Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in
Lingue e Letterature Europee e Americane
Classe LM-37

Tesi di Laurea

"Hanging up Looking Glasses at Odd Corners": Virginia Woolf and Biography

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Anno Accademico 2013 / 2014

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FOREWORD

Biography was one of Virginia Woolf's life-long interests, but the critical attention her biographical works have received has been little compared to that of her novels. However, as the quotation in the title (taken from Virginia Woolf's essay "The Art of Biography") suggests, her approach to the biographical genre was not traditional and – even if often considered contradictory – it played an important role in the modernist revolution of biography. By rejecting Victorian biographical limitations and exploring new possibilities, Virginia Woolf revolutionised biography: dismissing the value of her biographical works means denying one of Virginia Woolf's major preoccupations and achievements in her literary career.

This thesis is not only about Virginia Woolf's biographical works but also about the different influences on her approach to biography. The first chapter deals with Victorian biography, which Virginia Woolf used to read from an early age. The second chapter focuses on Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf's father and editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*; Virginia Woolf's relationship with her father is, as we will see, one of the fundamental sources of her interest in biography. The third chapter concerns the biographical revolution which occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century with Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicolson, whose works stimulated Virginia Woolf's experiments with biography. The fourth and final chapter provides an analysis of Virginia Woolf's biographical works in chronological order, so as to have a clear vision of how Virginia Woolf's approach to biography developed. The chapter starts therefore with Virginia Woolf's early biographical sketches "Friendships Gallery" (1907) and "The Lives of the Obscure" (1925) followed by the essay "The New Biography" (1927), then it goes on to her biographical novels *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933) and ends with the essay "The Art of Biography" (1939) and Roger Fry's biography (1940), which posed some interesting problems and forced Virginia Woolf to change her own

approach to the genre. Since every work is discussed in a different subchapter, as the table of contents shows, the fourth chapter is followed by some pages of conclusions where I recapitulate the main ideas and achievements of Virginia Woolf's biographical method, in particular how she explored new possibilities to achieve the marriage of granite and rainbow in biography and how she managed to find a compromise between the restraint and pedantry of the Victorians and the freedom and the light-hearted attitude of modern biographers.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the helpful kindness of Elena Gualtieri, Stuart N. Clarke and the Cambridge Library Collection Blog who provided me with some information and material I needed to write this thesis.

CHAPTER I

Biography in Victorian England

While introspection was a great achievement of Romanticism,[1] natural curiosity about the personal and the private life of others has always been a driving force of the human spirit. This elementary curiosity and the wish to understand how someone actually saw the world is also at the root of biography: the aroused interest about someone's life is one of the most basic motivations for writing a biography,[2] and as Alan Shelston states:

> The immediate attraction of biography for the reader is two-fold: it appeals to our curiosity about human personality, and it appeals to our interest in factual knowledge, in finding out 'what exactly happened'.[3]

Biography became thus the literary genre apt to satisfy human curiosity about others and it acquired a widespread readership by awakening the readers' enthusiasm and providing a sort of intimacy between readers and subject. But in the Victorian age something changed: instead of being satisfied, this natural curiosity was often silenced. Surely Victorian biography had its merits, such as providing the biographer with a large reading public, exploiting foreign biography, and producing vast works of erudition.[4] Nevertheless, many critics feel that in the Victorian period biography became "the art of concealment".[5]

First of all, there was a significant change in the author-subject relationship which Leon Edel defines not by chance as a "relationship deeply intimate and highly subjective".[6] The proximity of author and subject has always been fundamental to the writing of an

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1 Leon Edel, *Literary Biography*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973, p. 5.
2 Eric Homberger and John Charmley, "Introduction", in Eric Homberger and John Charmley, eds., *The Troubled Face of Biography*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988, pp. ix-xv, p. xi; Maureen Moran, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, London: Continuum, 2006, p. 111.
3 Alan Shelston, *Biography*, London: Methuen, 1977, p. 3.
4 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, London: Hogarth Press, 1968 (first edition: 1928), pp. 126-127.
5 Robert Gittings, *The Nature of Biography*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978, p. 35.
6 Edel, p. 9.

authentic biography: the closeness between author and subject grants the advantage of personal knowledge and understanding which could never be substituted by a detached academic research.[7] During the Victorian period, however, the author-subject relationship became an author-family-subject relationship: biography started to be driven by a commemorative impulse instead of curiosity and therefore the biographer was chosen by the family as a family retainer who made sure that everything was in order for a sort of literary funeral of the beloved.[8] The image of biography as a literary funeral is quite appropriate, especially in this case: almost every biography started with family history until the birth of the subject and then it narrated the major events in the subject's life until his death, reminding the reader indeed of a funeral procession.[9] So, Victorian biography acquired a contractual basis where the widow or the family granted to the biographer the use of personal papers in return for his/her respect of domestic privacy.[10] This meant that the biographer had the advantage of being the first to use the original material of his/her subject,[11] but at the same time s/he was submitted to the pressures and desires of the family which left no place for an independent judgement of his/her own. In other words, throughout the Victorian period the biographer was essentially controlled and restrained by the deference to the code of domestic privacy imposed by the subject's family.[12] In most cases, being an intimate of the subject became a requisite as a discretion mark instead of an authenticity mark, because only someone close to the subject could be trusted to keep hidden certain aspects of the subject's private life.[13] Besides, more often than not, the biographer commissioned by the family was not even a writer but a relative

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7 Edel, pp. 23-24.
8 Robert Skidelsky, "Only Connect: Biography and Truth", in Eric Homberger and John Charmley, eds., *The Troubled Face of Biography*, pp. 1-16, p. 6.
9 Skidelsky, p. 8.
10 Skidelsky, pp. 4, 8.
11 The most standard form of Victorian biography was in fact the *Life and Letters* of the subject. (Timothy Peltason, "Life Writing", in Herbert F. Tucker, ed., *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, pp. 356-372, p. 364; Alan Shelston, "Introduction", in Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Alan Shelston, ed., London: Penguin Books, 1985, pp. 9-37, p. 18).
12 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 49.
13 Shelston, *Biography,* p. 51.

of the subject:[14] this granted to the family the privacy they desired but resulted of course in inadequate and dishonest works by amateurs.[15] Sometimes it was the widow herself who commemorated her husband by writing his biography,[16] as in the case of Mrs Grote's *The Personal Life of George Grote* (1873),[17] Mrs Kingsley's *Charles Kingsley* (1877),[18] and Lady Burton's *The Life of Sir Richard Francis Burton* (1893).[19]

This commemorative impulse had its greatest manifestation in didactic praise. The subject of biography was considered a hero: the aim of biography was no longer to satisfy human curiosity but to offer instead a moral example in order to achieve a sort of didactic praise.[20] This was not an innovation; on the contrary, it seems that in the Victorian age biography turned back to its origins. It is indeed interesting to go back a few centuries and consider how biography started as praise: medieval chronicles and hagiographies were written to glorify and commemorate socially or religiously eminent figures.[21] The reason behind this was that curiosity has always been considered an inadequate justification for writing a biography: following the Horatian formula of pleasure and instruction, biography acquired a moral and didactic purpose which was glaring from the medieval lives of the saints.[22] From medieval hagiography, Victorian biography retained the *exemplum*: in the same way as the lives of the saints were used to make a moral point, Victorian exemplary figures were used to give an example and a model to emulate. The biographer had thus a functional motivation: s/he not only recorded, but also praised in order to instruct the reader. In the same way, nineteenth-century biography praised famous men and women for the example they set.[23] As

14 Shelston, *Biography,* p. 9.
15 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 52.
16 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, p. 126; Shelston, *Biography*, p. 52.
17 Harriet Grote, *The Personal Life of George Grote,* London: John Murray, 1873.
18 Fanny Kingsley, *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of His Life*, London: H. S. King, 1877.
19 Isabel Burton, *The life of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton*, London: Chapman & Hall, 1893.
20 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 49.
21 Gittings, p. 19.
22 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 6.
23 Peltason, pp. 356-357; Shelston, "Introduction", p. 17; Moran, p. 112; Skidelsky, p. 13.

Robert Skidelsky declares:

> The Victorian age was one of hero-worship. In a period of religious doubts, morals increasingly needed the support of exemplary lives: lives which, in particular, stressed the strong connection between private virtue and public achievement.[24]

The heroes chosen by the Victorian biographer were persons who distinguished themselves in action, thought or art and whose life could be taken as a model to emulate by schoolchildren,[25] like for example Florence Nightingale[26] or David Livingstone[27]. Everything around these heroes was covered by an aura of morality and virtue; if they sinned, it was promptly concealed and no proof could be found.[28] With some exceptions,[29] the focus was on their achievements rather than on the truthful account of their lives.[30] Needless to say, the effect that this practice had on biography was catastrophic: ordinary people with all the contradictions their human nature implied were turned into angelic heroes who never did any wrong.[31] Harold Nicolson points out:

> Something like this happened to nineteenth-century biography. It all began splendidly. We had Moore and Southey and Lockhart; but then came earnestness, and with earnestness hagiography descended on us with its sullen cloud, and the Victorian biographer scribbled laboriously by the light of shaded lamps. It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that the art of biography is intellectual and not emotional. So long as the intellect is undisturbed by emotion you have a good biography. The moment, however, that any emotion (such as reverence, affection, ethical desires, religious belief) intrudes upon the composition of a biography, that biography is doomed. Of all such emotions religious earnestness is the most fatal to pure biography. Not only does it carry with it all the vices of hagiography (the desire to prove a case, to depict an example – the sheer perversion, for such purposes, of fact), but it disinterests the biographer in his subject. A deep belief in a personal deity destroys all deep belief in the unconquerable personality of man. Nor is this all. Religious earnestness tempts people to think in terms of dualism; to draw, that is, a sharp line between the material and the spiritual, between the body and the soul, between the mortal and what they would call the immortal. This sort of thing is very bad for biography. There is no such dualism in

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24 Skidelsky, p. 5.
25 Skidelsky, pp. 9-10.
26 Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), who served as a nurse in the Crimean war, was a reformer of the Army Medical Services and of the nursing organization. (ODNB)
27 David Livingstone (1813-1873) was an explorer in Africa and a missionary, famous for his geographical discoveries. (ODNB)
28 Edel, p. 2.
29 Froude's *Life of Carlyle*, for example, that will be discussed later in this chapter.
30 Shelston, "Introduction", p. 17; Moran, pp. 111-112.
31 Gittings, p. 34; Robert Blake, "The Art of Biography", in Eric Homberger and John Charmley, eds., *The Troubled Face of Biography*, pp. 75-93, p. 86.

> man; there is personality, and that is all; and if one thinks of personality in terms of dualism one is, in fact, not thinking of personality at all. It is this religious earnestness which is responsible for the catastrophic failure of Victorian biography.[32]

According to Harold Nicolson, Victorian biography was a failure because of the pernicious influence of hagiography. In his opinion, two works in particular were badly influenced by hagiography: Arthur Stanley's *Life of Arnold* (1844) and Robert Horton's *Alfred Tennyson: a Saintly Life* (1900).[33] It is also interesting to note how in this passage he appropriates the religious terminology (like "hagiography descended on us", "deity", "religious earnestness", "belief", "tempts", "immortal") and associates it with negative words such as "cloud", "shaded", "doomed", "fatal", "vices", "perversion" and sets it in contrast with what he perceives to be the core of biography: the unconquerable personality of man, thus making the discrepancy he acknowledges between religious earnestness and human personality glaring. Moreover, this willingness to surround his subject with an aura of perfection led the Victorian biographer to manipulate explicitly the material s/he had in favour of a preconceived attitude: the biographer conveyed to the reader not the subject as s/he truly was, but the image of the subject s/he had in his/her mind.[34] Therefore, we can affirm that many Victorian biographies had a quality of unreliability: an excellent example is the life of Dorothy Pattison, where her horrible childhood is transformed into a happy family upbringing.[35] As Robert Gittings writes:

> … the numerous pious lives of heroes and heroines, suitable for prizes, short ones for children at Sunday School, extremely long ones for university or theological students, three-volume monsters for family reading by father, all left the real life virtually untouched and unexplored.[36]

Of course, the immediate consequence of portraying the subject as a virtuous and

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32 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, pp. 110-111.

33 Arthur Stanley, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold*, London: Fellowes, 1844; Robert Horton, *Alfred Tennyson: a Saintly Life*, London: J. M. Dent, 1900; Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, pp. 125-126.

34 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 52.

35 Margaret Lonsdale, *Sister Dora: a Biography*, London: Kegan Paul, 1880; Dorothy Wyndlow Pattison (1832–1878), known as Sister Dora, was an Anglican nun and a nurse. (ODNB)

36 Gittings, p. 37.

praiseworthy individual was a sheer conflict between two of the most renowned Victorian values: truth and discretion.[37] To begin with, truth has always been a claim of the biographer because biography is not concerned with fiction but with demonstrable facts. Besides,

> 'Truth' was a Victorian ideal, but so too was discretion and the prolific output of Victorian biography reveals all too readily the strain between these conflicting virtues. In this respect certain aspects of human personality, most notably those relating to sexual behaviour, were obviously forbidden ground.[38]

A sort of standard censorship aroused from this conflict: the biographer cleansed his/her subject's life not only because s/he was afraid his/her readers could accuse him/her of indecency but also because s/he wanted his/her book to be accepted as an exemplification of the socially supported private and public virtues.[39] Basically, in Victorian England there were numerous taboos.[40] Some were obvious, like sexual deviations or scandalous secrets inside the family; but among the taboo subjects of Victoria's reign there were also drunkenness, mental instability or illness, and doubts regarding the subject's religious faith. A man's relationship with his wife and his family was rarely a subject of discussion.[41] For example, Forster's life of Dickens[42] does not mention either his estrangement from his wife and his relationship with his mistress or the negative aspects of his character, like his outbursts of anger.[43] But these taboos were made to be seen not under a negative light as concealment and denial, but under a positive light as respect for someone's privacy, discretion and refusal to pry. It was generally considered a betrayal of trust on part of the biographer to expose the subject's weaknesses: it was more a social obligation than an individual and consciously applied censorship.[44] Still, this respectful silence was obviously to clash with the natural human curiosity that was at the

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37 Shelston, “Introduction”, pp. 17-19.
38 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 9.
39 Skidelsky, p. 5.
40 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 9.
41 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 50.
42 John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, London: Cecil Palmer, 1872-1874.
43 Gittings, p. 35; Moran, p. 112; Michael Benton, *Literary Biography: An Introduction*, Oxford: John Wiley, 2010, pp. 56, 118-121.
44 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 51.

root of the biographical genre.

Despite the major faults of Victorian biography we have seen so far, the nineteenth century left us three biographical masterpieces:[45] Carlyle's *Sterling* (1851),[46] Gaskell's *Charlotte Brontë* (1857),[47] and Froude's *Life of Carlyle* (4 volumes, 1882-4).[48] Carlyle's *Life of Sterling* is an interesting example of Victorian biography, especially if compared with Hare's portrayal of the same man. John Sterling[49] was a peculiar subject for a Victorian biography: he died at the age of thirty-eight without having accomplished any achievement which, as we have seen before, was a crucial factor in making someone worthy of being turned into a hero with an appropriate Victorian biography. According to Alan Shelston, "John Sterling, a prominent Cambridge intellectual of whom great things were expected, failed, at least on the surface, to fulfil his potential".[50] After his death, Archdeacon Hare wrote his official life[51] more as an apology for the failure of his subject than as a work of laudatory praise. Carlyle was dissatisfied with it and decided to publish his own account, basically a counter-biography of Sterling's life.[52] Even if the period covered by the two biographies is the same, the interpretation of the two authors could not be more different. Instead of focusing on what was expected from Sterling and how he failed according to these expectations, Carlyle gives us a vivid portrayal of a tragic life always fighting against persistent ill health.[53]

> For, I say, it is by no means as a vanquished *doubter* that he figures in the memory of those who knew him; but rather as a victorious *believer*, and under great difficulties a victorious doer.[54]

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45 Gittings, p. 35.
46 Thomas Carlyle, *The Life of John Sterling*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1851.
47 Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Alan Shelston, ed., London: Penguin Books, 1985.
48 James Anthony Froude, *Froude's Life of Carlyle*, John Clubbe, ed., Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979.
49 John Sterling (1806-1844) was a writer and a poet. (ODNB)
50 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 53.
51 J. C. Hare, 'Sketch of the Author's Life', in J. C. Hare, ed., *Essays and Tales by John Sterling*, 2 vols, London: John W. Parker, 1848, pp. i-ccxxxii.
52 Carlyle, pp. 3-11.
53 Shelston, *Biography*, pp. 53-57.
54 Carlyle, pp. 9-10.

Carlyle's account is a skilfully structured work able to convey the personality of a round character. Gaskell's *Charlotte Brontë,* which is considered by some the best English biography of the Victorian age, dealt successfully with some sensitive issues.[55] Of course Gaskell had to take into tactful consideration the feelings of Charlotte's father and widowed husband while writing her biography, but she did not let them perniciously influence her work: for example, in her account of the Clergy Daughters' school at Cowan Bridge[56] it is clear that she held the school responsible for Charlotte's fragile health and the death of two of her sisters.[57] In her biography Charlotte Brontë emerges as a real person in all her individuality. Nevertheless, as Alan Shelston points out, "Mrs Gaskell is always circumspect when dealing with Charlotte's relationships with men".[58] In particular, Gaskell felt the need to suppress some details of Charlotte's love for Constantin Héger, a married man,[59] since they would have been too great an affront to contemporary morals and a possible source of distress to Charlotte's still-living friends, father and husband, showing thus the adherence of her work to the Victorian social scale of values and taboos.[60] Gaskell succeeded in giving us the portrayal of a friend instead of a distant authoress, underlining the importance of the biographical author's convictions and points of view which had basically been suppressed in nineteenth-century biography.[61] Froude's *Life of Carlyle* was published in 1882–84 and it caused much controversy, largely by suggesting marital discord[62] and sexual inadequacy on Carlyle's part together with exposing other flaws of Carlyle's personality.[63] For example, Froude did not conceal Carlyle's guilt after

55 Gittings, p. 36; Shelston, "Introduction", p. 9.
56 Gaskell, pp. 96-109.
57 Shelston, "Introduction", pp. 26, 28; Gittings, p. 36.
58 Shelston, "Introduction", p. 35.
59 Gaskell, chapters XI-XIII.
60 Even if the first edition was judged scandalous by her contemporaries for what it revealed of the beloved author to the point that Gaskell had to withdraw and revise her work. (Alan Shelston, "Appendix A: Two Revised Chapters from the Third Edition of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*", in Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Alan Shelston, ed., pp. 527-556, pp. 527-528.)
61 Shelston, "Introduction", pp. 9-37; Moran, p. 112.
62 Froude, ch. 8.
63 Skidelsky, p. 5.

the death of his wife, a sense of guilt given by the realization of his failure as a husband, as we can see from this passage:

> There broke upon him in his late years, like a flash of lightning from heaven, the terrible revelation that he had sacrificed his wife's health and happiness in his absorption in his work; that he had been oblivious of his most obvious obligations, and had been negligent, inconsiderate, and selfish. The fault was grave and the remorse agonizing.[64]

The frankness of Froude's account broke the social standards of nineteenth-century biographies and was in fact attacked by Carlyle's family: he was accused of being a traitor without any respect for the sanctity of private life and his work was judged disturbing and heartless.[65] Despite this, Froude can be said to have done faithfully what Carlyle himself had wanted him to do.[66] In the preface to his work, Froude wrote:

> Carlyle knew that he could not escape. Since a "Life" of him there would certainly be, he wished it to be as authentic as possible.[67]

According to Carlyle, showing the flaws of heroes would not diminish their achievements. Froude managed to give us an honest account of what Carlyle really was,[68] something extremely unusual for the biographies of the period. Moreover, Froude has been recognized by critics as the first author to introduce the aspect of satire into English biography.[69] Finally, in the Victorian age there was a great and fundamental contribution to biographical studies. In particular, a prestigious work that is still today a point of reference in the biographical field was undertaken in 1882: the *Dictionary of National Biography* by Sir Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf's father, whose works and influence on his daughter shall be discussed in the following chapter.

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64 Froude, p. 316.
65 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, pp. 129-130.
66 Gittings, p. 36.
67 Froude, p. 78.
68 Gittings, p. 36; John Clubbe, "Preface" and "Editor's Introduction", in James Anthony Froude, *Froude's Life of Carlyle*, John Clubbe, ed., pp. xiii-60, pp. xiii-xvii, 1-60.
69 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, pp. 130-131.

CHAPTER II

Leslie Stephen

Life and Works

Sir Leslie Stephen,[70] an eminent philosopher, literary critic, and biographer of the Victorian age, was born in London in 1832. He belonged to a family with a strong legal and evangelical tradition: his grandfather, his father and his brother all held renowned legal positions in society, while his sister became an Evangelical nun devoted to good causes. He was a frail and sensitive child: Quentin Bell describes him as "a nervous, delicate boy, his mother's darling, fond of and over-excited by poetry, too sensitive to be able to endure an unhappy ending to a story".[71]

In 1842 he started to attend Eton College but found his home life more educative thanks to its literary cultivation and freedom in reading. He then attended King's College from 1848 without much enthusiasm and in 1850 he entered Trinity Hall, his father's college. There his health improved and he became committed to academic work – gaining a mathematical scholarship in 1851 – and he also became interested in sports. He was described by his friends at college as

> a man who never gave way to cynicism or bitterness, who never domineered over others, or uttered a word which might give pain to any one in his presence. There was no place for selfish or ungenerous thoughts in his pure, manly, and truly affectionate heart.[72]

In order to win a fellowship to remain at Trinity Hall, Stephen had to take orders: he was made deacon in 1855 and in 1856 he was admitted a presbyter fellow and appointed to the

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70 The following account of Leslie Stephen's life and works is taken from: Alan Bell, "Leslie Stephen" (ODNB); Mark Hussey, "Stephen, Sir Leslie (1832-1904)", in *Virginia Woolf A to Z: a Comprehensive Reference for Students, Teachers and Common Readers to Her Life, Work and Critical Reception*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 270-271; Frederic William Maitland, *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, Bristol: Thoemmes, 1991; Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf a Biography*, London: Hogarth Press, 1972, vol. 1, *Virginia Stephen 1882-1912*, chapters 1-4.

