer, has entered the realm of action" (p. 66). The historian (and, by implication, the biographer) is confined to this "realm of action." Though "quite as much concerned with character as the novelist," the historian "can only know of its existence when it shows on the surface" (p. 65). Thus, the historian can know something of, say, Queen Victoria's inner life on, and only on, those occasions when a record exists of her conveying her thoughts and feelings, through, for example, a look, a gesture or a remark ("We are not amused"). But the task of the novelist is "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" (p. 66).

To a Cambridge audience in 1927, the mere mention of Queen Victoria would bring to mind Lytton Strachey and the "New Biography." In "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," Forster and Strachey are linked together by Virginia Woolf as potential allies in her battle against the

Edwardians, when she attempts to portray her argument with Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett as part of a more general generational conflict between the Edwardians and a younger group of writers whom she called "Georgians." This latter group is a heterogeneous collection that includes D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, Woolf herself, and Lytton Strachey. What this group was supposed to have in common (other than being between ten and twenty years younger than the Edwardians) is a rejection of Edwardian materialism in favor of a deeper interest in character, personality and the mind, and, consequently, a determination to invent new methods of, so to speak, capturing Mrs Brown. Rather oddly, in view of the importance she attaches to fiction over fact, Strachey's Queen Victoria is listed by Woolf alongside Joyce's Ulysses and Eliot's Mr. Prufrock as one of the "names she [Mrs Brown] has made famous lately" (*WE*, p. 86).

It is not that she regards Strachey's Victoria as a fictional character—on the contrary, she emphasizes that Strachey is "dealing with facts, which are stubborn things" (p. 85)—it is rather that she sees in Strachey's new method of biography a concern with *character* that, in some way, establishes him as an ally in the struggle to be liberated from the Edwardian preoccupation with the "fabric of reality." She does not elaborate on this, but a clue as to how she could see Strachey in this way might be contained in Forster's remarks about Queen Victoria.

In the famous—and, at the time, much admired[30]—final paragraph of *Queen Victoria*, Strachey attempts something close to what Forster identifies as the novelist's task: namely, a depiction of Victoria's thoughts from, as it were, the inside. In this passage, Strachey describes Victoria, as she lay on her deathbed for two days, "speechless and apparently insensible."[31] For those two days she was "blind and silent" (*QV*, p. 245) and "seemed to those who watched her to be divested of all thinking." And yet, Strachey suggests:

> . . . perhaps, in the secret chambers of consciousness, she had her thoughts too. Perhaps her fading mind called up once more the shadows of the past to float before it, and retraced, for the last time, the vanished visions of that long history—passing back and back, through the cloud of years, to older and ever older memories—to the spring woods at Osborne, so full of primroses for Lord Beaconsfield—to Lord Palmerston's queer clothes and high demeanour, and Albert's face under the green lamp, and Albert's first stag at Balmoral, and Albert in his blue and silver uniform, and the Baron coming in through a doorway, and Lord M. dreaming at Windsor with the rooks cawing in the elm-trees, and the Archbishop

> of Canterbury on his knees in the dawn, and the old King's turkey-cock ejaculations and Uncle Leopold's soft voice at Claremont, and Lehzen with the globes, and her mother's feathers sweeping down towards her, and a great old repeater-watch of her father's in its tortoise-shell case, and a yellow rug, and some friendly flounces of sprigged muslin, and the trees and the grass at Kensington. (pp. 245–46)

The repeated use of the word "perhaps" here serves to establish that this is biography and not fiction, and to make it clear to the reader that Strachey does not claim to *know* these to have been Victoria's dying thoughts. Neither is he *guessing* that these were, or even *speculating* that they might have been, her dying thoughts. Rather he is presenting these thoughts *as if* they were hers, a literary device that has both an artistic and a historical purpose. The literary, artistic purpose is to close his book in an artistically satisfying way, achieving something like the effect that a movie achieves when it ends with a series of flashbacks. The historical purpose is to impress upon his readers the "point of view" upon which Strachey placed so much emphasis; in this case, a picture of Victoria that is psychologically convincing and consistent with the available evidence.

But, after all, as there is no historical evidence that these *were* Victoria's dying thoughts. One might argue that this passage belongs in a novel rather than in a biography or a work of history, and, further, that it illustrates the claims made by Forster and Woolf about the advantages of fiction over fact in the depiction of the inner life. Running up against the limits of nonfiction, has Strachey not in this passage succumbed to the desire to "tell us more about Queen Victoria than could be known" and, in the process, shown how that desire impels us towards fiction?

How one responds to this question depends, I think, on how one understands the idea that the novelist can tell us more about Victoria "than *could* be known." It is clearly true that, in describing the dying thoughts of Queen Victoria, Strachey has not only gone beyond the *actual* historical evidence, but also beyond all *possible* historical evidence. He has, as it were, ventured into an area where *only* fiction can be written. But one has to be very careful how one describes and delimits that area, for it is, I think, much smaller than Forster and Woolf imagine it to be.