71 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, p. 7.

72 Maitland, p. 154.

junior tutorship at Cambridge. As he took an interest in philosophy, his faith began to waver: the clerical side of his tutorship started to weigh on him, he found his religious duties less and less appealing and he realized that his decision to be ordained had been dictated primarily by filial duty, since he wished to spare his family the expenses of supporting him after graduation and at the same time felt their evangelical expectation.

As a distraction from the pressure of these years, Stephen dedicated himself to alpinism: in 1858 he joined the Alpine Club (which he then presided from 1865 to 1868) and he became renowned as one of the best English alpinists by conquering the Eiger Joch in 1859 and the Schreckhorn in 1861. In 1871 he published his alpine essays in a volume entitled *The Playground of Europe*,[73] which became one of the classics of alpine literature, and he continued to cultivate his passion for alpinism throughout all his life.

In 1862 Stephen was asked to resign his tutorship because of his refusal to do chapel services, but stayed in Cambridge for another two years: it was in this period that he started to consider the possibility of a literary career. He left Cambridge in 1864 and finally resigned his fellowship in 1867; in 1875 he formally signed his renunciation of Anglican orders defining himself an agnostic. In 1863 he visited America where he met James Russell Lowell (who would later be Virginia's godfather) and Charles Eliot Norton with whom he would have a lifelong correspondence. Back in England, Stephen started writing unsigned contributions for London papers and in 1865 he published *Sketches from Cambridge, by a Don*.[74] He also began writing literary contributions for the *Cornhill Magazine*, of which he would become editor in 1871 (holding the post for eleven years); afterwards he would collect his literary contributions and republish them in the three series of *Hours in a Library* (1874-1879).[75]

In 1867 Stephen married Miss Harriet Marian (Minny) Thackeray, one of the two

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73 Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe*, London: Longmans, 1871.
74 Leslie Stephen, *Sketches from Cambridge, by a Don*, London: Macmillan, 1865.
75 Leslie Stephen, *Hours in a Library*, London: Smith, Elder, 1874-1879.

daughters of the famous writer, and their first daughter Laura was born in 1870 (to Stephen's dismay, she had a mental handicap and in 1891 she was placed in an asylum). Stephen pursued his literary career publishing in 1873 *Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking*,[76] which established him as a leading agnostic writer. Minny Stephen died unexpectedly of eclampsia in November 1875 and Stephen decided to ease the pain through his work writing many articles for the *Cornhill* and publishing his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*,[77] a work he had already conceived in 1871.

On 26 March 1878, Stephen married the widow Julia Prinsep Duckworth, his neighbour and friend who had been close to him in the time of his mourning. She had already three children (George, Stella and Gerald Duckworth) and after the marriage with Stephen another four were born: Vanessa (b. 1879), Thoby (b. 1880), Virginia (b. 1882), and Adrian (b. 1883). For Stephen the second marriage brought a period of renewed domestic happiness. Since 1876 he worked on *The Science of Ethics*[78] which was published in 1882 but did not meet his expectations. In summer 1881 Stephen accepted George Smith's proposal of becoming the editor of a national biographical dictionary: as he realized from the beginning and as we shall see more thoroughly later, the *Dictionary of National Biography*[79] would play a major role in Stephen's literary career. Clearly, this was not an easy task and from 1886 Stephen started suffering from some medical problems due to overstrain which led in the end to his full resignation as editor of the dictionary in April 1891; nevertheless, he continued to give his contribution with important literary articles until the completion of the dictionary and in 1893 he was able to publish *An Agnostic's Apology and other Essays*.[80] In 1895 Julia Stephen died suddenly because of a rheumatic fever leaving Stephen heartbroken; her

76 Leslie Stephen, *Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking*, London: Longmans, 1873.
77 Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, London: Smith, Elder, 1876.
78 Leslie Stephen, *The Science of Ethics*, London: Smith, Elder, 1882.
79 Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, eds., *Dictionary of National Biography*, London: Smith, Elder, 1885-1900.
80 Leslie Stephen, *An Agnostic's Apology and other Essays*, London: Smith, Elder, 1893.

daughter Stella died just two years later of peritonitis.

After his second wife's death, Stephen became domestically and emotionally demanding (he has been described, perhaps too harshly, as "a tiresome, petulant, demanding, querulous, self-pitying old man")[81] which provoked some domestic discord, as we shall see later on in this chapter. Leonard Woolf, who met Stephen in these years at Cambridge, writes in his autobiography that

> He was one of those bearded and beautiful Victorian old gentlemen of exquisite gentility and physical and mental distinction on whose face the sorrows of all the world had traced the indelible lines of suffering nobility. He was immensely distinguished as a historian of ideas, literary critic, biographer, and the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*.[82]

Stephen dedicated the following years to the publication of the three volumes of *The English Utilitarians*[83] and after being elected president of the London Library in 1892 and being awarded some honorary degrees from the most prestigious English universities, he was elected one of the founding fellows of the British Academy and was also given the KCB in 1902. In his later years he started to withdraw from social life particularly because of his growing deafness and in 1902 he was diagnosed with cancer. He succeeded in publishing the lectures he prepared for the Ford lectureship in English history at Oxford[84] just before his death, on 22 February 1904.

Despite his own disparagement of his works and his conviction to be a second-rate philosopher, he was considered in his own time a leading literary figure. Moreover, as Rosenbaum underlines, Stephen was also a major influence on the next generation:

> Stephen's work influenced not only his daughter's criticism, biographies and polemics, but also the literary and historical writings of Leonard Woolf, the biographies of Lytton Strachey, the essays of Keynes, the criticism of MacCarthy, and the biographical and critical writings of Forster. The writing father was significant for Bloomsbury as a Victorian moral philosopher and historian of ideas, as a literary historian and critic, and – perhaps most important – as a biographer.[85]

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81 Roger Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 13.
82 Leonard Woolf, *An Autobiography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, vol. 1, *1880-1911*, p. 115.
83 Leslie Stephen, *The English Utilitarians*, London: Duckworth, 1900.
84 Leslie Stephen, *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century*, London: Duckworth, 1904.
85 S. P. Rosenbaum, *Victorian Bloomsbury: the Early Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group*, vol. 1,

As we can assume from this quotation, Stephen had a huge influence not only on his daughter Virginia, but on all the Bloomsbury group. His works were admired, discussed and taken as an example. Even though he aimed at being remembered as a famous philosopher, Stephen was especially praised for his biographical achievements that shall be discussed in detail in the following paragraph.

Biographical works

Leslie Stephen's enjoyment of literature was deeply intertwined with his passion for biography: his favourite book was indeed an English masterpiece of biography, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*,[86] and as Rosenbaum writes, "he valued literature most for its expression of ideas and its revelation of the author's character".[87] Throughout his life, Stephen undertook four types of biography: periodical essays, monographs about men of letters, authorised lives, and dictionary entries.[88] In his opinion, a good biographer must be "fairly diligent, moderately intelligent, and scrupulously sincere".[89] Already in 1876 Stephen's literary articles were praised for their biographical insight,[90] but he made his official debut in biography with his contribution to Macmillan's *English Men of Letters*,[91] a series of literary biographies written by some leading literary figure of the period. In particular, Stephen wrote *Samuel Johnson* (1878),[92] *Alexander Pope* (1880),[93] and *Swift* (1882)[94] for the first series and *George Eliot*

London: Macmillan, 1987, pp. 37-38.

86 James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, London: Henry Baldwin for Charles Dilly, 1791; Maitland, p. 486.

87 Rosenbaum, *Victorian Bloomsbury*, p. 38.

88 Rosenbaum, *Victorian Bloomsbury*, p. 53.

89 Maitland, p. 3.

90 Alan Bell, ODNB.

91 John Morley, ed., *English Men of Letters*, London: Macmillan, first series: 39 vols., 1878-1892, second series (unnumbered series), 1902-1919.

92 Leslie Stephen, *Samuel Johnson*, London: Macmillan, 1878, in *English Men of Letters*, first series, vol. 1.

93 Leslie Stephen, *Alexander Pope*, London: Macmillan, 1880, in *English Men of Letters*, first series, vol. 20.

94 Leslie Stephen, *Swift*, London: Macmillan, 1882, in *English Men of Letters*, first series, vol. 27.

(1902)[95] and *Hobbes* (1904)[96] for the second series. Following Stephen's dislike for the overlong and over-reverent biographical fashion of the period, these biographies were concise but well documented thanks to an accurate historical context and well chosen quotations.[97] In 1884 Henry Fawcett[98] died and Stephen wrote his biography at the request of his family: the *Life of Henry Fawcett*[99] was published in 1885 and was an immediate success due to its autobiographical quality (Stephen and Fawcett were close friends at Cambridge).[100] In 1895 Stephen published the biography of his elder brother Sir James Fitzjames Stephen,[101] which he defined "the stiffest piece of work I ever undertook":[102] the brothers had never been particularly close, few letters were available, many of Fitzjames's intimates had died and Leslie had little familiarity with some aspects of his brother's career. Nevertheless, Stephen was content with the final result and it also satisfied his sister-in-law. In his old age, Stephen was frequently asked to write memorial articles about his old friends when they died:[103] for example, he commemorated, among others, James Dykes Campbell, John Richard Green, James Payn, Henry Sidgwick, George Smith, and James Russell Lowell.[104] All of Stephen's biographies were well written and an example for forthcoming writers.[105]

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95 Leslie Stephen, *George Eliot*, London: Macmillan, 1902, in *English Men of Letters*, second series, vol. 1 (the series being unnumbered, this was the first volume in order of appearance).

96 Leslie Stephen, *Hobbes*, London: Macmillan, 1904, in *English Men of Letters*, second series, vol. 14 (the series being unnumbered, this was the fourteenth volume in order of appearance).

97 Alan Bell, ODNB.

98 Henry Fawcett (1833-1884) was an English economist and politician. (ODNB)

99 Leslie Stephen, *Life of Henry Fawcett*, London: Smith, Elder, 1885.

100 Alan Bell, ODNB.

101 Leslie Stephen, *Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, London: Smith, Elder, 1895.

102 Leslie Stephen to Charles Norton, 23 Dec 1894, in Maitland, p. 420.

103 Alan Bell, ODNB.

104 James Dykes Campbell (1838-1895) was a Scottish merchant and writer, famous for his biography of Coleridge; John Richard Green (1837-1883) was an English historian; James Payn (1830-1898) was an English novelist and journal editor; Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) was an English utilitarian philosopher and economist; George Smith (1824-1901) was an English publisher, businessman, and the founder of the *Dictionary of National* Biography. (ODNB); James Russell Lowell (1819-1891) was an American poet, critic, editor, and diplomat; he was also Virginia Woolf's godfather.

105 Rosenbaum, *Victorian Bloomsbury*, pp. 52-53.

The *Dictionary of National Biography*

Leslie Stephen's major achievement in biography was his contribution to the *Dictionary of National Biography*. This work was planned by George Smith, who thought at first of creating a universal biographical dictionary but, on Stephen's advice, opted then for narrowing the project down to national coverage. Basically, the *Dictionary* is a collection of biographical entries about English subjects and is still today a point of reference for scholars. Published between 1885 and 1900, it comprised sixty-three volumes which contained altogether 29,120 lives. In 1992, Oxford University Press decided to update the dictionary: the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (called at the beginning *New Dictionary of National Biography*) was published in 60 volumes and in an online edition for subscribers in 2004.

Leslie Stephen was chosen by George Smith as editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* at the beginning of the project, in the summer of 1881. Stephen made an announcement on *The Athenaeum* in 1882 to find contributors for the dictionary: he gave as a model to contributors the life of Addison he had prepared and said he sought useful, lucid, concise and interesting information;[106] in Alfred Ainger's words, Stephen's policy on eulogy was "no flowers by request"[107] – meaning he was not interested in superfluous eulogies but only in relevant facts – and Stephen wrote to Norton when the project was quite well advanced that still his "greatest worry is in struggling against the insane verbosity of the average contributor. I never knew before how many words might be used to express a given fact".[108] Stephen also concentrated on finding a skilled sub-editor and among various candidates he chose Sidney Lee[109] who proved to be an efficient assistant.[110] Editing the

106 Alan Bell, ODNB.
107 Noel Annan, *Leslie Stephen: the Godless Victorian*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984, p. 84; Andrew McNeillie, "Bloomsbury", in Susan Sellers, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp.1-28, pp. 1, 21.
108 Leslie Stephen to Charles Norton, 13 April 1884, in Maitland, p. 383.
109 Sidney Lee (1859-1926).
110 Alan Bell, ODNB.

dictionary was an enormous commitment on Stephen's part, but he was conscious of this even at the beginning of the task and in 1882 he wrote to Norton:

> I have given up the *Cornhill*, and taken to a biographical dictionary, which will last me the rest of my life – if, that is, it succeeds in living at all. It is of British names exclusively, but I find that there are 900 A's to begin with, and God knows how many more we shall come out in volumes, four in a year, it is proposed, and, if we get it done in 50 [volumes] I shall be surprised.[111]

According to Maitland, "Stephen's feeling about the Dictionary were mixed":[112] in his letters Stephen expressed both pride and complaint about the work defining it as "a more useful bit of work than any books of mine are likely to be",[113] but also as "infernal"[114] and as a "weight",[115] a "damned thing",[116] and a "drudgery".[117] Also his family could not ignore the amount of work the dictionary required: his wife Julia was concerned by the strain the work put on him, while his son Thoby, aged 4 at the time, produced a box full of rubbish and called it a "contradictionary box"[118] and Virginia later remarked in her diary that "the DNB crushed [Adrian's] life out before he was born. It gave me a twist of the head too. I shouldn't have been so clever, but I should have been more stable, without that contribution to the history of England".[119] In 1891 Stephen resigned from the editorship because of medical troubles due to overwork and Lee took his place, but Stephen continued to contribute to the dictionary until his death.[120] Altogether, Stephen edited the first twenty-six volumes of the *Dictionary of National Biography* and wrote 378 of the biographies it contained.[121]

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111 Leslie Stephen to Charles Norton, 25 Dec 1882, in Maitland, pp. 375-376.
112 Maitland, p. 397.
113 Leslie Stephen to Charles Norton, 16 or 26 Oct 1884, in Maitland, p. 383.
114 Leslie Stephen to G. Croom Robertson, 5 Aug 1883, in Maitland, p. 378.
115 Leslie Stephen to Charles Norton, 22 Jan 1884, in Maitland, p. 381; Leslie Stephen to Charles Norton, 6 June 1891, in Maitland, p. 403.
116 Leslie Stephen to Charles Norton, 11 Jan 1888, in Maitland, p. 394.
117 Leslie Stephen to G. Croom Robertson, 4 April 1887, in Maitland, p. 391.
118 Leslie Stephen to Charles Norton, 23 Aug 1885, in Maitland, p. 387.
119 Virginia Woolf, 3 Dec 1923 entry, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Anne Olivier Bell, ed., London: Hogarth Press, 1977-1984, vol. 2, p. 277.
120 Alan Bell, ODNB.
121 Mark Hussey, "*Dictionary of National Biography*", in *Virginia Woolf A to Z*, p. 72.

In recent years there have been some controversies about the *Dictionary of National Biography*, in particular about its discrimination against women. Despite the fact that among Stephen's biographies in the dictionary there were for example the lives of the Brontës, Jane Marcus declared that

> Leslie Stephen's essays were authoritative male discourse, argumentative and assertive. The *Dictionary of National Biography* is a patriarchal masterpiece in its exclusion of women and of men who did not fit the pattern of power. Sitting on the library shelves, the volumes of the DNB are a horizontal monument to phallocentric culture.[122]

This was something that the *New Dictionary of National Biography* tried to amend. In *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography*,[123] Henry Colin Gray Matthew affirmed for instance that "women were literally an appendage to men in most articles. They were mentioned only at the end, following the death of the subject of the article, like a vampirish adjunct"[124] and he encouraged particularly suggestions for more female subjects, something that the original *Dictionary of National Biography* clearly lacked.

Studies of a Biographer

Stephen collected a series of biographical essays he wrote during his literary career for the *National Review*, the *Fortnightly Review*, the *Cornhill Magazine*, the *Nineteenth Century*, the *Quarterly Review* and the *Monthly Review* and published them in the four volumes of *Studies of a Biographer*.[125] The volumes appeared in 1898 and 1902 and contained the total amount of 29 essays.

The first essay, "National Biography",[126] is particularly interesting because in it

122 Jane Marcus, "The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination", in Jane Marcus, ed., *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, Ann Arbor: UMI, 2000, pp.7-36, p. 11.
123 Henry Colin Gray Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
124 Matthew, p. 16.
125 Leslie Stephen, *Studies of a Biographer*, London: Duckworth, 1898 and 1902.
126 Leslie Stephen, "National Biography", in *Studies of a Biographer,* pp. 1-36.

Stephen underlines a key-point of his biographical method: the fundamental importance of the context and therefore the close connection between history and biography. He wrote:

> The provinces of the historian and the biographer are curiously distinct, although they are closely related. History is of course related to biography inasmuch as most events are connected with some particular person. […] And, on the other side, every individual life is to some extent an indication of the historical conditions of his time.[127]

Unfortunately, according to Stephen, this bond between history and biography is often ignored and in many biographical accounts we remain ignorant of the contextual influence on the subject:

> Thus I have sometimes noticed that a man may be in one sense a most accomplished biographer; that is, that he can tell you off-hand a vast number of facts, genealogical, official, and so forth, and yet has never, as we say, put two and two together. I have read lives giving minute details about the careers of authors, which yet prove unmistakably that the writers had no general knowledge of the literature of the period.[128]

So, in Stephen's opinion,

> to facilitate what I may call the proper reaction between biography and history; to make each study throw all possible light on the other; and so to give fresh vitality to two different lines of study[129]

is the first duty of the biographer.

According to Maitland, Stephen regarded the *Studies of a Biographer* "merely as magazine twaddlings, which he has swept up because a step-son wishes it".[130] Despite his judgement, the *Studies of a Biographer* received much critical acclaim (some critics judged it better than his literary essays contained in *Hours in a Library*)[131] because it clearly showed Leslie Stephen's ability in the skilful handling of character.[132]

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127 Stephen, "National Biography", p. 12.
128 Stephen, "National Biography", pp. 13-14.
129 Stephen, "National Biography", p. 15.
130 Maitland, p. 440.
131 Maitland, p. 440.
132 Alan Bell, ODNB.

Relationship with Virginia

Although he was busy with the *Dictionary of National Biography* when Thoby, Vanessa, Virginia and Adrian were little, Leslie Stephen always found some time to dedicate to his children: in the evenings, for example, he would entertain them drawing, cutting animal figures out of paper with a pair of scissors, telling stories about alpine adventures or reading novels aloud. Moreover, Stephen and his wife Julia decided to educate their children themselves at home with the aid of governesses until the boys were old enough to enter college: Julia would teach them Latin, history and French, while Leslie would teach them mathematics. This choice, apart from economic reasons, was probably due also to the fact that Stephen, as we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, enjoyed more his home education than school when he was young. He also tried to teach something to his daughter Laura, but he had to give up in front of her mental deficiencies and to his dismay the only child who was good at mathematics was Thoby, while all the others proved quite a disappointment in this field.[133] After Julia's death in May 1895, he went on teaching to his children alone with much less enthusiasm and much more impatience. In fact after his wife passed away, Stephen became depressed and gloomy, abandoning himself to grief and creating a wearing and oppressive atmosphere: he often broke down in front of his children, weeping and wishing he was dead too, while his children were embarrassed and sat in awkward silence not knowing what to do.[134] Virginia thus narrates the dreadful summer following her mother's death in "A Sketch of the Past":[135]

> Father used to sit sunk in gloom. If he could be got to talk – and that was part of our duty – it was about the past. It was about the "old days". And when he talked, he ended with a groan. He was getting deaf, and his groans were louder than he knew. Indoors he would walk up and down the room, gesticulating, crying that he had never told mother how he loved her.Then Stella would fling her arms round him and protest. Often one

133 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, pp. 26-27.
134 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, p. 40.
135 Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", in *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, Jeanne Schulkind, ed., London: Hogarth Press, 1978, pp. 64-137.

> would break in upon a scene of this kind. And he would open his arms and call one to him. We were his only hope, his only comfort, he would say. And there kneeling on the floor one would try – perhaps only to cry.[136]

As time passed and his children grew, things started to get better. Stephen wanted to mend their relationship and started to take an interest in their development: for example, Thoby entered Cambridge, where Stephen once visited him and met his friends; Vanessa began to dedicate herself to painting attending an art school; and Virginia was passionate about literature. Finally he could have stimulating discussions about art and literature with his children and was curious of what would become of them. Unfortunately in this period Stephen was diagnosed with cancer and died a little later, in February 1904.[137]

Leslie Stephen had a particularly close relationship with his daughter Virginia, a relationship which, as we shall see, brought her in the end to develop ambivalent feelings towards him. She grew closer to him than all his other children and from his letters to his wife, it emerges that Virginia was clearly Leslie's favourite child: he used to call her affectionately “Ginia” and he felt that she resembled him very much[138] because she, like him, had a sensitive temperament and a strong intellectual orientation.[139] This preference was mutual as this interesting episode in Virginia's childhood confirms:

> One evening, jumping about naked in the bathroom, she shocked and startled her elder sister by asking her which of her parents she liked best. Vanessa was appalled that such a question could be put; but she replied at once, for she was a very honest and forthright girl, that she thought she loved her mother best. Virginia, after much delay and deliberation, decided that she preferred her father.[140]

Virginia was indeed very fond of her father and, for example, she used to tell him a story

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136 Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, p. 94.

137 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, p. 84; Virginia Woolf, “Reminiscences”, in *Moments of Being*, Jeanne Schulkind, ed., pp. 28-59, p. 52.

138 Leslie Stephen wrote to Julia very early in Virginia's life that "she is certainly very like me, I feel". Leslie Stephen to Julia Stephen, 25 Jan. 1891; quoted in Katherine C. Hill, “Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution”, *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 96 (1981), pp. 351-62, p. 352.

139 Hill, p. 352; Jane Elizabeth Fisher, “The Seduction of the Father: Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen”, *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 18 (1990), pp. 31-48, p. 32.

140 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, p. 26.

every night. When she was nine, her mother caught her imitating him by twisting a lock of hair as she read, just like Stephen used to.[141] When she grew older, she began to share also his passion for walking: she would often accompany him in his walks (especially during the holidays at St. Ives) and they would take almost daily strolls together in Kensington Gardens.[142] This was a period of domestic happiness and bliss not only for Stephen but also for Virginia, as she herself recalled many years later in her diary:

> how beautiful they were, those old people – I mean father and mother – how simple, how clear, how untroubled. I have been dipping into old letters and father's memoirs. He loved her: oh and was so candid and reasonable and transparent – and had such a fastidious delicate mind, educated and transparent. How serene and gay even, their life reads to me: no mud; no whirlpools. And so human – with the children and the little hum and song of the nursery.[143]

If this domestic happiness was achieved it was mainly thanks to Julia who played a vital role in the family, as Quentin Bell points out:

> Essentially the happiness of the Stephen home derived from the fact that the children knew their parents to be deeply and happily in love. This, surely, was the genial fire from which they all drew comfort. But it was also the means whereby the whole edifice might be reduced to ashes. Despite her charities and her maternal commitments, Julia lived chiefly for her husband; everyone needed her but he needed her most. With his temperament and his necessities this was too great a task for even the most heroic of wives; his health and his happiness had to be secured; she had to listen to and to partake in his worries about money, about his work and his reputation, about the management of the household; he had to be fortified and protected from the world.[144]

From this passage we understand how she was constantly supporting Leslie, always putting his needs and happiness before those of everybody else. Of course this was a compelling and strenuous task, especially because Leslie Stephen was very prone to worries and self-disparagement. It was quite obvious that her death would mean also the destruction of this domestic peace, as actually happened in 1895.

After her mother's death, Virginia had to face another aspect of Stephen's personality:

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141 Lyndall Gordon, "Virginia Woolf" (ODNB)
142 Gordon, "Virginia Woolf" (ODNB)
143 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Leonard Woolf, ed., London: Hogarth Press, 1953, 22 Dec. 1940, p. 360.
144 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, p. 38.

his depressive, melancholic and demanding side. In fact, after Julia passed away, Stephen became inconsolable and required attentions from all the women he knew, in particular of course from his daughters. According to Virginia, her father was "extremely sensitive to female charm and largely depended upon female praise",[145] because he needed to be flattered and consoled out of his insecurity: he needed sympathy because he was convinced of being a failure as a philosopher and writer and this was something that he could not admit to other men. Therefore with men he was modest and reasonable, while with women he was insecure and at the same time demanding.[146] Of course, after Julia's death things got worse: not only he considered himself a failure in the literary field, he also thought himself guilty for not having told Julia how much he loved her. In this state of unbearable sorrow, he was unable to take care of the children and the house. Therefore Stella, Virginia's half-sister, was the first to submit and take her mother's place, both in raising her younger siblings and in taking care of her stepfather.[147]

Unfortunately in 1897 Stella died too and it was Vanessa's turn to oblige her father. But Vanessa was more strong-willed than Stella and was determined not to have her life ruined by her father: Virginia, now sixteen, witnessed the fights between her father and her sister and was puzzled by her father's tyrannical behaviour towards her sister and women in general.[148] For example, Virginia described in "Reminiscences" one of his tyrannical outbursts against Vanessa: "when he was sad, he explained, she should be sad; when he was angry, as he was periodically when she asked him for a cheque, she should weep".[149] And in "A Sketch of the Past" she wrote:

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145 Virginia Woolf, "22 Hyde Park Gate", in *Moments of Being*, Jeanne Schulkind, ed., pp. 142-155, p. 143.
146 Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", p. 125.
147 Virginia Woolf, "Reminiscences", pp. 40-41; Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", p. 94; Quentin Bell, vol. 1, chapter 3.
148 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, pp. 62-64.
149 Virginia Woolf, "Reminiscences", p. 56.

> He had so ignored, or refused to face, or disguised his own feelings, that not only had he no conception of what he himself did and said; he had no idea what other people felt. Hence the horror and the terror of these violent displays of rage. These were sinister, blind, animal, savage. He did not realise what he did. No one could enlighten him. He suffered. We suffered. There was no possibility of communication. Vanessa stood silent. He shouted.[150]

The major source of distress was money: Stephen was obsessed by the fear of bankruptcy and every Wednesday Vanessa would present him the weekly accounts and would witness with annoyance the scene he made each time the expenses exceeded a certain sum.[151] Virginia could not go on simply admiring him and could not ignore this demanding attitude: she still loved him, of course, but she also started to hate him because of what he was putting Vanessa through. In her own words, she now felt "passionate affection for my father alternating with passionate hatred of him"[152] and later in life she acknowledged:

> we made him the type of all that we hated in our lives; he was the tyrant of inconceivable selfishness, who had replaced the beauty and merriment of the dead with ugliness and gloom. We were bitter, harsh, and to a great extent unjust [...][153]

Quite naturally, the moment Vanessa could escape her father's tyranny she did not hesitate and when he was diagnosed with cancer it was Virginia's turn to take care of him. Despite the contrasting feelings she had towards her father, she assisted and comforted him during his illness and she wrote under his dictation the final pages of the *Mausoleum Book*,[154] a memoir Stephen wanted to finish before dying.[155] Quentin Bell writes that

> Virginia, although she had felt hatred, rage and indignation at Leslie's conduct to Vanessa, felt also very deep love for him. She saw that he was reluctant to die because his children had at last got to an age at which he could know them, and knowing, love them. He wanted to see what would become of them. In his present state he could no longer be a tyrant and his tyranny might be forgotten.[156]

Indeed a key-point in the troubled relationship between Leslie Stephen and his children was

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150 Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", p. 126.
151 Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", pp. 124-125.
152 Virginia Woolf, "Old Bloomsbury", in *Moments of Being*, Jeanne Schulkind, ed., pp. 159-179, p. 161.
153 Virginia Woolf, "Reminiscences", p. 56.
154 Leslie Stephen, *Mausoleum Book*, Alan Bell, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; Mark Hussey, "Mausoleum Book, The", in *Virginia Woolf A to Z*, pp. 155-156.
155 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, pp. 84-86.
156 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, p. 84.

the age difference: for example, he was almost fifty when Virginia was born and she was twenty-two when he died. As is also underlined by Quentin Bell in the quotation above, the children (Virginia, in particular) were conscious of this gap and its consequences. Virginia wrote in "A Sketch of the Past" that "two different ages confronted each other in the drawing room at Hyde Park Gate: the Victorian age; and the Edwardian age. We were not his children, but his grandchildren".[157] What seems to be the most tragic aspect of this generational gap is the fact that Leslie Stephen passed away, as we have already seen, when his children were finally reaching an age in which the relationship with their father could be rekindled.

After his death in 1904, Virginia suffered a breakdown probably as a result of the continual internal struggle between love and hate that she felt towards her father:

> She had lost her father, and the event, which seemed terrible in anticipation, now appeared more heart-breakingly tragic. She was more than ever convinced that he had wanted to live and that the true and happy relationship between him and his children was only just beginning. She had never done enough for him; he had been lonely and she had never told him how much she valued him. […] His faults were forgotten, his kindness, his quickness, his intelligence were not.[158]

This sense of guilt towards her father aggravated in the following months to the point of becoming almost maniacal: she started hearing the birds singing in Greek while in bed and even attempted suicide by throwing herself from a window. It took her all summer to recover from this period of insanity and wholly process her father's death,[159] even though the ambivalence of her feelings towards her father would still haunt her for many years.

The first thing Virginia did after recovering from her breakdown was to write a few pages about her father to contribute to Maitland's official biography.[160] She gave an affectionate portrait of her father, full of childhood memories, and a careful description of his literary tastes. She recalls how her father used to read to the children every evening and

157 Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", p. 126.
158 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, p. 87.
159 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, pp. 87-90.
160 Maitland, pp. 474- 476.

interrogate them afterwards:

> At the end of a volume my father always gravely asked our opinion as to its merits, and we were required to say which of the characters we liked best and why. I can remember his indignation when one of us preferred the hero to the far more life-like villain.[161]

In particular, she tells us that his favourite writers were Scott, Carlyle, Hawthorne and Shakespeare; while his favourite poets were Wordsworth, Tennyson, Keats, Matthew Arnold, and George Meredith. He also used to recite poetry by heart to his children and Virginia reveals that

> as he lay back in his chair and spoke the beautiful words with closed eyes, we felt that he was speaking not merely the words of Tennyson or Wordsworth but what he himself felt and knew. Thus many of the great English poems now seem to me inseparable from my father; I hear in them not only his voice, but in some sort his teaching and belief.[162]

In her contribution, Virginia avoided talking about his father's characters and her ambivalent feelings towards him, as we have just seen; she preferred to focus on literature which, as we shall see next, provided a fundamental basis of her relationship with her father.

The bond between Virginia and her father was in fact intensified by their common passion for literature. Virginia had the privilege of listening to him talking about the famous intellectuals of his age together with the writers of the past that he met when he was young[163] and, more importantly, she had the free run of his library.

Virginia never attended any school: while her brothers entered Cambridge and Vanessa started to attend an art school, Virginia remained home mainly because of her frail mental health (she had her first breakdown at the age of thirteen when her mother died). Therefore, she was educated at home and the major part of her education consisted in her reading and in her conversations with her father.[164] Leonard Woolf thus comments on his wife's education:

> she never went to school, I think partly because she was very delicate as a child, but her

161 Maitland, p. 474.
162 Maitland, p. 476.
163 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, p. 54.
164 Gordon, ODNB; Quentin Bell, vol. 1, chapters 2-4.

> father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was a literary man of the first water – a Victorian of the Victorians. […] He had a very good library of all the great English writers. His daughter, Virginia, was given the run of it, at an early age, and he would discuss with her afterwards what she had read. They used to go for walks in Kensington Gardens, and he would talk about what the children were reading and the people he had known.[165]

Later on she would envy her brothers who had the possibility of attending Cambridge, a possibility denied to her because at the time Cambridge was a place reserved for men. Her brothers could learn Greek and philosophy there, meeting at the same time all sorts of interesting people, while she was stuck at home: as a result, for the rest of her life she felt she was ill-educated and attributed the reason to the intellectual discrimination against her sex.[166]

Nevertheless, thanks to her father's background, it can be said that Virginia was basically born into English literature.[167] Since she was little she was a voracious reader and her father endorsed her passion by constantly lending her books from his library. The idea that Virginia could become a writer was not at all alien to Stephen's mind; on the contrary, it seems from his letters to his wife Julia when Virginia was still in her early teens that he already thought Virginia was destined to a literary career and would do well in that field:[168] in July 1893, for example, he wrote to his wife that he had "discussed George II with Ginia. She takes in a great deal and will really be an author in time; though I cannot make up my mind in what line. History will be a good thing for her to take up as I can give her some hints".[169] Even later in life, Virginia would always think affectionately about her father's constant interest in her reading as this entry of December 1929 from her diary shows:

> it was the Elizabethan prose writers I loved first and most wildly, stirred by Hakluyt,

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165 Leonard Woolf, "Virginia Woolf: Writer and Personality", in *Virginia Woolf: Interviews and Recollections*, J. H. Stape, ed., Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995, pp. 147-151, p. 149.

166 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, p. 70; Carol T. Christ, "Woolf and Education", in *Selected Papers from the Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, 13 (2005), pp. 2-10.

167 Leonard Woolf, "Virginia Woolf: Writer and Personality", p. 149; Claire Sprague, "Introduction", in Claire Sprague, ed., *Virginia Woolf: a Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971, pp.1-13, p. 3.

168 Hill, pp. 351-53; Virginia R. Hyman, "Reflections in the Looking Glass: Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf", *Journal of Modern Literature*, 10 (1983), pp.197-216, p. 204.

169 Leslie Stephen to Julia Stephen, 29 July 1893; quoted in Hill, p. 353.

> which father lugged home for me – I think of it with some sentiment – father tramping over the Library with his little girl sitting at H.P.G. (Hyde Park Gate) in mind. He must have been 65; I 15 or 16 then; and why I don't know but I became enraptured, through not exactly interested, but the sight of the large yellow page entranced me.[170]

In her article "Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution", Katherine C. Hill expresses her opinion that Leslie Stephen chose Virginia as his literary successor: "she should become his literary and intellectual heir"[171] and to this purpose, according to Hill, "he trained her extensively in history and biography to give her the background fundamental to this achievement",[172] fostering at the same time her writing skills.

Even though I would not go as far as to state that Leslie Stephen consciously trained Virginia to become a certain type of writer, I think it can safely be affirmed that he shaped Virginia's literary tastes (for biography, for example) because at first he was the one who decided which books to lend her. After seeing how fast she devoured those book, however, he opted for granting her the freedom of his library.[173] In her 1897 diary Virginia gives us an account of her monumental reading: *Three Generations of English Women;* Mandell Creighton's *Queen Elizabeth;* Froude's *Carlyle;* Carlyle's *French Revolution*, *Cromwell*, *Life of Sterling* and *Reminiscences*; *The Life of Coleridge* by Campbell; Sir James Stephen's *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*; Lockhart's *Life of Sir Walter Scott* in ten volumes; Macaulay's history of England; three volumes of Pepys; Thomas Arnold's *History of Rome*; Thackeray's *The Newcomes*; Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*; *The Heart of Princess Osra* by Anthony Hope; George Eliot's *Felix Holt* and *Silas Marner*; *Among my Books* and *My Study Windows* by J. R. Lowell; Trollope's *Barchester Towers*; *John Halifax, Gentleman* by Dinah Craik; a novel by Henry James; Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*; and W. E. Norris' *A Deplorable Affair*.[174] We can see from this list that from a young age she read

170 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 8 Dec. 1929, p. 150.
171 Hill, p. 351.
172 Hill, p. 351.
173 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, p. 51.
174 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, pp. 50-51.

indeed many biographies and histories, but she also read novels of her own choice.

Virginia always took inspiration from what she was reading and early she started to practice her own writing, but she never showed any of it to her father because she was intimidated by his ambivalent thoughts about women's education.[175] For example when courting his wife he wrote to her that he hated "to see women's lives wasted simply because they have not been trained well enough to take an independent interest in any study",[176] but once Virginia noticed how he rebuffed his own niece Katherine Stephen (who later became principal of Newnham College at Cambridge) for presuming to be an intellectual.[177] And although he considered writing a womanly occupation, he never praised female authors much.[178] Besides, it is important not to ignore that this (after Julia passed away) was the period in which Virginia started to develop contradictory feelings for her father, as we have seen before, and even perceived him to be a domestic tyrant. In her article "The Seduction of the Father: Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen", Jane Elizabeth Fisher affirms that "as both father and mentor, he occupied a position of dual and contradictory authority in her life and writing"[179] and this is something I think that must also be accounted as one of the reasons why Virginia never showed anything she wrote to him. Many years later, in her diary, she wrote:

> Father's birthday. He would have been 96, 96, yes, today; and could have been 96, like other people one has known: but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books; – inconceivable.[180]

Various critics used this comment of hers to affirm that, instead of helping her develop as a writer, Leslie Stephen was an obstacle to her literary career because his emotional demands would probably have prevented Virginia from writing. In particular, Louise A. DeSalvo and

175 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, p. 51: Gordon, ODNB.
176 Leslie Stephen to Julia Stephen; quoted in Gordon, ODNB.
177 Gordon, ODNB.
178 Rosenbaum, *Victorian Bloomsbury*, p. 47.
179 Fisher, p. 32.
180 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 28 Nov. 1928, p. 138.

Alice Fox publicly rebutted Katherine C. Hill's article[181] asserting that Leslie Stephen was a "selfish, loving, temperamental, difficult, hard-working, self-absorbed autocrat"[182] who deprived Virginia of her education by not letting her attend college and even did not make her conscious of her own worth or capacity, which is however a quite extreme statement since most colleges were not open to women and Virginia's frail health would have probably prevented her from attending lessons anyhow.

If not a perfect father, Leslie Stephen proved anyhow to be an excellent teacher of English literature for Virginia. In the article she published for the centennial of her father's birth,[183] it is Virginia herself who recognizes her father's literary teachings. First of all she acknowledges the freedom her father granted to his children: "if freedom means the right to think one's own thoughts and to follow one's own pursuits, then no one respected and indeed insisted upon freedom more completely than he did".[184] Then she remembers how he made available to her all the books he had in his library and she reveals that:

> To read what one liked because one liked it, never to pretend to admire what one did not – that was his only lesson in the art of reading. To write in the fewest possible words, as clearly as possible, exactly what one meant – that was his only lesson in the art of writing. All the rest must be learnt for oneself. Yet a child must have been childish in the extreme not to feel that such was the teaching of a man of great learning and wide experience, though he would never impose his own views or parade his own knowledge.[185]

So the most important lessons he taught her were to read with discrimination, not to be influenced by someone else's judgement, and to express herself clearly and concisely. But he also taught her that biography, history and literature are interrelated and therefore he taught her to recognize the continuity of art and life since all works of art are deeply rooted in

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181 Louise A. DeSalvo and Alice Fox, "Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen", *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 97 (1982), pp.103-06.

182 DeSalvo and Fox, p. 104.

183 Virginia Woolf, "My Father: Leslie Stephen", *The Atlantic*, March 1950, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/03/55-years-ago-in-the-atlantic/303745/ (accessed 7 April 2014)

184 Virginia Woolf, "My Father: Leslie Stephen".

185 Virginia Woolf, "My Father: Leslie Stephen".

ordinary life. All these would become the basic principles of Virginia's approach to literature.[186] Finally we must not forget that his own works, too, were a source of learning and inspiration for Virginia: it was by reading his philosophical works that she became familiar with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British philosophy and, later on, when writing literary criticism she often found it useful to consult her father's literary essays in order to develop her own ideas.[187]

To the Lighthouse: Leslie Stephen and Mr Ramsay

The most renowned fictional portrait of Leslie Stephen is certainly Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*,[188] published in 1927.[189] She started working on the novel already in 1925, as this entry of May 1925 in *A Writer's Diary* proves:

> This is going to be fairly short; to have father's character done complete in it; and mother's; and St. Ives; and childhood; and all the usual things I try to put in – life, death, etc. But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel.[190]

We can see how, from the beginning, Virginia conceived the novel as something to be built around Leslie Stephen's character. Despite the disagreement of some (in particular, Leonard Woolf wrote that "there are traces of unfairness to Stephen in Ramsey [sic]"),[191] the similarities between Stephen and Mr Ramsay are undeniable, to the point that after reading the novel Vanessa wrote to her sister: "it seems to me to be the only thing about him which ever gave a true idea".[192]

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186 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, p. 51; Hill, p. 355; Jean Guiguet, *Virginia Woolf and Her Works* (original title: *Virginia Woolf et son oeuvre*), translated by Jean Stewart, London: Hogarth Press, 1965, p. 145.

187 Lorraine Sim, *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010, pp. 18-19; Rosenbaum, *Victorian Bloomsbury*, p. 48.

188 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, London: Hogarth Press, 1927. The edition I use is: Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, Margaret Drabble, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

189 Another famous literary portrait of Leslie Stephen is Vernon Whitford in George Meredith's *The Egoist* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1879).

190 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 14 May 1925, pp. 76-77.

191 Leonard Woolf, *An Autobiography*, vol. 1, pp. 116-117.

192 Quoted in Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf a Biography*, London: Hogarth Press, 1973, vol. 2, *Mrs Woolf*

The first and most obvious similarity is that both Stephen and Ramsay are philosophers: Mr Ramsay

> had made a definite contribution to philosophy in one little book when he was only five and twenty; what came after was more or less amplification, repetition. But the number of men who make a definite contribution to anything whatsoever is very small.[193]

And just like Stephen, Mr Ramsay is the father of eight children and an indefatigable walker. It is interesting that Virginia chose the alphabet image to describe Mr Ramsay's achievements: this idea was probably suggested by Leslie Stephen's work as editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography.*[194] Lorraine Sim explains that

> Mr Ramsay, like Stephen, views human knowledge as akin to a linear progression, and truth as something fixed, ahead of him, symbolized in the letter 'Z' towards which he strives despite the fact that he is stuck at 'Q'.[195]

And indeed Mr Ramsay is a gifted intellectual who is however stuck at Q and cannot reach R in the alphabetical and linear path of knowledge:

> He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q. […] But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance. Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still, if he could reach R it would be something. Here at least was Q. He dug his heels in at Q. Q he was sure of. Q he could demonstrate. If Q then is Q—R—. Here he knocked his pipe out, with two or three resonant taps on the handle of the urn, and proceeded. "Then R... " He braced himself. He clenched himself.[196]

But despite his acute mind, all the skills he possesses (endurance, justice, devotion and foresight) and all his efforts, he cannot reach R. R is beyond him and this plunges him into insecurity and self-disparagement. In fact, like Stephen, Mr Ramsay thinks that he is not one of the first-rank intellectuals and that he will soon be forgotten:

> But not about himself. He was always uneasy about himself. [...] He would always be worrying about his own books—will they be read, are they good, why aren't they better, what do people think of me?[197]

1912-1941, p.128.
193 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 34.
194 Mark Hussey, "A to Z", in *Virginia Woolf A to Z*, p. 1.
195 Sim, p. 37.
196 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 47-48.
197 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 159.