It is indeed in the nature of things that there *could not possibly be* any evidence that these were, indeed, Victoria's dying thoughts. But this is *not* because of the essentially hidden nature of the inner life, but rather because of the terminal nature of death. If we suppose that Victoria was

not dying, but only *seemed* to be, then we could easily imagine that she recovered and then told someone that those were indeed her thoughts as she lay silent on the bed.

The area of inner life that goes unrecorded is, of course, enormous. People have dreams that they do not tell others, thoughts that they do not express, desires that they keep hidden. But very little of this is *intrinsically* or *essentially* hidden from the historical record: there are, of course, records of dreams, thoughts and desires and historians and biographers make use of these records all the time. The area of inner life that *could not possibly* be recorded is much smaller than is often thought.

In any case, the question does not have the importance that Forster and Woolf attribute to it. Knowing what somebody's inner thoughts are is *not* the same thing as understanding them. This is for two reasons. In the first place, if we do not already know and understand quite a lot about a person, then, even if we had access to their unspoken thoughts we would not be able to understand them. For example, to understand the thoughts that Strachey attributes to Victoria, we would need to know, among other things, who Albert was and what he meant to her, who Lords Beaconsfield and Palmerston were and what their relationship was to the queen, what role "Lehzen" played in Victoria's childhood; where Osborne House is and what significance its spring woods had for Victoria, etc., etc. In the second place, it is perfectly possible to understand certain things about a person better than they understand them themselves, and therefore it is not necessarily true that if we could see the world through someone's eyes we would understand them.

Thus, from the fact that "neither complete clairvoyance nor complete confessional exists" it does not at all follow that "in daily life we never understand each other." Neither does it follow that our restriction to the "external signs" of inner thought condemns us to knowing each other only "approximately." What is meant by saying that we *understand* another person is captured much better by Strachey's notion of a "point of view" than it is by Forster's appeal to the illusory ideal of the clairvoyant and the confessional.

Virginia Woolf's view is close to Forster's, but differs from it in an important and central respect. Broadly speaking, one could say that Forster's concerns are epistemological where Virginia Woolf's are metaphysical. That is to say, where Forster talks about *knowledge* (the difficulties in knowing the hidden, inner life of another, etc.), Woolf talks about *reality*.

Her concern in her argument with Arnold Bennett is to defend the

reality of her characters, which she does by appeal to a characteristic polarity: on the one hand, there is the world of objects, facts and actions, the world (mistakenly) regarded by the "masculine point of view" and by the Edwardian novelists as the "real world"; on the other, there is the world of thought, feeling and imagination, which is, in fact, the real world and it is *this* world that *her* characters inhabit. It is also, she believes, this world that *we* inhabit. At the end of "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," she challenges her audience to reflect on the reality of their mental life, in all its complexity and variety and to compare that rich reality with the impoverished portrayal of it that one finds in the works of the Edwardians:

> In the course of your daily life you have had far stranger and more interesting experiences than the one I have tried to describe. You have overheard scraps of talk that have filled you with amazement. You have gone to bed at night bewildered by the complexity of your feelings. In one day thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains, thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder. Nevertheless, you allow the writers to palm off upon you a version of all this, an image of Mrs Brown, which has no likeness to that surprising apparition whatsoever. (*WE*, p. 86)

In "The New Biography" and *Orlando* Virginia Woolf applied to biography the thoughts about the internal nature of life and reality that she had earlier articulated in her essays on fiction, her short stories and her novels.

IV

The polarity at the heart of "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" reappears in "The New Biography," where the role of the Edwardian novelists is taken by the Victorian biographers, Woolf's criticisms of whom exactly parallel those she had earlier levelled against Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett. She even ends the essay with a direct appeal to her audience that strongly echoes that quoted above:

> . . . we can assure ourselves by a very simple experiment that the days of Victorian biography are over. Consider one's own life: pass under review a few years that one has actually lived. Conceive how Lord Morley would have expounded them; how Sir Sidney Lee would have documented them;

> how strangely all that has been most real in them would have slipped through their fingers.[32]

"All that has been most real" in life necessarily slips through the fingers of the Victorian biographers for a familiar reason: they, like the Edwardian novelists, deal only in external fact, whereas what is most real in our lives is internal.

In the mixture of fact and fiction that is the most striking feature of Nicolson's *Some People,* Woolf sees an implicit recognition of this point. "New" biographers, she thinks, aware that the "old" Victorian methods can no more capture the elusive nature of character and personality than can the methods of the Edwardian novelists, and aware, too, that this is because of a preoccupation with *fact*, are driven towards writing fiction:

> For it would seem that the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than in the act. 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. Yet if it carries the use of fiction too far, so that he disregards the truth, or can only introduce it with incongruity, he loses both words; he has neither the freedom of fiction nor the substance of fact. (*CE 4*, p. 234)

By a deft sleight of the authorial hand, Woolf manages to present the idiosyncratic mixture of fact and fiction in *Some People* as if it were somehow representative of the "new biography" and illustrative of a general problem faced by the entire genre of biography.