As a consequence of his insecurity, Mr Ramsay is prone to fantasies: he identifies himself with heroic victims, mainly as the leader of a forlorn party in a doomed expedition, and often quotes aloud poems that well suit his fantasies like Tennyson's “The Charge of the Light Brigade”, Charles Elton's “Luriana, Lurilee” or William Cowper's “The Castaway” (from which is taken for instance the often quoted verse “We perish'd, each alone”). These grandiose fantasies are, according to Mitchell Leaska, “compensatory measures to counter the onslaught of his terrible feelings of inadequacy”.[198]

Moreover, throughout the novel, Mr Ramsay is accused of being selfish, vain, egotistical, spoilt, unjust and, more importantly, tyrannical.[199] These are the same accusations made to Stephen by his children and, indeed like Stephen, also Mr Ramsay is highly dependent on women's sympathy:

> It was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life[200]

His demand for sympathy in the novel is described as an urgent and unconscious need, which becomes more and more manifest after Mrs Ramsay's death:

> And then, and then—this was one of those moments when an enormous need urged him, without being conscious what it was, to approach any woman, to force them, he did not care how, his need was so great, to give him what he wanted: sympathy.[201]

When Mrs Ramsay was alive, she took care of him always giving him what she knew he needed and constantly comforting him, just like Julia used to do for Leslie throughout all their married life. After their wives' death, both Ramsay and Stephen pour their need for reassurance and sympathy on all women and especially on their children:

> Then he reminded them that they were going to the Lighthouse tomorrow. They must

198 Mitchell A. Leaska, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf: from Beginning to End*, New York: John Jay Press, 1977, p. 130.
199 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 35, 64.
200 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 52.
201 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 204.

> be ready, in the hall, on the stroke of half-past seven. Then, with his hand on the door, he stopped; he turned upon them. Did they not want to go? he demanded. Had they dared say No (he had some reason for wanting it) he would have flung himself tragically backwards into the bitter waters of despair. Such a gift he had for gesture.[202]

In fact, the real childhood tragedy of Mr Ramsay's children (and also of Virginia Woolf and her siblings) is not the death of the beloved mother but the tyranny of the grieving father. As Maria Dibattista notices:

> The father's attempt to subdue the child's spirit is the true threat to life, for it is he who would block and shut life off from its renewing source – the will of children which is inseparable from the will to futurity.[203]

James and Cam's reaction to the demanding and self-pitying attitude of their father is a fraternal agreement to "resist tyranny to the death".[204] From the very beginning of the novel, James is said to hate his father and even has violent fantasies towards him:

> Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it. Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr Ramsay excited in his children's breasts by his mere presence[205]

This violent image conveys the depth of James' rage towards his father, but despite this strong desire of killing Mr Ramsay, James is impotent against his father and his absolutism. Later on we are given many reasons for James' hate and, as we can see from this passage, everything his father does fuels James' blind rage towards him:

> But his son hated him. He hated him for coming up to them, for stopping and looking down on them; he hated him for interrupting them; he hated him for the exaltation and sublimity of his gestures; for the magnificence of his head; for his exactingness and egotism (for there he stood, commanding them to attend to him) but most of all he hated the twang and twitter of his father's emotion which, vibrating round them, disturbed the perfect simplicity and good sense of his relations with his mother.[206]

James is almost totally characterized by his hatred throughout the whole novel; as Harvena

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202 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 201.
203 Maria Dibattista, "To the Lighthouse: Virginia Woolf's Winter's Tale", in Ralph Freedman, ed., *Virginia Woolf, Revaluation and Continuity: a Collection of Essays*, Berkeley: University of California, 1980, pp. 161-188, pp. 183-184.
204 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 220.
205 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 8.
206 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 52.

Richter points out, “James himself is aware of nothing beyond his hatred, nothing beyond the childhood experiences of the crushing absolutism of his father”.[207] Cam, instead, has more ambivalent feelings towards her father:

> For no one attracted her more; his hands were beautiful, and his feet, and his voice, and his words, and his haste, and his temper, and his oddity, and his passion, and his saying straight out before every one, we perish, each alone, and his remoteness. [...] But what remained intolerable, she thought, [...] was that crass blindness and tyranny of his which had poisoned her childhood and raised bitter storms, so that even now she woke in the night trembling with rage and remembered some command of his[208]

Cam evidently resembles Virginia: her ambivalent feelings make clear that it was through her that Virginia tried to express her own attitude towards her father. But, as Roger Poole points out, there is a part of Virginia also in James:

> by splitting her experience of her father so equally between a male child, who is impervious to the attractiveness of his father, and a female child, who while attracted to him physically cannot forgive his brutality, Virginia manages to achieve maximum precision in her indictment of her father's own dual nature.[209]

Mr Ramsay's dual nature reflects as a mirror Leslie Stephen's dual nature: a fascinating intellectual, but at the same time a demanding father. So, to sum up, many are the similarities between Stephen and Ramsay: not only both are philosophers, great walkers and both love to recite poetry aloud to themselves, but also they both are occasionally tyrannical, short-tempered, and in need of praise and sympathy.

At the end of the novel, a sort of familiar integrity is realized because Cam's antagonism for her father vanishes and James's hatred disappears thanks to his father's praise. In this connection, it is interesting to underline that Virginia Woolf thought that the classification as a novel was not suited to this work of hers and thought of the word elegy to describe *To the Lighthouse*.[210] The year after the publication of this book, Virginia wrote:

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207 Harvena Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 184.

208 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 229.

209 Poole, p. 16.

210 On 27 June 1925, she wrote in her diary: “I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant 'novel'. A new --- by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?” (Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p.

> I used to think of him and mother daily; but writing the Lighthouse laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this to be true – that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; and writing of them was a necessary act.)[211]

So, *To the Lighthouse* meant for Virginia a much desired freedom and indeed the book starts with a childhood dream and then describes the nightmare of mourning; eventually freedom and independence are achieved through reconciliation with the paternal authority.[212] Moreover, Maria Dibattista thus comments on what Virginia achieved with *To the Lighthouse*:

> Woolf's elegy concludes with a double victory: the dead are transfigured (they come back, but differently) and the living descendant discovers an independent voice and a genuine artistic vocation.[213]

In conclusion, the elegiac tribute of *To the Lighthouse* acted as a kind of therapy which allowed Virginia Woolf not only to finally come to terms with her parents (her father, in particular) and her childhood, but also to affirm her own independence as a writer.

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211 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 28 November 1928, p. 138.

212 Dibattista, p. 188.

213 Dibattista, p. 165.

CHAPTER III

Modern English Biography

In the twentieth century there was a strong reaction against Victorian biography which brought to the genesis of what has been called modern biography. The sense of weariness and oppression created by the concealing nature of Victorian biography drove authors like Lytton Strachey, Harold Nicolson and Virginia Woolf to revolutionize biography. These authors attacked the ready-made values and self-esteem of the Victorians in the name of truth: they rejected the dishonest and concealing quality of Victorian biography. What they wanted in the first place were honest description and free moral judgement.

Besides, the disruptive effect of the First World War on worldwide literary production is not to be underestimated. In Robert Skidelsky's words:

> This complex of understandings and agreements was shattered by the First World War. The modern biographical movement was shaped by the experience of that war, and the loss of faith in leaders and in the official values which it caused. Modern biography – the movement we date from Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) – was above all debunking biography. Its purpose was to expose eminent characters as humbugs or prisoners of false values. Truth-telling for the modern biographer was not simply fidelity to the facts or scrupulous reliance on 'original sources': it was to do with correct moral evaluation. And no moral evaluation was considered correct which esteemed characters and attitudes and policies which had contributed to the mass slaughter.[214]

It is evident from this passage that in the eye of the following generation, Victorian politicians and generals were co-responsible for the slaughter of World War I. Therefore it was impossible to continue to praise the exemplary men who indirectly caused such a massacre. The modern biographer aimed at truth and at a “correct moral evaluation”, but as Skidelsky points out, his/her judgement seemed to be clouded by revenge and anger against those who contributed to the breaking out of World War I. So, was it truly a correct moral evaluation? The only thing we can take for granted is that the First World War had a huge impact on every literary genre, including the biographical movement: Victorian values did not work anymore

214 Skidelsky, p. 6.

and new values had to be found.

Following Leslie Stephen's example as editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the modern biography sought to produce a truthful and concise account of his/her subject's life, refusing the traditional length of Victorian biographies and their unnecessary embellishments. As Harold Nicolson points out

> A synthesis, however, requires a thesis, a motive, or, to say the least, a point of view. The modern biographer rightly discards the commemorative or the didactic motive; the "spirit of the age" will have none of these things. It insists on absolute detachment from ethical or sentimental considerations, and this detachment becomes in itself the point of view, and tends all to readily to produce the aloof, the patronising, or at best the affectionately satirical.[215]

So, together with truth, also brevity and detachment became new biographical values.

Still, despite the quality of "detachment from ethical or sentimental considerations" pointed out by Nicolson, another chief interest of modern biography was introspection: the modern reader of biography, as opposed to the nineteenth-century reader, was encouraged to understand and even to live with the subject of the biography he was reading[216] and the modern biographer tried to take part in his/her subject's inward life in order to better understand him/her and convey his/her personality as truthfully as possible.[217] As Leon Edel writes,

> The biographer also is required to get into the skin of his subject; he removes himself sometimes to another age; sometimes he even changes his sex; he takes on another's career, the very wink of his eye or shrug of his shoulder: yet all the while he retains his own mind, his own sense of balance and his own appraising eye.[218]

As we can understand from this quotation, the modern biographer faced a dilemma: how to convey the inner life of his/her subject and at the same time his/her own point of view? A possible solution was to be found in psychoanalysis which highly influenced modern biography. Clearly Freud's theories, like for example the stress he put on sexual deviations

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215 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, p. 142.
216 Suzanne Raitt, *Vita and Virginia: The Work and Friendship of V. Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 21.
217 Gittings, p. 62.
218 Edel, p. 9.

and the formative experience of childhood, found fertile ground in the field of modern biography. As far as this thesis is concerned, it must be acknowledge that Freud's writings were available in English only in extremely poor translations until the 1920s (*Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*,[219] published by James Strachey in 1922, was the first English translation of Freud's works) and many writers were at first sceptical about these theories.[220] Moreover, we must note that even if psychoanalysis was successful in enhancing the awareness of human nature and its possible interpretations, still "most attempts to fit a biography to the procrustean bed of one or other of the main psycho-analytic systems have failed because of their preconceived rigidity of doctrine".[221]

Finally, the principal aim of the modern biographer was to make biography an art. Until the twentieth century there was indeed little if any concern for the artistic form of the biographical genre since the motivation of the biographer had been so far of a practical kind, such as to record, to praise or to instruct, and the discussion of the genre revolved solely around questions of morality or of practice.[222] The most immediate way to approach biography to art was to focus on style: the language had to be adapted through style to capture the mercurial human experience.[223] In this connection, Nicolson writes:

> the intelligent reader also demands literary form. He asks that the details which are given him should be based on that "certainty of knowledge which not only excludes mistakes but fortifies veracity"; he asks for more and more of these details: and yet he insists that the mass of material be presented in a readable form.[224]

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219 Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, translated by James Strachey, London: The International Psychoanalytical Press, 1922. James Strachey (1887-1967) was a British psychoanalyst and Lytton's brother. (ODNB)

220 Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group: His Work, Their Influence*, London: Penguin Books, 1971, pp. 298-299. Virginia Woolf, in particular, claimed to have never relied on Freud's theories in her works even if she was familiar with these from intellectual small-talk with friends; she only read some of Freud's works after she met him in 1939. (Julia Briggs, "Virginia Woolf meets Sigmund Freud", http://www.charleston.org.uk/virginia-woolf-meets-sigmund-freud/, accessed 24 April 2014)

221 Gittings, p. 47.

222 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 62.

223 Edel, p. 8.

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

Therefore the modern biographer strove in order to achieve the perfect combination of truthful and scientific material together with the perfection of literary form, thus making the line between biographer and novelist thinner (as we shall also see in Virginia Woolf's essays about biography which will be discussed in the next chapter). Anyway, it was with Lytton Strachey's works that biography as a modern literary and artistic genre was born.[225]

Lytton Strachey

Lytton Strachey, whom Virginia once addressed as "great master of biography",[226] not only refused the Victorian model but was also able to bring biography to another level: he made it an art. His biographies were a reflection of the cynic post-war years in which they were written and at the same time they were readable and enjoyable.[227] As Michael Holroyd says:

> Evangelicism, liberalism, humanitarianism, education, imperialism – these were Strachey's targets, and he struck them beautifully.[228]

He brought the focus back on human nature and natural curiosity about others' personality. Strachey refused to be complacent or conventional and had a strong belief in thought and rationality; the goals he wanted to attain were truth and freedom of judgement[229] (in his biography of Florence Nightingale, for example, he depicted the popular heroine of Victorian humanitarianism as a neurotic and a workaholic: in his own words, "a demon possessed her").[230] Strachey had *in primis* to find a way to emancipate the biographer from the powerful and dictatorial control of the subject's family and he obtained this by using only published

225 Edel, pp. 132-133.
226 Virginia Woolf to Lytton Strachey, 1 February 1922, in Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey, *Letters*, Leonard Woolf and James Strachey, eds., London: Hogarth Press, 1956, p. 96.
227 Gittings, pp. 39, 41.
228 Michael Holroyd, "Introduction", in Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, Michael Holroyd, ed., London: Penguin Books, 1986, pp. vii-xii, p. x.
229 Skidelsky, p. 6.
230 Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, Michael Holroyd, ed., London: Penguin Books, 1986, pp. 111-161, p. 111.

sources and focusing on style, brevity and selection.[231]

In his preface to *Eminent Victorians* (1918) he wrote:

> To preserve, for instance, a becoming brevity – a brevity which excludes everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant – that, surely, is the first duty of the biographer. The second, no less surely, is to maintain his own freedom of spirit. It is not his business to be complimentary; it is his business to lay bare the facts of the case, as he understands them.[232]

And it was precisely this insistence on these literary qualities that transformed the biographer from a simple recorder or even worse a flatterer into an artist. It is clear from this passage how in his mind biography was inextricably linked with truth and art. Moreover, he was credited with introducing the methods of the newborn Freudian analysis into the exploration of his subjects' psychological characters and inner impulses or motives, but this seems unlikely in *Eminent Victorians* since, as we have just seen, Freud's works were not yet available in English until 1922. Therefore, it would be more correct to affirm that the introspective quality of his portrayals was rather due to a humanistic and rationalizing approach.[233] Michael Holroyd explains that

> Very characteristic, in all his biographies, is his use of indirect speech which serves to recount the facts as seen from the viewpoint of the characters themselves, which enables him to interpret the secret thoughts of these characters, and to impersonate their tricks of speech. […] In these soliloquies, Strachey withdraws completely and conceals himself behind his characters, who present their own, often one-sided view of a situation or verdict on another person.[234]

Yet Strachey, in order to debunk the Victorian model of biography at all costs, ended up committing the same mistake of single-mindedness. He was convinced that the length and language of Victorian biography were to blame as tokens of social hypocrisy and accused the Victorians of being insincere and concealing. But he too frequently suppressed or ignored historical evidence in order to obtain some scandalous or colourful stories. He also stressed sex more than it was necessary and he often relied on second-hand sources. In the case of

231 Skidelsky, p. 8.
232 Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, p. 10.
233 Gittings, pp. 41-42; Skidelsky, pp. 6-7.
234 Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*, p. 292.

General Gordon, for example, Strachey derived his passion for brandy[235] from dubious third-hand sources. Therefore, his narration cannot actually be considered more reliable than any Victorian socially approved account.[236]

Strachey's following work, *Queen Victoria* (1921),[237] has been regarded as his masterpiece.[238] The biography, dedicated to Virginia Woolf and defined by Lytton as "a slightly pointless book",[239] skilfully covers the 81 years of Victoria's life. Each one of these years was well documented because they were all rich in important events, vital developments in England's imperial and domestic policy and profound changes in the social condition of the country.[240] Therefore, Strachey had at his disposal an enormous mass of material. Thanks to this abundance of published sources, there was little need for Strachey to manipulate facts or to find a particular meaning in trivial episodes.[241] Also his style changed from incisive to almost nostalgic.[242] As a consequence of both these aspects, even if they covered the same period, *Queen Victoria* was clearly a less witty and irreverent book than *Eminent Victorians*.[243] Of course it was not an easy task to compress all the material he had into a synthetic volume and at the same time convey a sense of wholeness and reality. Strachey's solution was to concentrate himself on the queen's character and her private life: he chose to re-create Victoria's intimate personality and he scrupulously selected his material to achieve this artistic purpose.[244] Strachey's concern for Victoria as a sovereign was confined only to the influence of her public role on her private life.[245] And indeed more than two thirds of the biography[246]

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235 Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, pp. 189-267, p. 203.
236 Gittings, pp. 38-39; Holroyd, "Introduction", p. x; Benton, p. 6.
237 Lytton Strachey, *Queen Victoria*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1921.
238 Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*, p. 279.
239 Lytton Strachey to Virginia Woolf, 24 January 1921, in *Letters*, Leonard Woolf and James Strachey, eds., p. 89.
240 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, pp. 148-149.
241 Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*, p. 250.
242 Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*, p. 243.
243 Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*, p. 250.
244 Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*, p. 265.
245 Raitt, p. 25.
246 Strachey, *Queen Victoria*, chapters I-VI.

are dedicated to Victoria's life before the death of Albert and to the process through which her character was formed.[247] As Harold Nicolson points out,

> By thus concentrating his attention upon internal development rather than upon external events, Mr Strachey was able to subdue his material and to allow himself full scope for the display of his own literary powers.[248]

Moreover, Michael Holroyd reminds us that

> with the publication of *Queen Victoria*, Strachey inaugurated a new but no less legendary view of the queen – a whimsical, teasing, half-admiring, half-mocking view that found in Victoria a quaintly impressive symbol of a quaintly impressive age.[249]

But this achievement was not without a cost: even if it can be affirmed that in *Queen Victoria* Strachey had been able to convey a fully realised personality, this realisation was his own artefact[250] since it was a figment of the influence of his own point of view, and therefore this work cannot be considered what Nicolson calls a "pure biography".[251]

Strachey's last full-length work, *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History* (1928)[252] was a biographical experiment, whose mood and narration revealed the flexibility of Strachey's style.[253] This lurid and pictorial account revolves around the relationship between Queen Elizabeth and Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, which began in in 1587, when she was 53 and he was 19. The affair went on for five years until Essex was beheaded for treason in 1601. Strachey's focus was on the passionate nature of this relationship and how it was intertwined with ambition and power. If a Freudian approach was unlikely in *Eminent Victorians* and in *Queen Victoria*, Strachey's emphasis on Elizabeth's relationship with her father and its effect on her treatment of Essex together with his preoccupation with sexual themes and deviations showed a clear and early debt to Freud. Notably, Strachey dedicated the book to his brother

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247 Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*, pp. 264-265; Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, p. 151.
248 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, pp. 151-152.
249 Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*, p. 248.
250 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 68.
251 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography,* p. 153.
252 Lytton Strachey, *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1928.
253 Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*, pp. 291-292.

James and his wife Alix who were pupils of Freud and responsible for the translation of his works into English. Furthermore, Strachey sent a complimentary copy of his book to Freud who wrote to him a congratulatory letter. Therefore, it can be claimed that *Elizabeth and Essex* is possibly the first consciously Freud-oriented biography.[254] As always Strachey used only published sources for his biography, but the material on this subject was quite scarce and therefore he felt inclined to be an imaginative biographer. Shelston explains that

> in *Elizabeth and Essex* Strachey was in a sense freer to indulge in the imaginative approach since, where the actual life of his major subject, Queen Elizabeth, is concerned, the remoteness of the period and the unreliability of such factual evidence as can be gathered should have liberated his impulse towards a predominantly artistic recreation.[255]

But despite Strachey's ambition to straddle between fact and fantasy, he went too far in flouting the limitations of biography: Elizabeth never achieved the quality of reality that Queen Victoria or the other famous Victorians of his biographies had.[256] Therefore, *Elizabeth and Essex* has been judged by critics as "an original but abortive experiment".[257]

In conclusion, each of Strachey's biographies was different from the other and all were experiments to make biography an art: first by a witty satire (*Eminent Victorians*), then by a thoughtful introspection (*Queen Victoria*) and finally by pushing biography to its limits as to become almost quasi-fictional (*Elizabeth and Essex*).

Harold Nicolson

The diplomat Harold Nicolson was also a prolific writer throughout all his life. In the 1920s he published four literary biographies: *Paul Verlaine* (1921), *Tennyson* (1923), *Byron* (1924), and *Swinburne* (1926).[258] But for the purposes of this thesis I thought it more interesting to

254 Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*, pp. 298-299, 336.
255 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 68.
256 Shelston, *Biography*, p. 68; Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*, pp. 301-302; James Naremore, *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973, pp. 199-200.
257 Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group*, p. 334.
258 Harold Nicolson, *Paul Verlaine*, London: Constable, 1921; Harold Nicolson, *Tennyson: Aspects of His*

focus on his most original biographical work *Some People*, on his article "How I Write Biography" and on the last pages of his *Development of English Biography*.

Some People (1927)[259] is a series of nine closely observed, semi-fictitious, and semi-autobiographical sketches. This experimental and intriguing collection of stories about people he had known and his experiences in the diplomatic service plays cleverly with the relation between fantasy and fact.[260] Significantly, its epigraph states: "many of the following sketches are purely imaginary. Such truths as they may contain are only half-truths".[261] Since *Some People* is a comic text which was originally conceived as a jeu d'esprit to entertain friends, the reason for its appeal to fantasy was to protect the author and the characters it mocked from the dangers of libel.[262] It is a playful book which lacks seriousness while giving the reader at the same time the pleasure of light but sophisticated literature.[263] *Some People* is also an ironic commentary on Edwardian manners and mores thanks to Nicolson's ability to convey personality through gestures and speech and each of the characters is almost portrayed as a stereotype of this age. Anyway, the character who emerges most clearly at the end of the book is Nicolson himself since each of his experiences serves as a mirror of his own development.[264] Finally, the equilibrium between fantasy and fact which approached biography to art made this book a success and an emblem of the new attitude towards biography.[265] Virginia Woolf declared that

> [Nicolson] has taken a step on his own initiative. For here he has devised a method of writing about people and about himself as though they were at once real and imaginary.

Life, Character and Poetry, London: Constable, 1923; Harold Nicolson, *Byron: The Last Journey*, London: Constable, 1924; Harold Nicolson, *Swinburne*, London: Macmillan, 1926.

259 Harold Nicolson, *Some People*, London: Constable, 1927.

260 Raitt, p. 29; Naremore, p. 200; Thomas S. W. Lewis, "Combining 'The Advantages of Fact and Fiction': Virginia Woolf's Biographies of Vita Sackville-West, Flush, and Roger Fry", in Eleanor McNees, ed., *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessments*, vol.II, Mountfield: Helm Information, 1994, pp. 376-397, p. 378.

261 Harold Nicolson, *Some People*, p. vi.

262 Raitt, p. 29.

263 Naremore, p. 200.

264 Michiko Kakutani, "*Some People* review", New York Times, 29 December 1982 (http://www.nytimes.com/1982/12/29/books/books-of-the-times-128259.html, accessed 26 April 2014)

265 Kakutani; Raitt, p. 29; Naremore, p. 201; Lewis, p. 378.

> He had 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.[266]

However, these are only a few lines of what Virginia Woolf wrote on *Some People* in her essay "The New Biography", which was originally written indeed as a review for Nicolson's book and which shall be fully discussed in the next chapter.

In 1934, Nicolson wrote an article for the *Saturday Review of Literature*. This article is entitled "How I Write Biography"[267] and is a brief analysis of Nicolson's idea of biography and his biographical method, together with the problems a biographer must ordinarily face. The article opens with Nicolson's confession of having never written a "pure" biography: his studies of Verlaine, Tennyson and Swinburne are actually attempts at literary criticism filled with biographical material, while *Some People* is, as we have just seen, an experiment in biographical fiction. On the contrary, a "pure" biography is a work of art born from the description of "the life and character of an individual from every angle and with no purpose other than such a description".[268] Indeed, according to Nicolson, a biography is

> the history of the life of an individual written as a branch of literature. As a history, it must be true. In that it describes an individual, it must be personal. And in that it is a branch of literature, it must be written with due regard to construction, balance, and style.[269]

A biography is therefore the result of a combination of truth and personality which are the most immediate problems a biographer must face. Truth is a problem for the biographer because even if he had been acquainted with his/her subject for a very long period still it is impossible for him/her to tell the whole truth about his/her subject. Moreover, in order to express as clearly as possible his/her subject's personality and thus give a coherent portrait,

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266 Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", in *Granite and Rainbow: Essays by Virginia Woolf*, Leonard Woolf, ed., London: Hogarth Press, 1958, p. 152.
267 Harold Nicolson, "How I Write Biography", in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, volume X (26 May 1934), pp. 1-3.
268 Harold Nicolson, "How I Write Biography", p. 1.
269 Harold Nicolson, "How I Write Biography", p. 1.

the biographer must put a special emphasis on certain qualities or defects of his/her subject without letting this selection distort his/her original personality.[270] But how does a biographer choose the subject? Nicoloson's advice is to “never write a biography about anyone whom you personally dislike or from whose mental and topical atmosphere you are sundered either by prejudice or lack of knowledge",[271] since if the biographer feels hostile or unsympathetic to his/her subject s/he will not be able to resolve the problems of truth and personality and thus to produce a work of art. In addition, it must be considered that if the biographer chooses a recently dead subject s/he will have to deal with his/her friends and relatives who are still alive and this will produce a conflict between truth and personal obligation, which together with the quality of unreliability of oral evidence will damage his/her work.[272] Finally, Nicolson expressed what he felt to be the recurrent thesis of his biographical work:

> Human error is a constant, and not an incidental, factor in history. Everybody is an ass sometimes, and most people are asses all the time. Human will power is an intermittent factor, and history has been made more frequently at moments when people had no idea what they wanted than at those rarer moments when some individual wanted something definite. We are all straws upon the stream: yet if one observes those straws they do not all behave in exactly the same manner.[273]

His passion for biography was aroused from the very desire to examine the difference of behaviour that makes some “straws” more interesting than others.

In the last pages of *The Development of English Biography* (1928),[274] Nicolson interrogated himself on the future of biography. From his point of view there would soon be a divergence between scientific and literary interest in biography since the two have always been hostile.[275] He wrote: “the more that biography becomes a branch of science the less will it become a branch of literature”.[276] According to him, biography would indeed become more

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270 Harold Nicolson, “How I Write Biography”, pp. 1-2.
271 Harold Nicolson, “How I Write Biography”, p. 2.
272 Harold Nicolson, “How I Write Biography”, p. 2.
273 Harold Nicolson, “How I Write Biography”, p. 3.
274 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, pp. 154-158.
275 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, p. 154.
276 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, p. 155.

and more scientifically specialised and technical and therefore would cease to belong to literature, while the literary interest would generate more imaginative types of biography (like, for example, satirical or sentimental biographies) until it would inevitably merge with fiction.[277] In the end of his survey, Nicolson was convinced that as a consequence of the divergence of scientific and literary interest in biography, "pure biography, as a branch of literature, will have ceased to exist"[278] because a "pure" biography can exist only if truth, individuality and art are skilfully combined together.[279]

277 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, pp. 154-155.
278 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, p. 156.
279 Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, pp. 157-158.

CHAPTER IV

Virginia Woolf and Biography

As I mentioned in the foreword, biography was one of Virginia Woolf's lifelong interests. Her father Leslie Stephen, as we have seen in chapter II, was a renowned biographer and the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*; from a young age, Virginia loved to read biographies and histories from his library. Besides being her favourite reading, biography remained a passion throughout her life because it "fed her insatiable desire to discover what it was possible to know and to communicate about individual lives"[280] and therefore life writing was one of the major concerns of Woolf's literary career.

The biographies Virginia Woolf wrote could not differ more from those of her father or those she used to read. Her biographies are not mere account of the subject's life but "leaps into the center of the person's experience of life".[281] Moreover, instead of choosing only worthy people Virginia often wrote short 'lives' of all sorts of people: adventures, writers, courtiers, and especially women. As her friends and relatives recalled, Virginia had an incredible imagination and was prone to fantasies: the moment she met someone, for example, she would often start weaving in her mind his/her personality and imagine his/her life.[282] Indeed, since Virginia was young, she wrote various biographical sketches of actual people and memoirs of her life and family. In the Edwardian period, she also wrote biographical reviews and essays for *The Times Literary Supplement* and the *Cornhill*. The most original biographical review she wrote was "Memoirs of a Novelist" (1909), a review of the fictional

280 Diane F. Gillespie, "Introduction", in Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: a Biography*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995, pp.xi-l, p. xv.

281 Josephine O'Brien Schaefer, "Moments of Vision in Virginia Woolf's Biographies", in Eleanor McNees, ed., *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessments*, vol. II, pp.363-375, p. 363.

282 Leonard Woolf, "Virginia Woolf: Writer and Personality", p. 147; Clive Bell, "A Genius Who Worked Magic", in J. H. Stape, ed., *Virginia Woolf: Interviews and Recollections*, pp. 93-112, p. 97; Rose Macaulay, "A Zest for Life", in J. H. Stape, ed., *Virginia Woolf: Interviews and Recollections*, pp. 181-183, p. 182.

biography of an imaginary Miss Willatt. Woolf here used a non-fictional form (a review essay) to write fiction (an invented biography of an imaginary novelist) and to express her criticism of the omissions and distortions of Victorian biography, but the piece was rejected by the editor of the *Cornhill* and was not published until 1985.[283]

It is clear from her essays and reviews that Virginia considered the traditional biographical methods unable to convey a person's true being: many biographies were "worthless or merely meaningless"[284] because "to arrange or to criticize, to make people live as they lived, is considered unnecessary, or perhaps disrespectful".[285] But the greatest failure of biography so far was to separate truth and art. As we shall see throughout this chapter, according to Virginia Woolf, a biography should not only convey reality but also be well written because biography needs not only truth but also art: in her opinion, biography and fiction are not separated by fixed lines and should intertwine to express the subject's true personality and experience of life.

This thesis is concerned not only with Virginia Woolf's well-known biographies (*Orlando*, *Flush* and *Roger Fry*) but also with two renowned essays on biography ("The New Biography" and "The Art of Biography") and two of her earlier and less known biographical sketches ("Friendships Gallery" and "Lives of the Obscure"). In order to investigate Virginia Woolf's evolution in the biographical field, this analysis will follow a chronological order starting therefore from "Friendships Gallery".

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283 Virginia Woolf, "Memoirs of a Novelist" in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf,* Susan Dick, ed., London: Hogarth Press, 1985; Quentin Bell, vol. 1, pp. 153-154; S. P. Rosenbaum, *Edwardian Bloomsbury: the Early Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group*, vol. 2, London: Macmillan, 1994, pp. 370-373.

284 Quoted in Gillespie, p. xv.

285 Quoted in Rosenbaum, *Edwardian Bloomsbury*, p. 344.

“Friendships Gallery” (1907)

“Friendships Gallery”[286] is a biographical sketch – or better a “comic biographical fantasy”[287] – of Virginia Woolf's friend Violet Dickinson written in 1907 and is an example of Virginia's fertile creativity. These pages typed with a violet ribbon and bound in violet leather were not meant for publication[288] and indeed they remained unpublished until 1979. Violet Dickinson was one of Virginia Woolf's closest friends (it was she who nursed Virginia back to health during the breakdown after Leslie Stephen's death)[289] and a quite eccentric woman whose life “is one of the most singular as well as the most prolific and least notorious that was lived in our age”.[290] Even if the biographer assures us of being sincere, Woolf mixed fact and fiction in this parodic biography: the subject is real but many are the comic exaggerations.

The first part of this mock-biography concerns Violet's early life until her first season, a period that is usually ignored by novelists and biographers as the narrator makes us satirically notice:

> For when you are writing the life of a woman you should surely begin
>
> Her First Season
>
> and leave such details as birth parentage education and the first seventeen years of her life to be taken for granted. […] Clearly no one could have a season who had not been born and who had not spent seventeen years practising for it; but as these acquirements are completely exhibited in the ball room it is mere waste of time to say how she came by them or in what proportion they are mixed. But then this Biography is no novel but a sober chronicle; and if Life will begin seventeen years before it is needed it is our task to say so valiantly and make the best of it.[291]

Our biographer aims to revise the patriarchal biographical and novelistic standards for telling a woman's life by claiming a higher authority[292] (“Life”) so, before talking about Violet's first

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286 Virginia Woolf, “Friendships Gallery”, Ellen Hawkes, ed., *Twentieth Century Literature*, 25 (1979), pp. 270-302.
287 Gillespie, p. xv.
288 Rosenbaum, *Edwardian Bloomsbury*, p. 374.
289 Quentin Bell, vol. 1, pp. 82-84, 89-90.
290 Virginia Woolf, “Friendships Gallery”, p. 292.
291 Virginia Woolf, “Friendships Gallery”, p. 279.
292 Karin E. Westman, “The first Orlando: The laugh of the comic spirit in Virginia Woolf's "Friendships Gallery"”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 47 (2001), pp. 39-71, p. 53.

season, the text narrates her birth and her naming. Then it goes on to her first ball, before which Violet talks with her aunt who advises her that since she is a very tall girl she would be prone to derision and therefore "if you are not to be a Maypole of Derision you must see to it that you shine forth as a Beacon of Godliness"[293] practising the virtues of "love, charity and humility"[294] and she gives Violet a golden cross as a reminder of what she just told her (which will later be an object of laughter at the ball). The gift of the cross and the ball are emblems of the spiritual and the material world but in the narrative they are intertwined to underline how in society spiritual success is closely linked with physical beauty and material wealth.[295] Although the biographer warns us that this biography differs from a novel, it presents some novelistic forms of narration: for example, in most novels the day after the ball is used as a pause for reflection in order to reveal other aspects of the character and here too the day after the ball is used to inform the reader of other aspects of Violet's life, in particular her education and conversations with her German governess. Violet's education comes not only from books but also from the personal confessions of her teacher, Fräulein Müller, who provides Violet with first-hand experiences of the social world. According to Karin Westman,

> to tell one's own 'story' or history in response to another's is a compliment and an act that builds trust. […] These stories, paired with sanctioned instruction, become alternative 'history' lessons, creating a genealogy of women's experience for Violet to learn by heart.[296]

Moreover this "alternative" education enables Violet to forge connections between life and literature, which is also the aim of this new form of biography. But since too much education "has been known to ruin the constitution [of a maiden] for life",[297] as the narrator ironically informs us, Violet locks her books with genuine regret and goes to London for her first season where she meets many great ladies. The first chapter then ends with the enquiries typical of a

293 Virginia Woolf, "Friendships Gallery", p. 276.
294 Virginia Woolf, "Friendships Gallery", p. 276.
295 Westman, p. 49.
296 Westman, p. 56.
297 Virginia Woolf, "Friendships Gallery", p. 278.

modern novel in order to analyse the Violet's inner character and stream of consciousness when her mind is stimulated:

> How did Violet love her friends – how did she know them? Tell me for example, how she thought? Why did she drop her 'g's and put in her 'h's? Was she a Christian? Describe the flight of her mind, rising like a cloud of bees, when a question was dropped into it. Did she reason or only instincticise? Where does care for others become care for oneself, and at what precise point in her relationship with ….. did she cross the boundary of unselfishness and become the most selfish of living creatures?[298]

But these are questions to which our biographer using the established methods of biography is unable to provide significant answers: traditional biography is evidently useless if someone wants to know Violet's inner nature and personality.

The second chapter is entitled “The Magic Garden” and presents an idyllic setting in which noble English ladies have their afternoon tea. Karin Westman writes:

> the biographer conjures an idyllic, mythic, and extremely feminine scene of ladies at tea while also suggesting a vision of women's autonomy and independence from the demands of patriarchal social norms […] Violet's biographer is conscious of and determined not to replicate the biographical and historical methods of those like Burke, who negate women's bodies through a "polite" propriety complicit with patriarchal ideologies of the feminine. Instead, Violet's biographer asserts the intellect, sexuality, and the corporeality of the ladies' existence.[299]

Basically, instead of focusing on the aesthetic harmony of the scene, the biographer underlines the material presence of the ladies by insisting on their eating and drinking. Together with the bucolic description of Hatfield House, where Lady Robert Cecil (known as Nelly) lived, the event that dominates this section is Violet's decision to build her own cottage after talking with a gardener, something subversive of class ideology. According to our biographer, this decision of hers was “the beginning of the great revolution which is making England a very different place from what it was”[300] and something which the Cambridge historian George Trevelyan will surely describe in his work on the social life of the nineteenth century. There

298 Virginia Woolf, “Friendships Gallery”, pp. 281-282.
299 Westman, p. 57.
300 Virginia Woolf, “Friendships Gallery”, p. 288.

follows a reference to the comic spirit: “The Comic Spirit laughed meanwhile”.[301] Even if ambiguous (at what does the comic spirit laugh and what is the intended effect of its laughter on the reader?), this statement probably originated from Virginia Woolf's reflection on Meredith's *Essay on Comedy* (1897),[302] which was also at the basis of her own essay “The Value of Laughter” (1905).[303] While Meredith viewed the comic spirit as a reconciling force between the sexes, Virginia Woolf classified comedy as feminine; the comic spirit in her essay is a disruptive force:

> All the hideous excrescences that have overgrown our modern life, the pomps and conventions and dreary solemnities, dread nothing so much as the flash of laughter which, like lightning, shrivels them up and leaves the bones bare.[304]

According to Woolf, the comic spirit “concerns itself with oddities and eccentricities and deviations from the recognized pattern”[305] and is expressed through laughter, which is fundamental to preserve our sense of proportion and reality in life. In particular, women and children are

> the chief ministers of the comic spirit, because their eyes are not clouded with learning nor are their brains chocked with the theories of books, so that men and things still preserve their original sharp outlines.[306]

Therefore, we can conceive of the character of Violet Dickinson in this biographical sketch as an embodiment of the Woolfian conception of the Comic Spirit itself: Violet's physical attributes, in particular her great height, are emphasised to set out Violet's disruption of established social norms. Together with her height, Virginia Woolf decided to value also Violet's voice and, in particular, her frequent laughter (“held to be the voice of folly”) [307] which not only contrasts the customary silence of women in history and biography but also

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301 Virginia Woolf, “Friendships Gallery”, p. 284.
302 George Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit*, London: Constable, 1897.
303 Virginia Woolf, “The Value of Laughter”, *The Guardian*, 16 August 1905.
304 Virginia Woolf, “The Value of Laughter”.
305 Virginia Woolf, “The Value of Laughter”.
306 Virginia Woolf, “The Value of Laughter”.
307 Virginia Woolf, “The Value of Laughter”.

challenges social conventions.[308] Anyhow, the major preoccupation of our biographer in this chapter is the possibility that Violet's personality can be hidden behind the account of the construction of her own cottage instead of being exemplified through it:

> Often she has whisked behind a paragraph and it was only when I had done it and set it proudly in its place in the pile raised to her honour that I discovered that she was behind and not in front; that I had made a screen and no pane of glass.[309]

In Virginia Woolf's opinion, the typical biography with its focus on facts was burdensome[310] and useless, because it just reported the facts without describing "what the person was like to whom [they] happened".[311] Indeed, important as facts can be – in this case Violet's cottage "stood for a symbol of many things"[312] – they are yet unable to convey the subject's inner character, therefore a biography based solely on facts fails to represent truthfully its subject.

The third chapter, "A Story to Make You Sleep", is inspired by Violet Dickinson and Lady Robert Cecil's visit to Japan during a world cruise in 1905. In this story, defined by Rosenbaum, a "mythic tale",[313] Violet and Nelly are depicted as "Two Sacred Princesses", a Giantess (Violet Dickinson) and the Mistress of the Magic Garden (Nelly Cecil),[314] who save Tokyo from sea monsters and giant birds. The story is set within a second narrative frame – a mother telling a child the story – and the conventions of biography are completely abandoned to plunge into fantasy. But, as Westman affirms,

> It is through the narrative tropes of myth and fantasy through storytelling that Violet's biographer can convey "truths" about Violet's character otherwise lost from conventional biographical methods: her independence, her generosity, and good spirits.[315]

Again, Woolf wanted to point out how the traditional biographical methods relying solely on

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308 Westman, p. 50.
309 Virginia Woolf, "Friendships Gallery", p. 290.
310 As observed by Naremore, p.193.
311 Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", p. 65.
312 Virginia Woolf, "Friendships Gallery", p. 290.
313 Rosenbaum, *Edwardian Bloomsbury*, p. 374.
314 Virginia Woolf, "Friendships Gallery", p. 295.
315 Westman, p. 58.

truth and facts are unable to convey a person's true being; on the contrary, mixing fact and fantasy – like she did in this biographical sketch – it is possible to achieve a more truthful portrait.