The general problem is this: how can biography, tied as it is to facts and external evidence, succeed in capturing the reality of the lives of its subjects when those lives—like all lives—are *essentially* constituted by *internal* events? Though there is no evidence that Nicolson was greatly exercised by this problem, Woolf presents him as writing *Some People* primarily as a response to it. And so, "The New Biography" takes as its central theme the question of whether we can see in the mixture of fact and fiction that Nicolson has produced some kind of solution to this general problem of biography.

Her answer to this question is an emphatic "no," though, perhaps because Nicolson was a personal friend, she expresses this answer with a good deal of polite padding that appears to soften its emphatic nature.

She speaks, for example, of the "territory" that *Some People* "has won for the art of biography" (p. 233) and comments that: "Mr Nicolson has proved that one can use many of the devices of fiction in dealing with real life. He has shown that a little fiction mixed with fact can be made to transmit personality very effectively."

Nicolson, she says: "has devised a method of writing about people and about himself as though they were at once real and imaginary. He has succeeded remarkably, if not entirely, in making the best of both worlds. *Some People* is not fiction because it has the substance, the reality of truth. It is not biography because it has the freedom, the artistry of fiction" (p. 232).

Eventually, however, she makes it clear that she actually regards Nicolson's "method" (of combing fact and fiction) to be a *failed* attempt to solve the central problem of biography, one, indeed, that was bound to be a failure, because fact and fiction *cannot* be successfully combined:

> He [Nicolson] is trying to mix the truth of real life and the truth of fiction. He can only do it by using no more than a pinch of either. For though both truths are genuine, they are antagonistic; let them meet and they destroy each other . . . Let it be fact, one feels, or let it be fiction; the imagination will not serve under two masters simultaneously. (pp. 233–34)

In short: "Truth of fact and truth of fiction are incompatible."

At the end of the article, she suggests that Nicolson's (necessary) failure here in combining the truths of fact and fiction is but one instance of the failure of biography itself—including the new biography—which has not yet found a way of presenting "that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow" (p. 235) that constitutes real life. It is true that she adds that "Mr. Nicolson with his mixture of biography and autobiography, of fact and fiction, of Lord Curzon's trousers and Miss Plimsoll's nose, waves his hand airily in a possible direction" (p. 235), but one can hardly see in this extremely faint praise a conviction that Nicolson had *solved* the problem. If the truths of fact and the truths of fiction are incompatible, then the "possible direction" in which Nicolson airily waves his hand is assuredly a dead end.

For anyone familiar with Virginia Woolf's novels, what requires some kind of explanation is how her criticisms of Nicolson here are compatible with her writing of *Orlando: A Biography*, a fictionalised portrait of her friend, Vita Sackville-West (who was—not entirely coincidentally—Harold

Nicolson's wife). Woolf was working on *Orlando* at the very time that she wrote "The New Biography" (it was published the following year) and, more, even, than her other novels and short stories, it betrays on almost every page her intense preoccupation with the nature, limits and problems of the genre of biography. Perplexingly, however, *Orlando* seems, on the face of it, to revel in precisely the kind of blurring of fact and fiction of which she had criticised Nicolson.

On the one hand, *Orlando* is quite clearly fiction, in a way that the sketches in *Some People* are not (Nicolson, after all, felt the need to tell his readers that he had made up some of the characters and stories in his book, evidently aware that, if he had not pointed this out, his readers would naturally have assumed otherwise). Indeed, *Orlando* is not only fiction but pointedly and determinedly unrealistic fiction. It describes things that *could not possibly* be true. The central character, for example, lives for three hundred years and magically changes sex from male to female. No one could possibly mistake *Orlando* for "truth of fact." On the other hand, it is quite clearly *about* a real person, Vita Sackville-West, as Woolf herself made clear in letters to Vita herself[33] and indicated to at least some of her readers by illustrating the book with pictures of Vita dressed as Orlando and with photographs of Knole, Vita's country estate. If real life and fiction destroy each other when they meet, then how did Woolf think *Orlando* would survive?

So striking is this apparent incongruity that some commentators have been forced into the most strained reading of "The New Biography" in order to accommodate it. Suzanne Raitt, for example, in her otherwise excellent and scrupulous study, *Vita & Virginia: The Work and Friendship of V. Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf*, says: "It is likely that Woolf's reading of *Some People* had some influence on the final form of *Orlando*. She felt that Nicolson had solved the central problem of biography—'on the one hand there is truth on the other there is personality'—by legitimizing a controlled form of fantasy as a means for the transmission of personality."[34] This is, to say the least, a perverse reading of Woolf's central argument in "The New Biography."

If one is not simply to attribute to Woolf a glaring inconsistency, one has to see *Orlando* as an expression of—or, at the very least, consistent with—the view she advances in "The New Biography" that the truths of fact and fiction have to be kept apart. The key to this, I think, lies in Woolf's conviction, articulated directly in "The New Biography" and dramatised in *Orlando*, that biography *could not* solve its own central problem. At the heart of her reason for believing this (and, in my

opinion, her most pernicious legacy for the theory of biography) is her view that the self can be truthfully described *only* in fiction. It follows from this view that biography can never adequately capture the people it attempts to describe, and that the only way of writing an adequate biography (or rather, of accomplishing what an adequate biography, were such a thing possible, *would* accomplish) was not to write biography at all, but a novel. The subtitle of *Orlando*, "*A Biography*," is a joke. *Orlando* is not, of course, a biography, and that, precisely, is the point: only by *not* writing a biography did Woolf believe that she could achieve what a biography seeks, and necessarily fails, to achieve. Only in fiction could she capture the truth about Vita, because the truth about a person is "truth of fiction" rather than "truth of fact."

Woolf's determination to keep the two ("truth of fiction" and "truth of fact") separate appears to have been motivated, above all, by her desire to preserve the integrity and the autonomy of the "inner" life, to protect it from encroachment by, or confusion with, the relatively mundane "outer" world. The central theme of "The New Biography" is the difficulty of conveying the inner personality of a person through the *outer* records of their life, such as form the raw material from which biographies are written. It is her identification of this as *the* central problem of the entire genre of biography that allows her to present her review of *Some People* as a series of reflections on Stracheyesque biography. For, in her mind, the motivation of Strachey's iconoclastic attacks on the Victorians was the same as that which drove Nicolson to present fictional sketches as biographical portraits, and the same as that which inspired her to write *Orlando*. All are understood by her to be responses to the same problem: how to capture and present character and personality *truthfully*.

V

"The New Biography" begins with a statement of that problem, introduced with a quotation from the work of the now largely forgotten writer, Sir Sidney Lee. As the official biographer of Queen Victoria and the man who replaced Woolf's father, Sir Leslie Stephen, as editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, Sir Sidney Lee was enough of an establishment figure, enough of an "Eminent Victorian," to be considered fair game for Bloomsbury ridicule, and, as it turns out, not the kind of person that Virginia Woolf scholars have felt much like defending.[35] Thus it is that, in the numerous books and articles that

discuss "The New Biography," no-one, as far as I know, has pointed out that the sentence from Lee with which the essay begins is misquoted in a rather crucial respect.

The first paragraph of "The New Biography" reads as follows:

> "The aim of biography," said Sir Sidney Lee, who had perhaps read and written more lives than any man of his time, "is the truthful transmission of personality," and no such single sentence could more neatly split up into two parts the whole problem of biography as it presents itself to us today. 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 past failed to solve it. (*CE 4*, p. 229)

Woolf does not provide any references, but the sentence she (mis)quotes here comes from "The Principles of Biography," Sidney Lee's Leslie Stephen Lecture, given at Cambridge in 1911.[36] What Lee actually said was: "The aim of biography is not the moral edification which may flow from the survey of either vice or virtue; it is the truthful transmission of personality."[37] The middle section of this sentence is awkward for Woolf, not only because it makes the sentence a good deal less pithy and quotable, but also because it makes Lee sound much less Victorian than she needs (or, anyway, wants) him to sound. In describing what distinguished the new biography from the old, Woolf chose to use Sidney Lee as a paradigm of the latter, a choice to which she seemed peculiarly and obstinately committed.

The two features of Victorian biography that Woolf takes to be characteristic are (A) an emphasis on moral edification ("the Victorian biographer was dominated by the idea of goodness" *CE 4*, p. 231) and (B) an over-emphasis on *fact* ("Victorian biographies are laden with truth," p. 231). In "The Principles of Biography," Lee identifies *and objects to* both these features. Indeed, his objections to the Victorian emphasis on moral edification as the purpose of biography, form a central theme to the lecture, and he expresses them again and again, not only in the middle section of the sentence quoted by Woolf, but also, for example, in his insistence that: "True biography is no handmaid of ethical instruction" (*EOE*, p. 39)

Lee's view, like Woolf's, is that biography is chiefly concerned with the transmission of *personality*. And, again like Woolf, Lee is convinced that

the proliferation of factual detail characteristic of Victorian biography hindered rather than helped the truthful transmission of personality.

> Let the biographer note down every detail in fullness and at length. But before offering his labour to the world, let him excise every detail that does not make for graphic portrayal of character and exploit. No mere impressionist sketch satisfies the conditions of adequate biography. But personality is not transmitted on the biographic canvas through overcrowded detail. More than ever at the present day is there imperative need of winnowing biographic information, of dismissing the voluminous chaff while conserving the grain. (p. 51)

Such passages suggest that Strachey's famous call for "a becoming brevity" was not quite as novel as it appeared at the time, but it does not suit Woolf's argumentative purposes to acknowledge Lee as a precursor of the New Biography and so she presses on with her ill-founded characterisation of him as the very personification of the Victorian love of moral edification and hard fact.