As we have seen from this brief analysis, “Friendships Gallery” is an early landmark of Virginia Woolf's biographical revolution and a clear anticipation of *Orlando*. It was intended as a joke and a tribute to Violet Dickinson, showing Woolf's most comic side. But despite its playful nature, “Friendships Gallery” fully exemplifies Woolf's theories about biography. First of all, throughout the entire sketch, there is a critical and irreverent attitude towards the established biographical methods. This attitude is clear from the first lines of the text:

> Forty years ago, our sincerity does her credit, a child was born in a Somersetshire manor house. Whether she was born laughing or crying or both at once or whether she merely accepted the situation and made the best of it, a sincere historian anxious to use only those words that cannot be avoided has no means of telling.[316]

What is apparent from the analysis of each chapter is that Virginia Woolf wanted to prove with “Friendships Gallery” the inability of the traditional biographical approach to give a faithful portrait of the subject and the necessity to mix truth and fiction to describe the psychological profile of the subject and his/her stream of consciousness. With an allusion to Woolf's following essay on biography, Karin Westman comments:

> "Friendships Gallery" illustrates Woolf's growing control over her literary inheritance as she satirically mocks the failures of biography and novels to capture the "granite" and the "rainbow" of individuals' lives.[317]

In particular, Virginia attacked the conventions of biographies and novels concerning women's lives:

> Through Violet's biographer, Woolf criticizes the fictional methods available for recounting a woman's life, drawing attention to the ideological implications of nineteenth-century novelistic forms. Calling upon but redeploying the narrative

316 Virginia Woolf, “Friendships Gallery”, p. 275.
317 Westman, p. 39.

> conventions of the sentimental novel" and the realist novel, Woolf's biographical sketch of her friend Violet Dickinson frequently questions and then rejects the "realistic" representation typical of biographies and novels, narrative modes that can limit a woman's body and voice.[318]

Patriarchal ideologies together with nineteenth-century social mores not only limited women's material existence but also omitted women's individual character. With this sketch, Virginia Woolf rejected the limitations of established biographical and narrative means and explored a new method to tell a woman's life, focusing in particular on her material nature expressed – as we have seen in Violet's case – through both body and voice. For all these reasons, "Friendships Gallery" should be considered an early and important step of Virginia Woolf's biographical revolution.

"The Lives of the Obscure" (1925) and Virginia Woolf's Feminism

The lives of the obscure fascinated Virginia Woolf and constituted one of her lifelong projects. The obscure were women and ordinary people who were not considered worthy of a biography and were also excluded from the lives her father had chosen to be part of the *Dictionary of National Biography;* according to Jane Marcus, Virginia Woolf's *Lives of the Obscure* "would slay the patriarchal ghost".[319] Throughout her life, Virginia Woolf wrote many short biographical essays which belonged to this category: for example she chose to write on Selina Trimmer (a governess), on Sara Coleridge (S. T. Coleridge's daughter), on Harriette Wilson (a courtesan), on James Woodforde and John Skinner (two parsons), on Miss Ormerod (an entomologist), on Sarah Bernhardt (a French actress), on Louise de La Vallière (one of Louis XIV's mistresses), on Elizabeth Lady Holland (a nineteenth-century English noblewoman), on Margaret Cavendish Duchess of Newcastle (a writer), on Lady Winchelsea (a poet), and on Mercy Harvey (the sister of the writer Gabriel Harvey). This list might strike

318 Westman, p. 53.
319 Jane Marcus, "Thinking Back through Our Mothers", in Jane Marcus, ed., *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, London: Macmillan, 1981, pp. 1-30, p. 7.

contemporary readers because for us many of these women are not obscure, but at that time they were: some of them, like Sarah Bernhardt, were known for the wrong reasons (gossip, mainly) and others, like Sara Coleridge, were only acknowledged because of the influence they had on the lives of famous men, but the majority of these women were completely ignored. Today we are acquainted with them because feminist critics of the second half of the twentieth century rediscovered them and their works through Virginia Woolf and her own interest in women writers and her search for literary grandmothers. Unfortunately, these essays were never published together: they were written over various years – a few of them appeared already in the *Cornhill* in 1908[320] – and only some were later included in different collections of essays.[321] Therefore I have decided to analyse here only Virginia Woolf's essay entitled "The Lives of the Obscure",[322] because I consider it an eloquent example of what were Virginia's intentions when writing this kind of lives.

The essay published in the first series of *The Common Reader* (1925) opens with a brief introduction which presents an "obsolete library"[323] where the "obscure sleep on the walls, slouching against each other as if they were too drowsy to stand upright".[324] These obscure are mostly memoirs of forgotten men and women for whom nobody seems to care anymore. But for Virginia Woolf these lives were, as we have seen, all "forecast possibilities for biography".[325] And indeed she chose to "disturb their sleep"[326] and "reopen those peaceful graves".[327] The obscures were of course filled with old secrets and revelations, but it was not only a matter of curiosity (even if we should not forget that it was the driving force behind the

320 Rosenbaum, *Edwardian Bloomsbury*, p. 367.
321 In particular, a few of these essays were gathered and published in the two series of *The Common Reader* (Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, two series, London: Hogarth Press, 1925 and 1932).
322 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", in *The Common Reader*, first series, London: Hogarth Press, 1968, pp. 146-167.
323 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 146.
324 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 146.
325 Gordon, "Virginia Woolf" (ODNB)
326 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 146.
327 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 146.

birth of biography). She wanted to give the obscure the biographical justice she thought they deserved:

> One would conclude that human beings were happy, endowed with such blindness to fate, so indefatigable an interest in their own activities, were it not for those sudden and astonishing apparitions staring in at us, all taut and pale in their determination never to be forgotten, men who have just missed fame, men who have passionately desired redress [...] And in the whole world there is probably but one person who looks up for a moment and tries to interpret the menacing face, the furious beckoning fist, before, in the multitude of human affairs […] one's attention is distracted for ever.[328]

She would rescue them by giving them again "the divine relief of communication".[329]

The first section of this essay is entitled "Taylors and Edgeworths" and describes the biographer of these lives as "a deliverer advancing with lights across the waste of years to the rescue of some stranded ghost".[330] Then our biographer starts talking of the Taylors, the Strutts, the Stapletons, and the Hills and how these families were related which is

> one of the attractions of the unknown, their multitude, their vastness; for, instead of keeping their identity separate, as remarkable people do, they seem to merge into one another, their very boards and title-pages and frontispieces dissolving, and their innumerable pages melting into continuous years so that we can lie back and look up into the fine mist-like substance of countless lives, and pass unhindered from century to century, from life to life.[331]

What fascinated Virginia Woolf was not only the continuing presence of the dead which blurred the formal limits of the lifespan,[332] but also their being closely linked to each other to the point of merging into one another creating thus an entire world covered by obscurity ("an obscurity which is not empty but thick with the star dust of innumerable lives"),[333] while remarkable people shone alone under the light. Instead of giving us facts, the narrator gives us some anecdotes for each person he mentions. These anecdotes are like strokes that, one after the other, enable us to get a picture of these people: with one minor detail after another, the obscurity starts to lift and a personality begins to emerge together with a general idea of life in

328 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 151.
329 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 147.
330 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", pp. 146-147.
331 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 149.
332 Gordon, "Virginia Woolf" (ODNB)
333 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 150.

Colchester in 1800 where we find ourselves too, as in a daydream. After a few examples of obscure, we are given a portrait of Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744-1817). He was an Anglo-Irish politician, writer and inventor who wrote two volumes of memoirs published by his daughter Maria after his death.[334] He is described by our biographer as "a man meritorious, industrious, advanced, but still, as we investigate his memoirs, mainly a bore".[335] Why then should we read his memoirs? First of all, we must remember that the main pleasure we obtain from a memoir is not only knowing the subject from his own point of view, but also getting to know the environment which surrounded him/her and the people s-/he met. Richard Edgeworth, we are informed, "had known every one and done everything"[336] and the biographer is thankful for all his acquaintances because he "brings out, as he bustles and bangs on his way, the diffident, shrinking figures who would otherwise be drowned in darkness":[337] his life, like that of most of the obscure, is connected with many other lives and thus it can cast a beam of light on them; in return we are granted the possibility of seeing the subject through other people's eyes. Unusual attention is placed in particular on his first wife, Mrs Edgeworth, and on the philosopher Thomas Day, a close friend of Richard Edgeworth. The biographical sketches then closes with an episode concerning the meeting with a clergyman and his relationship with a young girl which leaves Mr Edgeworth and the reader full of questions: two more obscure lives that could be explored. In this section, Virginia Woolf not only achieved an interesting and lively portrait of a forgotten man, she also brought to life the people who revolved around him proving thus how the lives of the obscure are inextricably linked and how biography could benefit from this. Moreover, while a standard biographical article would have focused on the main events and achievements of Richard

334 Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Maria Edgeworth, *The Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth*, 2 vols., London: Hunter, Cradock & Joy, 1820-1821.
335 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 152.
336 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 152.
337 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 153.

Edgeworth, Virginia Woolf chose to concentrate upon his personality and to depict him through different scenes. As a consequence, he becomes alive to us as a character in a novel would be: we sympathise with him and it seems to us to be there in each situation he faces. In this way Virginia avoided the sterile praise of a dead man and achieve on the contrary an interesting and living portrait.

The second section of this essay is shorter and is dedicated to the life of Laetitia Pilkington, an obscure woman writer of the eighteenth-century. Her *Memoirs*[338] were a precious source of information on Swift, Pope and others, but were soon forgotten. Nevertheless, the biographer presents Laetitia Pilkington as a champion for women and describes her thus:

> Can you imagine a very extraordinary cross between Moll Flanders and Lady Ritchie, between a rolling and rollicking woman of the town and a lady of breeding and refinement? Laetitia Pilkington (1712-1759) was something of the sort — shady, shifty, adventurous, and yet, like Thackeray's daughter, like Miss Mitford, like Madame de Sévigné and Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, so imbued with the old traditions of her sex that she wrote, as ladies talk, to give pleasure.[339]

From this initial description it is clear that Virginia Woolf was not telling the reader the story of an ordinary woman, but she was telling the story of a woman writer: her life and her literary passion were inextricably connected. Like all women writers in the past, Laetitia Pilkington was limited by the conventions of her sex: she belonged to the great tradition of English women of letters not simply because she wrote, but because like all women writers of the time she could not express herself and her feelings but was obliged to hide them in order to entertain the reader. The lives of women writers were almost always characterized by this discrepancy between their lives and their literary works. But Laetitia was not a typical eighteenth-century lady ("a harmless household dove"),[340] she had an adventurous nature and a profound passion for literature. Unfortunately, this turned out to be her ruin: Laetitia's

338 Laetitia Pilkington, *Memoirs of Laetitia Pilkington*, 3 vols., Dublin: privately printed, 1748-1754.
339 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 161.
340 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 167.

passion for reading was the cause of the misunderstanding which led to her divorce. As a consequence, Laetitia had to earn her living and she tried to do so by writing:

> More and more wildly she ransacked her brains for anecdotes, memories, scandals, views about the bottomless nature of the sea, the inflammable character of the earth — anything that would fill a page and earn her a guinea.[341]

The necessity of earning a living meant the end of free expression: Laetitia Pilkington – like all women writers who tried to earn their living – could not write what she wanted but had to submit to what the public wanted. Laetitia Pilkington's life had not been easy:

> All had been bitterness and struggle, except that she had loved Shakespeare, known Swift, and kept through all the shifts and shades of an adventurous career a gay spirit, something of a lady's breeding, and the gallantry which, at the end of her short life, led her to crack her joke and enjoy her duck with death at her heart and duns at her pillow.[342]

Her strong character and all the difficulties she had to face were what turned her into a heroine for other women writers. In this sketch Virginia Woolf not only described the life of an eighteenth-century woman with a passion for literature, she also seized the opportunity to underline the difficulty – if not impossibility – for women writers of earning a living and how this affected their writing, a theme which profoundly mattered to her.

"The Lives of the Obscure" constitutes another step of Virginia Woolf's biographical revolution. With this essay she expressed her belief that

> memories of great men are no infallible specific. They fall upon the race of life like beams from a lighthouse. They flash, they shock, they reveal, they vanish.[343]

According to Virginia Woolf, the Victorian criteria for identifying potential subjects for biographies were not adequate: in her opinion, many were the people worthy of a biography – clearly more than those that were considered so by Victorian biographers. Forgotten worthies had a lot to tell and teach and the study of "minor" people was fundamental to have a truthful

341 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 167.
342 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 167.
343 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 163.

picture of life in a certain period. Furthermore, Virginia Woolf exemplified again in this essay her theory concerning the necessity to mix facts and fiction in biography (as she had already done in "Friendships Gallery"):

> It is so difficult to keep, as we must with highly authenticated people, strictly to the facts. It is so difficult to refrain from making scenes which, if the past could be recalled, might perhaps be found lacking in accuracy. […] we find ourselves oozing amazement, like a sponge which has absorbed so much that it can retain no more but fairly drips. Certain scenes have the fascination which belongs rather to the abundance of fiction than to the sobriety of fact.[344]

Her biographical essays faced the gaps facts had left in the lives she had chosen and she decided to fill these gaps by recurring to imaginative truths. As Hermione Lee affirms, Virginia Woolf "brought her critical mini-biographies as close to fiction as she could through a bold, inventive, subtle process of synthesising and scene-making".[345] In Virginia Woolf's mind, a successful biography was clearly based on the co-existence of factual and imaginative truth and the gap between biography and novel was becoming smaller and smaller.

Since most of the lives of the obscure were – not by chance – women's, I think it would be here appropriate to spend a few words on what has been often considered to be Virginia Woolf's feminism. Even if Virginia Woolf is held as a key-writer by the feminist criticism and theory of the second half of the twentieth century, it is important to keep in mind that Virginia Woolf's responses to the feminist ideas of her time were, as Laura Marcus points out, "complex and often contradictory";[346] in particular, she had doubts about the suffrage societies and her involvement with feminist political activism was scarce. In Virginia Woolf's case, we had better understand the word "feminism" in its broadest sense: it concerned her interest in women's conditions, without being restricted to the advocacy of women's rights.[347]

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344 Virginia Woolf, "The Lives of the Obscure", p. 155.

345 Hermione Lee, "Virginia Woolf's Essays", in Susan Sellers, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 89-106, p. 97.

346 Laura Marcus, "Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf", in Susan Sellers, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, pp.142-179, p. 144.

347 Laura Marcus, pp. 142-145; Herbert Marder, *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968, pp. 1-4, 91-98.

As Hermione Lee underlines,

> Woolf's absorption in women's lives and writing, her passion for entering into domestic detail and for recovering hidden histories, her quest for female forebears, has become essential to considerations of her work as an essayist. Her feminist agenda has long been linked to her interest in history and biography.[348]

First of all, we must consider what were the conditions of women in those times. In 1880 the Married Woman's Property Act allowed women to keep the money they earned, in 1918 the Parliamentary Reform Act ensured the right to vote to women over 30 (in 1928 this act was modified by the Equal Franchise Act which gave the vote to all women over 21), and in 1919 the Sex Disqualification Removal Act opened to women nearly all public offices and professions.[349] This meant that until the twentieth century women could not vote, could not earn money through a profession (since marriage was the only "profession" open to them) and even if they had money of their own they could not dispose of it: this clearly put women in a position of inferiority to and dependance from men. Education too was limited for women: colleges were not open for them until the end of the nineteenth century; noble women received a private education that aimed only to make them "a saleable commodity on the marriage market",[350] while poor women remained basically illiterate. As we have seen when talking about her education, also Virginia Woolf resented the impossibility to go to college and the poor education of women is at the basis of Woolf's attack against England's patriarchy in *Three Guineas* (1938).[351]

Women were a constant focus in all her works, but Virginia Woolf devoted many of her essays to analyse the status of women in literature in particular. She was convinced that literature, like society, was dominated by a patriarchy: women could not express themselves

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348 Lee, "Virginia Woolf's Essays", p. 93.
349 Mark Hussey, "*Room of One's Own, A* (1929)", in *Virginia Woolf A to Z*, pp. 233-242, pp. 234-236.
350 Marder, p. 73.
351 Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, London: Hogarth Press, 1938. *Three Guineas* is considered to be the most radical of Virginia Woolf's feminist writings, but its urgency cannot be detached from the historical context which shaped the book.

freely and in literary works they were seen only in relation to men. She wrote in "Men and Women" (1920):

> in all the libraries of the world the man is to be heard talking to himself and for the most part about himself. […] Some [women] are plainly men in disguise; others represent what men would like to be, or are conscious of not being; […] some of the most famous heroines even of nineteenth-century fiction represent what men desire in women, but not necessarily what women are in themselves.[352]

According to Virginia Woolf men and women are different because their vision of reality is different, since they have different perspectives and standards and "both in life and in art the values of a woman are not the values of a man".[353] Therefore men and women should express themselves differently: women should be independent of opinion, create a sentence whose form suits them ("a woman's book is not written as a man would write it")[354] and explore their own sex describing the experiences of their own bodies. Virginia Woolf affirmed in *A Room of One's Own* (1929)[355] that women think back through their mothers, but unfortunately she was the first to ascertain with regret the lack of a female literary tradition and the absence of female literary predecessors until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, caused by the patriarchal dominion of culture. In her opinion, women who wished to write should first of all commit a sort of matricide by killing the Angel in the House, the symbol of Victorian femininity and rectitude that prevented women from writing freely:

> I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing.[356]

Moreover, according to Woolf, women writers required a good education, an adequate experience obtained by expressing themselves "in all the arts and professions open to human

352 Virginia Woolf, "Men and Women", in *Women and Writing*, Michele Barrett, ed., London: Women's Press, 1979, pp. 64-67, p. 65.
353 Virginia Woolf, "Women and Fiction", in *Women and Writing*, pp. 43-52, p. 49.
354 Virginia Woolf, "Women and Fiction", p. 50.
355 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, London: Hogarth Press, 1946.
356 Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women", in *Women and Writing*, pp. 57-63, p. 59.

skill",[357] financial independence and an autonomous space – "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction"[358] – to be able to express themselves openly.[359] However, despite the differences between the sexes, Virginia concluded *A Room of One's Own* with an invitation to unity and collaboration: in her opinion, a true artist should be androgynous,[360] a topic that shall be examined in depth later, in the sub-chapter dedicated to *Orlando*.

Together with the absence of a female literary tradition, Virginia Woolf denounced women's silence in biography:

> It is to be found in the lives of the obscure – in those almost unlit corridors of history where the figures of generations of women are so dimly, so fitfully perceived. For very little is known about women. The history of England is the history of the male line, not of the female. […] But of our mothers, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers, what remains? Nothing but a tradition. […] We know nothing of them except their names and the dates of their marriages and the number of children they bore.[361]

The subjects of biographies were mostly men; women made usually an appearance as men's appendages and very little of their lives was considered worth recording. But Suzanne Raitt notices how in the 1920s a sense of equality emerged between reader, writer, and subject which "opened up fresh possibilities for biography, and more particularly for biography as a transaction between women".[362] As we have seen in "Friendships Gallery" and in the lives of the obscure, Virginia Woolf started to exploit new biographical methods already at the very beginning of her literary career in order to "resurrect" women and insert them in the biographical tradition.

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357 Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women", p. 60.
358 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 6.
359 Laura Marcus, p. 146.
360 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 147-148.
361 Virginia Woolf, "Women and Fiction", p. 44.
362 Raitt, p. 22.

“The New Biography” (1927)

This essay appeared on the *New York Herald Tribune* on 30 October 1927 and was later republished in the collection of essays *Granite and Rainbow* (1958).[363] It was supposed to be a review for Harold Nicolson's *Some People*, but it turned out to be an interesting reflection on the nature and limitations of English biography. The essay opens with Sidney Lee's affirmation that “the aim of biography is the truthful transmission of personality” which perfectly summarizes the main problem of biography:

> On the one hand there is truth; on the other there is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it.[364]

The dichotomy between truth and personality could not be expressed in more adequate visual terms: while truth is based on hard facts that stand like milestones in the subject's life, the subject's personality is colourful and intangible like a rainbow. Biography seems to be “precariously balanced between irreconcilable possibilities”.[365] Only combining granite and rainbow, the biographer can achieve a truthful depiction of the subject:

> 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.[366]

Facts and personality are not only both necessary to create a complete portrait of the subject, they have equal value: in a successful biography one cannot prevail on the other. The biographer has to find a way to mediate between granite and rainbow with consistency and balance, for example by focusing on the facts of the subject's life that best transmit his/her personality but without manipulating them to the point of affecting the incontestable evidence

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363 Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography”, in *Granite and Rainbow*, Leonard Woolf, ed., London: Hogarth Press, 1958, pp. 149-155.
364 Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography”, p. 149.
365 Elena Gualtieri, “The Impossible Art: Virginia Woolf on Modern Biography”, *Cambridge Quarterly*, 29 (2000), pp. 349-61, p. 349.
366 Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography”, p. 150.

they provide. In this way, the biographer ceases to be a simple chronicler and becomes a creative artist.

Clearly, this is not an easy task and most biographers, as this essay informs us, failed because they had "relied upon external facts as a substitute for knowledge of the inner life".[367] Boswell[368] was the first to shift the focus in biography from actions to personality: after Boswell, "we can no longer maintain that life consists in actions only or in works. It consists in personality",[369] thus making a biography based solely on the servitude to facts intolerable. Boswell's success, in Woolf's opinion, was the result of his ability to recreate a sense of Johnson's intimate presence: according to Elena Gualtieri, "Boswell has paved the way for precisely that mixture of factual accuracy and imaginative recreation which Woolf enjoins the modern biographer to attain".[370] Even though it felt the influence of Boswell's example, Victorian biography was however a failure according to Woolf: she wrote that "the Victorian biography was a parti-coloured, hybrid, monstrous birth"[371] because, as we have seen in chapter I, it distorted the subject's personality in the name of the dominating idea of goodness. Moreover, the Victorian biographer ended up by losing him-/herself in innumerable words and countless documents transforming a living man into a "fossil"[372] through what Virginia considered an artistically wrong-headed method. As we have seen in chapter III, in the twentieth century there was a revolution in biography. Brevity, freedom and independent judgement became essential requirements for the modern biographer. The relationship between biographer and subject consequently changed tending towards equality because the biographer renounced pose, solemnity and moral standards and felt free to choose and synthesize his material, becoming an artist. The true ability of the modern biographer

367 Lewis, p. 379.
368 James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 2 vols., London: Henry Baldwin, 1791.
369 Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", p. 150.
370 Gualtieri, p. 352.
371 Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", p. 151.
372 Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", p. 151.

consisted however in conveying man's essence through the description of little gestures or anecdotes.

More importantly, together with the growing affirmation of psychoanalysis, the focus in all arts was brought back to man's inner life and personality. In "Modern Fiction", Virginia Woolf notoriously described life as "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end"[373] and this modern approach to life influenced of course not only the writing of novels but also that of biographies.The ensuing problem for biography was what Ray Monk efficaciously sums up thus:

> 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?[374]

Also Virginia Woolf registered this sharp shift of focus in her works and in this essay she wrote: "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".[375] It is interesting to notice how here fact and fiction seems to exchange positions: in the twentieth century, fictitious life and not fact was becoming more and more closely associated with the attribute of reality.[376] According to Virginia, the only possible solution for the biographer in order to recreate real personalities was to combine truth of fact and truth of fiction even though she was the first to realize that they are intrinsically incompatible:

> 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.[377]

The biographer can turn to the devices of fiction in order to resolve this impasse, but he must be extremely careful in order to preserve biographical integrity and so as not to undermine the

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373 Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction", in *The Common Reader*, first series, pp. 184-195, p. 189.
374 Ray Monk, "This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography and Reality", *Philosophy and Literature*, 31 (2007), pp.1-40, p. 26.
375 Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", p. 155.
376 Gualtieri, p. 351.
377 Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", p. 154.

reader's pact with the biographer:

> 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 he carries the use of fiction too far, so that he disregards the truth, or can only introduce it with incongruity, he loses both worlds; he has neither the freedom of fiction nor the substance of fact.[378]

The balance between granite and rainbow that defines a successful biography can only be achieved through a delicate balance between truth and fiction. Biography seems to become for Woolf a sort of hybrid form between history and novel which tries to preserve the original opposition between fact and fiction through a particular kind of synthesis able to transmit both granite and rainbow of the subject's life.[379]

Nicolson's *Some People* (1927) was praised by Woolf because, in her opinion, it illustrated effectively the new attitude to biography. Nicolson, in Woolf's opinion, presented his subjects with a critical eye which had lost all illusions and was quite able to mix fiction and biography relying both on the "reality of truth" and the "artistry of fiction",[380] creating thus good and amusing portrayals of what were perceived to be real human beings. Nevertheless, even if Nicolson succeeded in proving that the devices of fiction could effectively be used also when dealing with real life, the balance he achieved was – according to Virginia Woolf – precarious and this severely affected the final result of the book because it left the reader in a condition of disbelief. In conclusion, for Virginia, "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"[381] was still to be discovered, but Nicolson showed however a possible direction for future biographers. As we have already seen for "Friendships Gallery" and for "The Lives of the Obscure" and as we shall also see in the next sub-chapters,

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378 Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", p. 155.
379 A similar idea is expressed by Elena Gualtieri in her article "The Impossible Art: Virginia Woolf on Modern Biography".
380 Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", p. 152.
381 Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", p. 155.

Virginia Woolf herself attempted *in primis* to achieve "the perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow" through a careful balance between truth and fiction in her biographies.

Orlando (1928)

Orlando[382] is perhaps Virginia Woolf's most experimental work and since its publication it has puzzled many critics. It has been classified under many different labels: biography, novel, biographical or historical fantasy, parody, mock-biography, *jeu d'ésprit*, sentimental tribute, essay-novel, *roman à clé*, dream fantasy. In *Portrait of a Marriage*, Nigel Nicolson wrote that *Orlando* was the longest and most charming love-letter in literature,[383] while J. J. Wilson defined *Orlando* an anti-novel because of its subversive motifs.[384] Starting from an essay by Leonard Woolf, Claire Battershill classified Orlando as a relevant example of imaginative biography[385] which is, in Egerton Brydges' words, "an Imaginary Superstructure on the known facts of the Biography of eminent characters".[386] *Orlando* answers positively to all these labels but, at the same time, it seems to refuse strict genre categorizations: the only way to fully appreciate this work is for readers and critics to recognize its richness and freedom.[387] For the purposes of this thesis I will focus chiefly on *Orlando*'s connection with biography.

Virginia Woolf conceived Orlando in 1927 as a biography of Vita Sackville-West.[388]

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382 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: a Biography*, Rachel Bowlby, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

383 Nigel Nicolson, *Ritratto di un matrimonio* (original title: *Portrait of a Marriage*), Pier Francesco Paolini, trad., Milano: Rizzoli Editore, 1974, p. 214.

384 J. J. Wilson, "Why is *Orlando* difficult?", in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, Marcus, Jane, ed., pp. 170-184, p. 176.

385 Claire Battershill, "'No One Wants Biography': The Hogarth Press Classifies *Orlando"*, in *Interdisciplinary/Multidisciplinary: Woolf Selected Papers from the Twenty-Second Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf*, Ann Martin and Kathryn Holland, eds., Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2013, pp. 243-246, p. 243.

386 Quoted in Battershill, p. 243.

387 Vita Fortunati comments that unless we readers are able to do so, we will be in turn mocked by the book itself. (Vita Fortunati, "Parodia e ironia in *Orlando* di Virginia Woolf", in *Ritratto dell'artista come donna: saggi sull'avanguardia del Novecento*, Lilla Maria Crisafulli Jones and Vita Fortunati, eds., Urbino: Quattro Venti, 1988)

388 Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962) was an English writer and gardener. She became one of the closest friends of Virginia Woolf after they met in 1922. (ODNB)

On 5 October 1927, Virginia wrote in her diary:

> And instantly the usual exciting devices enter my mind: a biography beginning in the year 1500 and continuing to the present day, called *Orlando*: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another.[389]

Orlando (Vita Sackville-West)'s biography starts exactly in the Elizabethan age with Orlando as a sixteen-year-old nobleman slicing the head of a Moor in his enormous house (Knole).[390] Orlando then lives throughout the centuries until the present moment of the book: in 1928 Orlando is thirty-six years old (the same age as Vita). Throughout these centuries Orlando lives various adventures: he falls in love with a Russian princess called Sasha (Violet Trefusis)[391] during the Great Frost, becomes English Ambassador in Turkey (like Harold Nicolson, Vita Sackville-West's husband),[392] he falls into a coma and wakes up as a woman, lives with the gipsies,[393] returns back to England in the seventeenth century, faces different lawsuits,[394] is pursued by an Archduke (Lord Lascelles),[395] then under the reign of Queen Victoria she marries Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine (Harold Nicolson) and has a son.[396] Each century is carefully depicted by Virginia Woolf through the spirit of the age which constantly changes and influences Orlando's life. But Orlando is not a simple man/woman:

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389 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 5 Oct. 1927, p. 116.

390 Knole was Vita Sackville-West's family house. After her father's death in 1928 the house went to her uncle, because – being a woman – the English aristocratic inheritance customs prevented Vita from inheriting Knole. Vita was grateful to Virginia because *Orlando* identified Knole with her forever. (Nigel Nicolson, p. 220) In transforming Knole into Orlando's house, Virginia Woolf drew heavily on Vita's book *Knole and the Sackvilles* (London: William Heinemann, 1922).

391 Violet Trefusis (1894-1972) was an English writer. She and Vita Sackville-West had an affair from 1918 to 1921 which is recounted in Nigel Nicolson's *Portrait of a Marriage*. (ODNB)

392 Harold Nicolson was a Secretary in the British Embassy at Constantinople from 1911 to 1914. (ODNB)

393 Vita's mother was the illegitimate daughter of Lionel Sackville-West and Josefa Durán y Ortega, known as Pepita, a Spanish dancer of gipsy origins. (ODNB)

394 In 1909-10 Vita was involved in a much publicized legal battle between her parents and her uncle over the inheritance of Knole and the succession to the Sackville title. Lord Sackville was not married, therefore his children were all illegitimate and could not inherit Knole. So, on the death of Vita's grandfather, the title and Knole descended to his nephew Lionel Edward who had married Vita's mother (Vita's parents were cousins). Vita's uncle claimed to be a legitimate heir to the peerage and estate, but the lawsuit was settled in favour of Vita's parents. (Nigel Nicolson, pp. 77-80)

395 Henry George Charles Lascelles (1882-1947) was one of Vita Sackville-West's suitors in 1910. He later married Princess Mary, daughter of George V. (ODNB)

396 Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson married in 1913 and had two sons, Benedict (1914-1978) and Nigel (1917-2004). (ODNB)

s-/he is a poet. It takes him/her more than three centuries to finish and finally publish his/her poem "The Oak Tree" (Vita Sackville West's most famous poem is *The Land*[397] from which Virginia takes some quotes) and s-/he meets many famous men of letters throughout the ages. Therefore *Orlando* is not only a biography of Vita Sackville-West, but also a portrait of English history and literature: as Blackstone comments, "through the metamorphoses of a single individual the changing spirit of English history and the English way of life is re-created".[398]

Despite the fact that obviously Vita Sackville-West did not live for all these centuries, each important fact of Orlando's life is closely connected with Vita's experiences, as I specified between parenthesis or in the notes. On 9 October 1927 Virginia wrote to Vita:

> But listen: suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita, and its all about you and the lure of your mind […], shall you mind? Say yes or no. Your excellence as a subject arises largely from your noble birth […] and the opportunity thus given for florid descriptive passages in great abundance. Though, I admit, I should like to untwine and twist you again some very odd incongruous strands in you; and also, as I told you, it sprung upon me how I could revolutionize biography in a night; and so, if agreeable to you, I would like to toss it up in the air and see what happens.[399]

After Vita's consent, Virginia carefully documented herself, so it can be affirmed that the facts presented in *Orlando* are accurate. She wanted to revolutionize biography by achieving a careful balance between truth and fantasy[400] as she had suggested a few months before in the "New Biography": she was not solely to recount the facts, because her final aim was to give the readers an insightful portrayal of Vita by untwining and twisting the incongruous strands in her.

The book turned out, as she expected, "half laughing, half serious; with great splashes

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397 Vita Sackville-West, *The Land*, London: William Heinemann, 1926. In 1927 Vita was awarded the Hawthornden Prize for this poem. (ODNB)

398 Bernard Blackstone, *Virginia Woolf: a Commentary*, London: Hogarth Press, 1949, p. 131.

399 Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West, 9 Oct. 1927, quoted in Vita Sackville-West, "Virginia Woolf and *Orlando*", in Jacqueline E.M. Latham, ed., *Critics on Virginia Woolf*, Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970, pp.82-83, p. 82.

400 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 22 Oct. 1927, p. 117.

of exaggeration",[401] but Virginia Woolf's driving impulse was to give the book a satiric and caricature value.[402] As John Graham explains,

> A caricature of a person selects his most salient features and throws them into relief by simplification and exaggeration, usually to mock but sometimes to make us recognize with amusement someone we love or respect.[403]

When we look at someone through a caricature, we normally assume an attitude of detachment and this allows us not only to recognize his/her known features but also to discover something new about him/her. Therefore, caricature usually implies exploration and in *Orlando* Virginia Woolf exploited caricature to inspect not only things she admired but also things she disliked.[404] The satiric mode is evident from the initial mock preface where the author acknowledged the help of many friends who were actually never consulted. This preface serves, together with the illustrations and the final index, to give to the work the same pretences of scholarship and exactitude as official biographies.[405] Throughout the book nothing is exempt from parody – not even Virginia Woolf herself[406] – but the main object of satire is the solemn biographer with his scholarly apparatus and, through him, the traditional biographical methods, with what Naremore calls "an attack on the deadening empiricism of most biographical literature".[407]

The biographer is an active voice in the text who constantly interrupts the narration to explain and comment on the facts to the reader indulging in digressions, underlining thus the constructed nature of the biography. A few lines after the *incipit*, for instance, s-/he comments:

> A more candid, sullen face it would be impossible to find. Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex

401 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 20 Dec. 1927, p. 120.
402 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 20 Dec. 1927 and 7 Nov. 1928, pp. 120, 136.
403 John Graham, "The 'Caricature Value' of Parody and Fantasy in *Orlando*", in Claire Sprague, ed., *Virginia Woolf: a Collection of Critical Essays*, pp. 101-116, p. 101.
404 Graham, p. 101.
405 Edel, pp. 134-135.
406 Virginia Woolf's style is mocked particularly in *Orlando*, p. 94 where the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* is self-parodied.
407 Naremore, p. 193.

> herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet. From deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach whatever seat it may be that is the height of their desire.[408]

Being both pompous and naïve, s-/he embodies the pedantry of the Victorian biographer who relies only on facts, dates and documents, presenting as true only the logical conclusions deriving from his/her evidence. According to Orlando's biographer, the first duty of a biographer is

> to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads.[409]

Only truth interests him/her but his/her subject will give him/her a very hard time in accomplishing his/her mission. For instance, in *Orlando*, the official evidence on which biographers rely is consistently mocked: the evidence which Orlando's biographer possesses is mostly scarce and unreliable, helplessly confining him/her to the realm of uncertainty, as on the occasion of the conferring of the Dukedom to Orlando in Constantinople when a fire caused by the insurrection of the Turks severely damaged all available documents. Sometimes the events the biographer has to face are completely mysterious and undocumented but still his/her duty prevents him/her from glossing over them, as s-/he tells us at the beginning of the second chapter:

> now we come to an episode which lies right across our path, so that there is no ignoring it. Yet it is dark, mysterious, and undocumented; so that there is no explaining it. Volumes might be written in interpretation of it; whole religious systems founded upon the signification of it. Our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may.[410]

Throughout the book, the biographer continues to lament the obstacles and pitfalls s-/he has to face in trying to record Orlando's life, in particular dealing with matters which Victorian decorum would rather suppress, such as Orlando's childbirth:

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408 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 14.
409 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 63.
410 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 63.

> Suddenly she started – and here we could only wish that, as on a former occasion, Purity, Chastity, and Modesty would push the door ajar and provide, at least, a breathing space in which we could think how to wrap up what now has to be told delicately, as a biographer should.[411]

Moreover, while Orlando's biographer may pause to solemnly explain obvious things and record with the utmost precision trivial details, s-/he would prefer to ignore the nebulous aspects of life, such as thoughts and feelings, "that riot and confusion of the passions and emotions which every good biographer detests".[412] As Leon Edel writes,

> it is clear that the biographer cannot do all that Mrs. Woolf wants him to do – he can never penetrate to the consciousness of his subject, he can only guess at his thoughts and only suggest the successive days of his life.[413]

Virginia Woolf's aim in portraying such a self-conscious biographer is to underline "the dichotomy between factual biography and true life":[414] she taunted the traditional biographer because of his/her inability and, more importantly, unwillingness to capture the "rainbow" of Orlando's life.

Despite the biographer's intentions, Orlando's inner life is constantly brought to the surface: as Christy L. Burns writes, "the parody of that narrator's attempt results in the realization of the modern, constructive figuration of subjectivity".[415] In the last chapter, in particular, the reader understands that Orlando's modern subjectivity is composed of many different selves:

> how many different people are there not – Heaven help us – all having lodgement at one time or another in the human spirit? Some say two thousand and fifty-two. […] these selves of which we are built up, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own, call them what you will (and for many of these things there is no name) so that one will only come if it is raining, another in a room with green curtains, another when Mrs Jones is not there, another if you can promise it a glass of wine – and so on; for everybody can multiply from his own experience the different terms which his different selves have made with him – and some are too wildly ridiculous to be

411 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 278.
412 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 16.
413 Edel, p. 144.
414 Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, London: Methuen, 1977, p. 142.
415 Christy L. Burns, "Re-Dressing Feminist Identities: Tensions Between Essential and Constructed Selves in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 40 (1994), pp. 342-364, p. 346.

> mentioned in print at all.[416]

According to Virginia Woolf, a person's inner being is not ordained in unity, but it is something extremely complex: someone's personality is exactly like a rainbow composed of many different colours which continually shift. Identity is composed of many selves; these selves, as Harvena Richter notices, "are linked through the threads of memory, sensory stimulus, or association"[417] and are similar to apparitions. Orlando's true self is nothing less than the combination of all his/her identities. However, all these selves present in each person are controlled by a Captain self:

> the conscious self, which is the uppermost, and has the power to desire, wishes to be nothing but one self. This is what some people call the true self, and it is, they say, compact of all the selves we have it in us to be; commanded and locked up by the Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls them all.[418]

This Key self prevents chaos from reigning inside us: it imposes an order so that our personality appears in the end consistent, despite the various facets of which it is composed. Moreover, the captain self has the important function of making the reader feel that Orlando has a recognizable personality:[419] Orlando seems to be inconstant and changeable, but at the same time s-/he shows a sort of consistency throughout all his/her alterations. But "since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand",[420] it will never be able to wholly capture its subject's innermost being. This is the ultimate limit of biography for Virginia Woolf, a limit that can be surpassed only by resorting to the methods of fiction, as she explained in "The New Biography". As Marder underlines, "in *Orlando*, fantasy became a means of emphasizing the inner life of her hero-heroine"[421] because Virginia Woolf thought that we may

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416 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 294.
417 Richter, pp. 116-117.
418 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, pp. 295-296.
419 Richter, pp. 116-117.
420 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 295.
421 Marder, p. 24.

try to understand inner life, which is particularly elusive, through imagination.

Other two anomalies characterize this biography. The first anomaly is time: as we have seen above, *Orlando* does not begin with the birth of its hero-heroine nor does it end with his/her death. In addition, Orlando is only 20 years older after many centuries and, as the biographer informs us, s-/he "scarcely looked a day older".[422] Biography and history are closely linked both for Virginia Woolf and her father, but in different ways. While Leslie Stephen used to choose an exemplary figure to describe and understand a period, Virginia employed different centuries to describe Orlando's personality and mutability. Orlando is constantly influenced by the spirit of the age, because

> such is the indomitable nature of the spirit of the age, however, that it batters down anyone who tries to make stand against it far more effectually than those who bend its own way.[423]

Orlando needs to adapt to each century in order to survive; consequently, each century contributes to form his/her personality. As Harvena Richter states,

> if a person *is* his past, if all of time – historical, racial, and personal – merges to create the person as he is at a single moment of being, then there exists a peculiarly intimate connection between time and personality, a relationship of such interdependency that the equation of time = personality can very nearly be made.[424]

Basically, for Virginia Woolf the historical past is part of the present consciousness so that any human being is the result of not only the moments s-/he lives but also of his/her personal and national past. Every person is consequently the compound not only of different selves but also of different times:

> And indeed, it cannot be denied that the most successful practitioners of the art of life, often unknown people by the way, somehow contrive to synchronize the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system so that when eleven strikes, all the rest chime in unison, and the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in the past.[425]

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422 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 288.
423 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 233.
424 Richter, p. 160.
425 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 291.

Orlando continually recalls his/her past, but s-/he is nevertheless – as Mark Hussey notices – "constantly anchored in the actual world of time by the visible world around her";[426] this prevents Orlando from losing him-/herself in time. Furthermore, mocking her father's work, Virginia Woolf wrote in *Orlando* that "the true length of a person's life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute"[427] because she perceived time as a flux which is strictly connected with the human mind:

> Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no such simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second.[428]

There is a fundamental discrepancy between the clock-time and the mind-time: according to our emotional state, time seems shorter or longer. This is a common theme in Virginia Woolf's fiction: the fact that we find this same preoccupation with time also in her biographies probably suggests that in Virginia's mind there was not a fixed line dividing the two genres and upholds *Orlando*'s equilibrium between biography and novel. Time is accelerated and decelerated in order to give more emphasis to thoughts and emotions of Orlando's inner life and exemplify how the mind can manipulate time. For these reasons, Orlando can be considered a "questing hero in the realm of time"[429] and the book can be also seen as a history of England throughout various centuries.

The second anomaly is androgyny. At the beginning of the book Orlando is a man but halfway through the book he changes into a woman. But the biographer tells us that "the change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that

426 Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: the Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986, p. 106.
427 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 291.
428 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, pp. 94-95.
429 Richter, p. 154.

Orlando herself showed no surprise at it".[430] Orlando is not shocked by the change because inside he has always had an androgynous nature. As Hermione Lee points out,

> Virginia Woolf emphasizes Orlando's natural androgyny: she is the same character whether she is a man or a woman, and it is evident from the first line of the book that Orlando's man/womanly characteristics overlap.[431]

Orlando has masculine and feminine qualities at the same time so that man and woman are only different aspects of the same personality. Indeed,

> Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity.[432]

Orlando, moreover, fully enjoys his/her androgyny:

> She had, it seems, no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed far more frequently that those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied.[433]

Vita Sackville-West, too, considered herself androgynous and used to dress up as a young man for fun (like Orlando does in the seventeenth century).[434] In the book Orlando is not the only androgynous person: Sasha, the Archduke, and Shelmerdine are all male and female at the same time. But why androgyny? Orlando's biographer explains that,

> Different thought the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above.[435]

Androgyny seems here to be a natural condition of humankind. This concept is explored also in *A Room of One's Own* where Virginia Woolf wrote:

> in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the

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430 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 133.
431 Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, p. 149.
432 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 133.
433 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 211.
434 Nigel Nicolson, pp. 118, 121.
435 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 181.

brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her.[436]

As I previously mentioned when talking about Virginia Woolf's feminism, she believed that men and women have a different vision of reality since they have different values and perspectives. Nevertheless, Virginia Woolf realized that "it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex"[437] because "a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine".[438] It is therefore of fundamental importance that a sort of androgynous collaboration takes place between the male side and the feminine side – as Virginia Woolf put it, "some marriage of opposites has to be consummated"[439] – in order to create a work of art, because if only one of the two sexes predominates large areas of human experience will be excluded and consequently sex-consciousness will seriously damage artistic creation. Orlando, as we have seen, balances the qualities of both sexes; in addition, being also a writer, s-/he embodies the androgynous nature of the literary mind.[440] Finally, androgyny is another means to ridicule the rigid conventions of Victorian biography: as Suzanne Raitt underlines, "Orlando's rite of passage is neither birth, marriage, nor even death, but a fantastic and ridiculous experience of transsexualism".[441] Orlando is not a great and exemplary man, but both man and woman; in this way all biographical expectations are disrupted.