"The truth of which Sir Sidney speaks, the truth which biography demands," she declares in her second paragraph:

> . . . is truth in its hardest, most obdurate form; it is truth as truth is to be found in the British Museum; it is truth out of which all vapour of falsehood has been pressed by the weight of research. Only when truth had been thus established did Sir Sidney Lee use it in the building of his monument; and no one can be so foolish as to deny that the piles he raised of such hard facts, whether one is called Shakespeare or King Edward the Seventh, are worthy of all our respect. For there is a virtue in truth; it has an almost mystic power. . . . Truth being thus efficacious and supreme, we can only explain the fact that Sir Sidney's life of Shakespeare is dull and that his life of Edward the Seventh is unreadable, by supposing that though both are stuffed with truth, he failed to choose those truths which transmit personality. For in order that the light of personality may shine through, facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity. And it is obvious that it is easier to obey these precepts by considering that the true life of your subject shows itself in action which is evident rather than in that inner life of thought and emotion which meanders darkly and obscurely through the hidden channels of the soul. (*CE 4*, pp. 229–30)

Most of this is quite grotesquely unfair. It is true that Lee's biography of Shakespeare (an extended version of his *DNB* entry on Shakespeare) is rather dull, but its dullness owes more, surely, to the notorious *scarcity* of facts about Shakespeare than to its being "stuffed with truth." The "truths which transmit personality" are simply not available to the biographer of Shakespeare; there are no letters, no recorded conversations, no diaries, no autobiography and no vivid recollections of his personal foibles from his closest friends. Had these things been available to Lee, there is no doubt that he would have chosen to use them. Neither is it accurate to say that, in Lee's Shakespeare we have "truth out of which all vapour of falsehood has been pressed by the weight of research." No biography of Shakespeare that runs to nearly five hundred pages can be entirely devoid of supposition, speculation and plain guess work, and Lee's book contains its fair share of all three, their presence indicated by a liberal use of those stand-by words of the biographer: "perhaps," "possibly," "probably," "doubtless," etc.

It is true that in his Preface, Lee announces that he has "sought to provide students of Shakespeare with a full record of the duly attested facts and dates of their master's career,"[38] and that his aim has been to "supply within a brief compass an exhaustive and well-arranged statement of the facts of Shakespeare's career, achievement, and reputation, that shall reduce conjecture to the smallest dimensions consistent with coherence, and shall give verifiable references to all the original sources of information" (*LWS*, p. vi), but reducing conjecture to its smallest possible dimensions does not mean eliminating it altogether. To take a small but characteristic example: in his chapter dealing with the last few years of Shakespeare's life, Lee writes:

> With puritans and Puritanism Shakespeare was not in sympathy [here Lee provides a footnote, justifying this remark with references to puritans in Shakespeare's plays, which, he claims, "are so uniformly discourteous that they must be judged to reflect his personal feeling"], and he could hardly have viewed with unvarying composure the steady progress that Puritanism was making among his fellow-townsmen. Nevertheless a preacher, doubtless of puritan proclivities, was entertained at Shakespeare's residence, New Place, after delivering a sermon in the spring of 1614. The incident might serve to illustrate Shakespeare's characteristic placability, but his son-in-law Hall, who avowed sympathy with puritanism, was probably in the main responsible for the civility. (p. 268)

If Lee had *really* wanted to use the weight of his research to press all vapour of falsehood out of this passage, it would have condensed to a single, brief sentence: "A preacher was invited to dinner at Shakespeare's address in Stratford in the spring of 1614." In conjecturing about Shakespeare's views on Puritanism, Shakespeare's reaction to the growth of Puritanism in Stratford and whether it was Shakespeare's tolerant nature or his son-in-law's leanings towards Puritanism that explained the preacher's invitation, Lee demonstrates, not only a willingness to go beyond verifiable fact but also—contra Woolf's caricature of him—an interest in Shakespeare's *personality*, together with an adherence to the view recommended by Woolf that: "in order that the light of personality may shine through, facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity" (*CE 4*, p. 229).

The most unfair jibe that Woolf makes at Lee's expense in the above passage, however, is the final one: the accusation that he makes the biographer's task easier than it would otherwise be "by considering that the true life of [his] subject shows itself in action which is evident rather than in that inner life of thought and emotion which meanders darkly and obscurely through the hidden channels of the soul." This is an allusion to a passage in "The Principles of Biography" in which Lee says: "Character which does not translate itself into exploit is for the biographer a mere phantasm" (*EOE*, p. 34). However, Woolf puts upon this remark a meaning which Lee's text shows it cannot possibly have. It clearly does *not* mean that the biographer should be concerned only with the subject's actions and not with his or her *thoughts*. His contrast is *not* the one that the narrator of "The Mark on the Wall" had made between thought and action. Rather, Lee is here expressing something like the thought expressed by Wittgenstein's famous dictum: "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria."[39] In its context, Lee's remark reads as follows:

> Character and exploits are for biographical purposes inseparable. Character which does not translate itself into exploit is for the biographer a mere phantasm. The exploit may range from mere talk, as in the case of Johnson, to empire-building and military conquest, as in the case of Julius Caesar or Napoleon. But character and exploit jointly constitute biographic personality. (*EOE*, pp. 34–35)

It is important to note here that Lee is here quite explicit in including in his conception of "exploit" the conversations with Dr. Johnson that were recorded by Boswell. This point is crucial, because, as we shall see, Woolf, despite her general insistence on a gulf between the inner and the outer, does accept that the inner life—thoughts, feelings, emotions, character and personality—*can* be expressed in conversation. Thus, given that, on Lee's (perhaps rather odd) conception of "exploit," conversation—"mere talk"—is an example of it, the sharp contrast Woolf draws, in criticising Lee's views, between exploit (action) and the inner life is misconceived. To restrict oneself to exploit, as Lee understands the word, is to deny neither the existence nor the importance of the inner life; it is rather simply to seek "outward criteria" for "inner processes."

That inner processes *can* have outward criteria, and that, in particular, the conversations with Dr Johnson recorded by Boswell give us a vivid impression of Johnson's personality, is not just conceded by Woolf, it is emphasised by her. In "The New Biography," while describing the enormous impact that Boswell's *Life of Johnson* had on the development of biography, Woolf stresses that Boswell showed biographers how to turn their attention inwards, towards the thoughts and personality of their subject. "In the old [i.e., pre-Boswell] days," she says, "the biographer chose the easier path":

> A life, even when it was lived by a divine, was a series of exploits. The biographer, whether he was Izaak Walton or Mrs. Hutchinson or that unknown writer who is often so surprisingly eloquent on tombstones and memorial tablets, told a tale of battle and victory . . . And so, perhaps, biography might have pursued its way, draping the robes decorously over the recumbent figures of the dead, had there not arisen toward the end of the eighteenth century one of those curious men of genius who seem able to break up the stiffness into which the company has fallen by speaking in his natural voice. So 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 in personality. (*CE 4*, p. 230)

Through the influence of Boswell, Woolf goes on, biographers of the nineteenth century "sought painstakingly and devotedly to express not

only the outer life of work and activity but the inner life of emotion and thought" (p. 230) but were hampered by their determination to use biography as a tool for moral improvement.

In conceding that Boswell, through reproducing verbatim some of Johnson's spoken words, gives us a glimpse of Johnson's personality, his "inner life of emotion and thought," Woolf effectively undermines the overly rigid dichotomies between outer and inner, the concrete and the rainbow that dominate her entire oeuvre. For, on her own admission, there is at least one biography—Boswell's *Life of Johnson*—which *is* successful in capturing the rainbow of personality and not just the granite of recorded fact. Moreover, the rainbow of personality is here given to us precisely *through* the granite of recorded fact. For, when Boswell transcribes his conversations with Johnson, they become part of the granite, part of the documentary record.

Thus, when, in the passage at the end of "The New Biography" already quoted, Woolf writes, "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" (pp. 234–35), what she says is clearly not true. We *can* name such a biographer and she has, in fact, named him herself. His name is Boswell. And his method does not remain to be discovered. As Woolf has herself noted, Boswell's method of revealing personality was through direct quotation of recorded conversations, and—as she further noted—it is an extremely effective method. With enough granite, and with the right *sort* of granite, a skilled sculptor can indeed, it seems, conjure up a rainbow.

The polarities that dominate Virginia Woolf's thinking about fiction in "Modern Fiction," "The Mark on the Wall," *Jacob's Room*, and "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown"—between thought and action, inner and outer, mind and matter, female and male—forced upon her a picture of biography that simply did not fit with what she herself well knew. Applying those polarities, she persuaded herself that the biographer was someone whose conception of life was dominated by external facts, material objects, and actions, particularly characteristically male actions, such as fighting wars. Thus in *Orlando* she could present as a satire of the genre the following heavy-handed pastiche, which records the exasperation of Orlando's biographer when Orlando, previously a man of action (and, as such, an eminently fit subject for a biography) becomes, not only a woman, but a woman *writer*:

> Life, it has been agreed by everyone whose opinion is worth considering, is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer; life, the same authorities have decided, has nothing whatever to do with sitting still in a chair and thinking. Thought and life are as the poles asunder. Therefore—since sitting in a chair and thinking is precisely what Orlando is doing now—there is nothing for it, but to recite the calendar, blow one's nose, stir the fire, look out the window, until she has done. Orlando sat so still that you cold have heard a pin drop. Would, indeed, that a pin had dropped! That would have been life of a kind. Or if a butterfly had fluttered through the window and settled on her chair, one could write about that.Or suppose she had got up and killed a wasp. Then, at once, we could out with our pens and write. For there would be bloodshed, if only the blood of a wasp. Where there is blood there is life. And if killing a wasp is the merest trifle compared with killing a man, still it is a fitter subject for novelist or biographer than this mere wool-gathering; this thinking; this sitting in a chair day in, day out, with a cigarette and a sheet of paper and a pen and an inkpot. If only subjects, we might complain (for our patience is wearing thin), had more consideration for their biographers! What is more irritating than to see one's subject, on whom one has lavished so much time and trouble, slipping out of one's grasp altogether and indulging—. . . what is more humiliating than to see all this dumb show of emotion and excitement gone through before our eyes when we know that what causes it—thought and imagination—are of no importance whatsoever? . . . If the subject of one's biography will neither love nor kill, but will only think and imagine, we may conclude that he or she is no better than a corpse and so leave her.[40]

That there is something drastically amiss with this caricature is something of which Woolf's admiration of Boswell ought to have alerted her. For it ought to have spurred her to reflect on the significance of the fact that what is generally considered to be the best biography ever written (and acknowledged as such by Woolf herself), is about somebody who never killed anyone, never engaged in any kind of military action and spent much of his life doing precisely what Orlando is here described as doing: thinking and writing. A genre, the paradigm of which is Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is clearly *not* one uncomfortable with the activity—or, rather, the comparative inactivity—of writing. The target of the above passage, then, is not biography as it is (and has been at least since the time of Boswell), but biography as it appears through the distorting lens of Virginia Woolf's confusions about the "inner" and the "outer."

Woolf's concession that, in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, we are provided with not only an account of Johnson's outer life, but also an insight

into his "inner life of emotion and thought" ought to have forced her to rethink the view that one finds expressed again and again in various ways throughout her entire corpus: that the inner life of a person *cannot* be conveyed through external records and description, and the *only* way the inner life can be conveyed is *from the inside*. Boswell, she might have reflected, does not have to be inside Johnson's mind in order to express what is there, he does not have to speak in the first person when he presents Johnson's opinions, tastes and emotions, for the very simple and powerful reason that, having recorded Johnson's conversations, he can let *Johnson* speak in the first person, can let him *speak his mind*. Similarly, a novelist does not have to provide what Gilbert Ryle described as "privileged access" to the mind of his or her characters; it is often enough to have the characters speak. For, if Dr. Johnson can convey his personality through the booming out of a single phrase, why should a fictional character not do the same?

"The New Biography" does not, through the application of Virginia Woolf's thoughts about fiction, show biography to be a failed attempt to accomplish a task that only fiction can carry out successfully; rather it shows that, when they are applied to biography, Virgina Woolf's thoughts about fiction reveal themselves to be fundamentally flawed.

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1. "The New Biography," *New York Herald Tribune*, 30 October 1927; reprinted in *Granite and Rainbow* (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), pp. 150–55, and again in *Collected Essays Volume Four* (London: Hogarth Press, 1967), pp. 229–35; a part of it is reprinted in *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560–1960* , ed. James L. Clifford (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 126–28.

See also Virginia Woolf's later essay on the subject, "The Art of Biography," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1939, pp. 506–10; reprinted in *The Death of the Moth* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), pp. 187–97, and again in *Collected Essays Volume Four* (London: Hogarth Press, 1967), pp. 221–28; a part of it is reprinted in *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560–1960* (see above for details), pp. 128–34. Summaries of the two essays can be found in David Novarr, *The Lines of Life: Theories of Biography, 1880–1970* (Purdue: Purdue University Press, 1986), pp. 51–56 and pp. 88–94.

Extended discussions of these essays can be found in: Julia Briggs, "Virginia Woolf and the 'Proper Writing of Lives,'" in *The Art of Literary Biography*, ed. John Batchelor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 245–65; Elena Gualtieri, "The Impossible Art: Virginia Woolf on Modern Biography," *Cambridge Quarterly* 29 (2000): 349–61; Laura

Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) and "The Newness of the 'New Biography,'" in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France and William St. Clair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 193–218; Suzanne Raitt, *Vita & Virginia: The Work and Friendship of V. Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 17–40; and Alan Shelston, *Biography* (London: Methuen, 1977), pp. 62–73.

2. Harold Nicolson, *Some People* (London: Constable, 1927), reprinted with an author's note in 1951 (London: Folio Society, 1951), and in 1996 with an introduction by Nigel Nicolson (London: Constable, 1996).

3. Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London: Penguin, 1986); hereafter abbreviated *EV.*

4. See, for example, André Maurois's *Aspects of Biography* (New York: Appleton, 1929), which throughout treats Nicolson and Strachey as if they were members of the same movement, and often speaks of "modern biography" as consisting of the works of "Mr. Strachey, Mr. Nicolson and their imitators" (p. 5).

5. Harold Nicolson, *Paul Verlaine* (London: Constable, 1921).

6. Harold Nicolson, *Byron: The Last Journey, April 1823–April 1824* (London: Constable, 1924).

7. Harold Nicolson, *Tennyson: Aspects of His Life, Character and Poetry* (London: Constable, 1925).

8. "We smile to-day at our Victorians, not confidently, as of old, but with a shade of hesitation: a note of perplexity, a note of anger sometimes, a note often of wistfulness has come to mingle with our laughter. For the tide is turning and the reaction is drawing to its close.

It is a matter, in the first place, of historical perspective. As the Victorian age recedes from our vision, the lesser accidents and accessories, which had seemed to us, but a decade ago, to be so characteristic and so humorous, sink down together in the haze of distance, and from them emerges slowly the long line of mountain landmarks, bleak and dominant, and our merriment is for the moment stilled" (p. 1).

9. *The Development of English Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928).

10. See, for example, p. 153, where Nicolson argues that Strachey's *Queen Victoria* fails to count as "pure biography," because it is shaped by a "personal thesis."

11. *Some People* (London: Constable, 1927), p. iv.

12. *Some People* (London: Folio Society, 1951), "Author's Note to this Edition."

13. *Some People* (London, Constable, 1996), p. x.

14. p. xiii. The point Nicolson makes at length here was made much more briefly by Virginia Woolf in "The New Biography": "Each of the supposed subjects holds up in his or her small bright diminishing mirror a different reflection of Harold Nicolson" (see *Collected Essays Volume Four*, p. 233).

15. The remark comes from Strachey's article, "Macaulay," *Nation and Athenaeum*, January 28, 1928, reprinted in *The Shorter Strachey*, ed. Michael Holroyd and Paul Levy (London: Hogarth Press, 1989).

16. "A New History of Rome," *Spectator*, January 2, 1909, p. 20.

17. "Macaulay," *Nation and Athenaeum*, January 21, 1928, reprinted in *The Shorter Strachey*, pp. 93–98.

18. *The Shorter Strachey*, p. 93.

19. "Modern Fiction," first published as "Modern Novels," *Times Literary Supplement*, April 10, 1919, reprinted as "Modern Fiction" in *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), and again in *Collected Essays Volume Two* (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), pp. 103–10; hereafter abbreviated *CE 2*.

20. "The Mark on the Wall," *Two Stories*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1917), reprinted in *Selected Short Stories* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 53–60; hereafter abbreviated *SSS*.

21. *Jacob's Room* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), hereafter abbreviated *JR*.

22. "Is the Novel Dying?" *Cassell's Weekly*, March 28, 1923, see Margaret Drabble, *Arnold Bennett: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), pp. 291–92.

23. Drabble, p. 291.

24. "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," *Nation and Athenaeum*, December 1, 1923, reprinted as "Character in Fiction" in the *Criterion*, July 1924, then, under its original title, as a Hogarth Press pamphlet in October 1924. Reprinted in *A Woman's Essays* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 69–87; hereafter abbreviated *WE*.

25. Arnold Bennett, *Hilda Lessways* (London: Methuen, 1911), p. 3.

26. Woolf acknowledges this (*WE*, p. 78), but her acknowledgement is lost in the development of her case against Bennett and apparently denied in her claim, quoted above, that Bennett *begins* by describing the sort of house Hilda lived in because, as an Edwardian, he feels such a thing necessary as a prelude to intimacy.

27. Woolf alludes to this when she has an Imaginary Edwardian novelist advising her to begin her account of Mrs Brown's character by ascertaining "the wages of shop assistants in the year 1878" (*WE*, p. 82).

28. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Edward Arnold, 1927); hereafter abbreviated *AN*.

29. The connection between Woolf's views and Forster's is discussed by Laura Marcus in "The Newness of the 'New Biography,'" in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France and William St. Clair (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 193–219. She is more sympathetic to both sets of views than I am.

30. See, for example, Maurois, pp. 72–73.

31. Lytton Strachey, *Queen Victoria* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 245; hereafter abbreviated *QV*.

32. *Collected Essays, Volume Four*, p. 234; hereafter abbreviated *CE 4*.

33. See, e.g., Virginia Woolf's letter to Vita Sackville-West, October 9, 1928: "suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind," quoted in Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography Volume Two* (London: Paladin 1982), p. 131, and Mitchell Leaska, *Granite and Rainbow: The Hidden Life of Virginia Woolf* (London: Picador, 1998), p. 272.

34. Suzanne Raitt, *Vita and Virginia: The Work and Friendship of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 29.

35. The fairest discussion of Lee that I have seen in this context is that by Laura Marcus in *Auto/biographical Discourses*. Though she initially seems to dismiss Lee as someone who "appears as an unreconstructed Victorian in the debates about biography in the early twentieth century" (p. 60), she later (p. 92) points out that, in urging brevity, candor and analysis in biography, Lee departed from our image of the Victorian biographer in many respects. She later mentions Lee's "reactions against Victorian biographical panegyric, hero-worship, the 'family' bias and the 'ethical' or 'didactic' bias" (p. 96) without, however, drawing the obvious moral that picturing him as an "unreconstructed Victorian" is therefore extremely inaccurate and unfair.

36. Sir Sidney Lee, *Elizabethan and Other Essays*, ed. F. S. Boas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 31–57; a facsimile of this is included in *Victorian Biography: A Collection of Essays from the Period*, ed. Ira Bruce Nadel (New York: Garland, 1986).

37. *Elizabethan and Other Essays*, 1929, p. 43; hereafter abbreviated *EOE*.

38. Sidney Lee, *A Life of William Shakespeare* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1898), p. v; hereafter abbreviated *LWS*.

39. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), Part I, paragraph 580.

40. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 254–57.