As we have seen, *Orlando* overtly exposes the failure of traditional biography to give a truthful and adequate portrait of its subject and his/her complexity. But biography is not the only genre mocked by Virginia Woolf in this work. Jill Channing in her article "Magical Realism and Gender Variability in *Orlando*" notices how in this book many genres – biography, novel, poem and history – are affected by Virginia Woolf's approach: "in rewriting

436 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 147-148.
437 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 156-157.
438 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 148.
439 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 157.
440 Guiguet, p. 175.
441 Raitt, p. 23.

these genres, Woolf amalgamates them, creating a multi-genre approach to the novel that transcends and mocks the literary conventions for these various genres".[442] This, of course, mirrors the composite nature of *Orlando* I acknowledged at the beginning of this sub-chapter. Focusing mainly on the biographical nature of the work, I would consider *Orlando* not only an example of the new biography proposed by Woolf in her essay "The New Biography" (for its marriage of granite and rainbow), but also an anti-biography. An anti-novel can be described as a "work deliberately constructed in a negative fashion, relying for its effects on omitting or annihilating traditional elements of the novel, and on playing against the expectations established in the reader by the novelistic methods and conventions of the past";[443] basically, the anti-novel forces the reader to abandon conventions and rethink all limitations. Consequently, we may define *Orlando* an anti-biography because it applies the ideas of the anti-novel to biography: Virginia Woolf mocked and parodied the traditional and conventional elements of biography – such as time, gender, facts and death – to annihilate its methods and the readers' expectations. In this way she unequivocally demonstrated the limitations of biography and encouraged a biographical revolution.

Flush (1933)

Virginia Woolf started to work on *Flush*,[444] the biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel, in the summer of 1931 and published it in October 1933.[445] She wrote to Ottoline Morrell in February 1933:

> Flush is only by way of a joke. I was so tired after the Waves, that I lay in the garden and read the Browning love letters, and the figure of their dog made me laugh so I couldn't resist making him a Life. I wanted to play a joke on Lytton – it was to parody

442 Jill Channing, "Magical Realism and Gender Variability in *Orlando*", *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 67 (2005), pp. 11-13, p. 11.
443 Wilson, p. 174.
444 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, Kate Flint, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
445 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, pp. 165-214.

him.[446]

We can see from this comment to her friend that *Flush*, like *Orlando*, was born out of a desire to unwind and aimed at parody. In this case, the object of parody was to be Lytton Strachey's biographical methods: Woolf indeed wrote a version of the ending of *Flush* in the manner of Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria,* but she cut it out after Strachey's death in January 1932.[447] Moreover she expected *Flush* to be a financial success, in order to recover from the failure of profit she supposed *The Waves* (1931) would be.[448] Therefore, for Virginia Woolf, *Flush* meant many things: a sort of vacation from more strenuous writing, a literary exercise in biography, parody, and money.

Even if the intention to make fun of Lytton Strachey was abandoned after his death, *Flush* remains – again like *Orlando* – a means to mock traditional biographies. Virginia Woolf supplied the biography with a list of authorities, notes, pictures and drawings to give it the appearance of scholarly biographies. In addition, unlike what happens in *Orlando*, the biography begins with the genealogy and birth of the subject and it ends with his death, like all canonical biographies. Still, there remains a great anomaly: the subject of this biography is a dog. As Kate Flint explains, Virginia Woolf

> both legitimizes her own biographic enterprise through footnotes and a list of sources, as though she were writing the life of a human subject, and makes her reader recognize the conventions of biography *as* conventions, through questioning their appropriateness when applied to canine.[449]

By choosing a non-human subject, Virginia Woolf openly challenged the conventions of traditional biography and, as we are about to see, tried to explore new possibilities.

Taking a dog as the subject of her biography, Virginia Woolf also tried to describe

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446 Virginia Woolf to Ottoline Morrell, 23 February 1933, quoted in Pamela L. Caughie, "*Flush* and the Literary Canon: Oh Where Oh Where Has That Little Dog Gone?", in Eleanor McNees, ed., *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessments*, vol. II, pp. 514-532, p. 519.
447 Lewis, pp. 383-384; Mark Hussey, "*Flush, A Biography* (1933)", *Virginia Woolf A to Z*, p. 89.
448 Caughie, "*Flush* and the Literary Canon: Oh Where Oh Where Has That Little Dog Gone?", p. 520.
449 Kate Flint, "Introduction", in *Flush*, pp. xii-xlvi, p. xviii.

things from what Lewis defines "the spaniel's angle of perception".[450] While in her other works the world is mainly seen,[451] in *Flush* Virginia explored a more sensuous life: smell and taste are more important than sight and the focus is constantly on the dog's physical sensations and his experience of the world. For example, the entrance of Flush into the Barretts' house is thus described through his senses:

> he was more astonished by what he smelt than by what he saw. Up the funnel of the staircase came warm whiffs of joints roasting, of fowls basting, of soups simmering – ravishing almost as food itself to nostrils used to the meagre savour of Kerenhappock's penurious fries and hashes. Mixing with the smell of food were further smells – smells of cedarwood and sandalwood and mahogany; scents of male bodies and female bodies; of men servants and maid servants; of coats and trousers; of crinolines and mantles; of curtains of tapestry, of curtains of plush; of coal dust and fog; of wine and cigars. Each room as he passed it – dining-room, drawing-room, library, bedroom – wafted out its own contribution to the general stew; while, as he set down first one paw then another, each was caressed and retained by the sensuality of rich pile carpets closing amorously over it.[452]

The richness of the house is not conveyed to the reader by describing its beauty and its objects, but through Flush's perceptions: the reader cannot simply establish the given beauty of the place, s-/he has to imagine and understand it by means of the positivity or negativity of Flush's experience. The biographer asks the reader for a shift in perception, going beyond the limitations of human sight, in order to understand the subject of the book:

> the human nose is practically non-existent. The greatest poets in the world have smelt nothing but roses on the one hand, and dung on the other. The infinite gradations that lie between are unrecorded. Yet it was in the world of smell that Flush mostly lived. Love was chiefly smell; form and colour were smell; music and architecture, law, politics and science were smell. To him religion itself was smell. To describe his simplest experience with the daily chop or biscuit is beyond our power.[453]

As Anna Feuerstein affirms, "Flush's canine epistemology, which functions primarily by way of scent, challenges the empirical belief in the authority of vision and the ability to know and understand simply by looking".[454] As a consequence, readers cannot trust sight to understand

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450 Lewis, p. 385.
451 Richter, p. 69.
452 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 15.
453 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 86.
454 Anna Feuerstein, "What Does Power Smell Like? Canine Epistemology and the Politics of the Pet in Virginia Woolf's *Flush*", *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 84 (2013), pp. 32-34, p. 32.

the reality of the book and this allowed Woolf not only to go beyond human experience but also to debunk the limitations of biography by exploring new regions of perception. Nevertheless, visual imagination is not altogether absent in the book. In particular, as Maggie Humm points out,[455] visual experience is crucial in Flush's perception of his own subjectivity:

> Flush knew before the summer had passed that there is no equality among dogs: some dogs are high dogs; some are low. Which, then, was he? No sooner had Flush got home than he examined himself carefully in the looking-glass. Heaven be praised, he was a dog of birth and breeding! His head was smooth; his eyes were prominent but not gozzled; his feet were feathered; he was the equal of the best-bred cocker in Wimpole Street.[456]

It is not through smell but through a mirror that Flush is able to understand his individual subjectivity.

Indeed, throughout the book, the reader not only perceives the world through Flush's sense, s-/he also has access to his mind and his stream of consciousness: Flush thinks and dreams, ponders and plans, loves and hates, blames and forgives. *Flush*, therefore, constitutes Virginia Woolf's experiment in portraying a canine subjectivity instead of an human character: she wanted to take "human minutes and hours and drop them into a dog's mind"[457] and to analyse his thoughts and feelings. For example, after being scolded for attacking Mr Browning, Flush lies on the floor pondering the situation and his feelings:

> Twice Flush had done his utmost to kill his enemy; twice he had failed. And why had he failed, he asked himself? Because he loved Miss Barrett. Looking up at her from under his eyebrows as she lay, severe and silent on the sofa, he knew that he must love her for ever. Things are not simple but complex. If he bit Mr Browning he bit her too. Hatred is not hatred; hatred is also love. Here Flush shook his ears in an agony of perplexity. He turned uneasily on the floor. Mr Browning was Miss Barrett – Miss Barrett was Mr Browning; love is hatred and hatred is love.[458]

Every event and experience in Flush's life are accompanied by his own thoughts and reflections, so that every fact is filtered through his mental perspective on reality. Moreover,

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455 Maggie Humm, "Virginia Woolf and Visual Culture", in Susan Sellers, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, pp. 214-230, pp. 226-227.
456 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 23.
457 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 84.
458 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 47.

throughout the biography, as Flush grows older his character develops too, becoming more mature and complex after each experience. For instance, after being stolen and kept prisoner for five days, Flush's vision of his world has profoundly changed:

> Now as he lay on cushions once more, cold water was the only thing that seemed to have any substance, any reality. He drank continually. The old gods of the bedroom – the bookcase, the wardrobe, the busts – seemed to have lost their substance. This room was no longer the whole world; it was only a shelter. It was only a dell arched over by one trembling dock-leaf in a forest where wild beasts prowled and venomous snakes coiled; where behind every tree lurked a murderer ready to pounce.[459]

In light of reflections such as these, it can be argued that Flush's consciousness, despite the fact of being a dog's consciousness, is very similar to human thought. Two are the fundamental reasons for this sort of anthropomorphism: first, as Jamie Johnson reminds us, it is impossible to truly know the consciousness of a dog;[460] second, the biographer informs us that Flush is a dog "highly sensitive to human emotions"[461] and "his flesh was veined with human passions; he knew all grades of jealousy, anger and despair".[462]

Still, a crucial alterity remains: even if Flush's thoughts are rendered as similar to human consciousness, the reader is aware that his perception of reality is different from man's and woman's because people and dogs necessarily have different modes of knowing. Beauty, for example, is perceived by human beings and dogs in diverse ways:

> Beauty, so it seems at least, had to be crystallized into a green or violet powder and puffed by some celestial syringe down the fringed channels that lay behind his nostrils before it touched Flush's senses; and then it issued not in words, but in a silent rapture. Where Mrs Browning saw, he smelt; where she wrote, he snuffed.[463]

The upsetting of human values together with the absence of mutual communication makes it impossible for dog and man to truly understand each other. Language, in particular, loses its value: the biographer gives us an account of a conversation between Elizabeth Barrett and

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459 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 67.
460 Jamie Johnson, "Virginia Woolf's *Flush*: Decentering Human Subjectivity through the Nonhuman Animal Character", *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 84 (2013), pp. 34-36, p. 35.
461 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 32.
462 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 88.
463 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 85.

Robert Browning not through words, but from Flush's point of view and therefore the focus is not on the content of the dialogue but on the form, i.e. the tone and the rhythm of the voices. As Kate Flint points out, "Woolf fantasizes about the freedom from the tyranny of words which makes the dog's sensual and emotional comprehension the more direct".[464] In this way, Virginia Woolf not only underlined the fundamental unknowability of people and human reality for Flush but she also parodied one of the most famous courtships in the history of English literature by presenting it from the perspective of the resentful dog.[465]

More importantly, choosing the dog's perspective allowed Virginia Woolf to achieve the marriage of granite and rainbow she wished for in biographies: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's life and letters provided Virginia Woolf with the necessary facts, while the attempt to convey a canine subjectivity required a stretch of imagination. Furthermore, Flush was supposedly present in all the most intimate and privy circumstances of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's life, giving the biographer access to details no other could have provided to the point that, as Lewis argues, "the reader is left wondering where the truth of the Browning letters ends and where the fiction of Woolf's creation begins":[466] the line that divides fact from fiction is erased and so the marriage of granite and rainbow is absolute.

Thanks to the context of its protagonist's life, *Flush* served also as a means for Virginia Woolf to investigate some aspects of Victorian society. Flush accepts and lives by Victorian rules – knowing that, being a dog of noble breed, he has consequently privileges and penalties. Especially at the beginning of the book, Flush mirrors perfectly Victorian society and values: as David Garnett comments, *Flush*'s true tribute to Lytton Strachey lies in the fact that Flush can be considered "the first animal to become an Eminent Victorian".[467] Still, most

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464 Flint, p. xix.
465 Julia Briggs, "The Novels of the 1930s and the Impact of History", in Susan Sellers, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, pp. 70-88, p. 72.
466 Lewis, p. 386.
467 David Garnett, "*Flush*", in Eleanor McNees, ed., *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessments*, vol. II, pp. 497-

of Flush's experience in Victorian London are negative to the point that when he visits London once again after the elopement to Italy he can't wait to get away again. In particular, Virginia Woolf decided to focus her attention through Flush on a theme for which, as we have already seen before, she cared enormously: the oppression of patriarchy on women writers.

Both of Flush's owners, Miss Mitford and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, are women writers who have to live with dominant fathers; both of them are relegated into domestic isolation and have little social experience. Mary Russell Mitford[468] is depicted at the beginning of the book as the dutiful daughter of George Mitford, thus presented by Virginia Woolf:

> he was utterly selfish, recklessly extravagant, worldly, insincere and addicted to gambling. He wasted his own fortune, his wife's fortune, and his daughter's earnings. He deserted them in his prosperity and sponged upon them in his infirmity.[469]

Miss Mitford spends her day taking care of her father and constantly writing in order to repay her father's debt. Mary Russell Mitford – like Laetitia Pilkington portrayed in "The Lives of the Obscure" – shows how hard it is for a woman writer to earn her living through her profession and how her devotion/servitude to a selfish father dictated, and basically ruined, her life. Elizabeth Barrett Browning has, of course, more prominence in the book. She is described by Virginia Woolf as "England's foremost poetess",[470] but in the notes Virginia affirmed that readers of *Aurora Leigh* were "non-existent" to underline the fact that Victorian women poets were barely discussed or read in the 1930s. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's father was, as Virginia Woolf later claimed in *Three Guineas*, the most famous example of a patriarch with an infantile fixation:[471] he was very oppressive and controlling with his children

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499, p. 499.

468 Mary Russell Mitford (1787-1855) was an English playwright and writer best known for her collection of essays, *Our Village, Sketches of Rural Life, Character, and Scenery* (1824), set in Three Mile Cross, near Reading, where she lived with her parents. (ODNB)

469 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 9.

470 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 13.

471 Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p. 149.

and did not even want them to marry. At the beginning of the biography, when Flush, still a puppy, is given to her as a gift from Mary Russell Mitford, we see Elizabeth Barrett as an invalid confined to her bedroom: she rarely goes outside and receives visits from very few friends. Her seclusion is seen from Flush's point of view; he has to repress his nature and become domesticated:

> he could not help running to the door with his hackles raised when a dog barked outside. And yet when Miss Barrett called him back, when she laid her hand on his collar, he could not deny that another feeling, urgent, contradictory, disagreeable – he did not know what to call it or why he obeyed it – restrained him. He lay still at her feet. To resign, to control, to suppress the most violent instincts of his nature – that was the prime lesson of the bedroom school.[472]

Just like the daughter, in name of the devotion towards her father, accepts and submits to his tyranny, so Flush, in name of the affection he feels towards his mistress, decides to suppress his instincts, renounce his freedom and share her confinement. The apparition of Mr Barrett is for Flush a terrifying experience; when in the evenings the father visits Elizabeth, Flush is overcome by fear:

> As that dark body approached him, shivers of terror and horror ran down Flush's spine. So a savage couched in flowers shudders when the thunder growls and he hears the voice of God. Then Wilson whistled; and Flush, slinking guiltily, as if Mr Barrett could read his thoughts and those thoughts were evil, crept out of the room and rushed downstairs. A force had entered the bedroom which he dreaded; a force that he was powerless to withstand.[473]

The point of view of the dog emphasizes the authority which surrounds Mr Barrett and the reader is thus made aware of the extent of his power. Flush is unable to understand his tyranny but he can perceive it: he feels like a savage in the presence of God. Through Flush's sensations, once again, we can have a more vivid and immediate idea of what Elizabeth and all the other children of Mr Barrett might feel in his presence: he is a force that they feel unable to withstand. Things change for Elizabeth Barrett and Flush with the arrival of Robert Browning and their elopement to Italy: there both Flush and his mistress, away from Victorian

472 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 25.
473 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 31.

England and the patriarchy, find new strength, happiness and freedom. But the final elopement to Italy is anticipated by another key-event in Elizabeth Barrett's life. When Flush is stolen by Taylor's society, she has to decide whether to accept the unwillingness of her family to pay the ransom and thus lose Flush, or to stand up for having him back at all costs. Clearly, it would have been easier for her to respect her family decision and this was what everyone expected:

> How easy it would have been to yield – how easy it would have been to say, 'Your good opinion is worth more to me than a hundred cocker spaniels'. How easy it would have been to sink back on her pillows and sigh, 'I am a weak woman; I know nothing of law and justice; decide for me'. She had only to refuse to pay the ransom; she had only to defy Taylor and his Society.[474]

But, as Virginia Woolf underlined, "Miss Barrett was not to be intimidated":[475] with a simple sentence all the inner strength Elizabeth Barrett Browning possessed is conveyed. If everyone considers her a perfect example of the "Angel in the House", she is ready to demonstrate that she has a mind, wishes and values of her own and she wants them to be respected:

> Her family came running to prevent her. It was getting dark. She was exhausted already. The adventure was risky enough for a man in health. For her it was madness. So they told her. Her brothers, her sisters, all came round her threatening her, dissuading her, 'crying out against me for being "quite mad" and obstinate and wilful – I was called as many names as Mr Taylor'. But she stood her ground. At last they realized the extent of her folly. Whatever the risk might be they must give way to her.[476]

She is accused of being mad for trying to impose her will but she does not desist and thanks to her resistance she is finally able to save her beloved Flush. Through this experience Elizabeth Barrett Browning rejects the label of "Angel in the House" and asserts her individual value and power of choice, a revolutionary act for a woman of her time and class. The strength she discovers on this occasion is the one that will enable her to elope with Robert Browning and free herself once and for all from the tyranny of her father and Victorian England. For these reasons, *Flush* can be also considered, in Josephine O'Brien Schaefer's words, "a woman's

474 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 61.
475 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 61.
476 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 66.

escape to freedom"[477] together with a feminist victory over patriarchy.

Woolf also could not resist to write a "life of the obscure" in *Flush*: a very long note at the end of the book is dedicated to the life of Lily Wilson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's maid. According to Virginia Woolf, "biography had not then cast its searchlight so low"[478] and indeed there were no lives of maids in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Woolf ironically wrote that one cannot guess the thoughts of the old maid, "for she was typical of the great army of her kind – the inscrutable, the all-but-silent, the all-but-invisible servant maids of history":[479] another dig to official biography and its limitations in the choice of "worthy" subjects. Flush and Wilson are the only two witnesses of the whole story between Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, therefore the only ones able to provide significant biographical material but they both occupy a marginal position. For such a reason, official biography would never take them into consideration as possible subjects: by virtue of its canine subjectivity and its similarities with the servant's life, *Flush* represents the revenge of both non-human subjects and marginal – hence discarded – people.

Virginia Woolf dreaded the popularity she expected *Flush* to achieve, because she feared that the book would be misunderstood. As Quentin Bell recalls, she was afraid that "the critics would like it for reasons which did her no credit; she would be admired as an elegant lady prattler".[480] Despite – and probably, at the same time, because of – its popularity, Flush has always received little critical attention and has never achieved canonical status.[481] Virginia Woolf wrote to Lady Colefax that *Flush* "was all a matter of hints and shades, and practically no one has seen what I was after"[482] and indeed many critics misunderstood *Flush*

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477 Schaefer, "Moments of Vision in Virginia Woolf's Biographies", p. 370 .
478 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 111.
479 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, p. 113.
480 Quentin Bell, vol. 2, p. 174.
481 Caughie, "*Flush* and the Literary Canon: Oh Where Oh Where Has That Little Dog Gone?", p. 514.
482 Virginia Woolf to Sibyl Colefax, 22 October 1933, quoted in Flint, p. xvii.

by simply considering it a mock biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. For example, according to Mark Van Doren, the focus on the dog "would serve merely as a device for bringing the reader into a novel and special intimacy with the true protagonist".[483] But considering *Flush* thus means denying its explicit nature, i.e. the biography of a dog, and the consequent biographical revolution it proposed. As Craig Smith points out,

> a sympathetic reading of Flush, taken on its own terms – as an intuitive, clear-eyed attempt to represent a nonhuman subject – reveals it to be one of Woolf's most original and forward-looking achievements.[484]

As we have seen with this analysis, the dog's point of view is precisely what enabled Virginia Woolf to satirize traditional biography and, at the same time, explore new biographical possibilities through the marriage of fact and fiction. *Flush* should therefore occupy – together with *Orlando* – a central position in Virginia Woolf's biographical revolution for its undeniable authenticity.

"The Art of Biography" (1939)

Virginia Woolf wrote and published the essay "The Art of Biography"[485] while working on her biography of Roger Fry, to which – according to Jean Guiguet – it provides a commentary.[486] More importantly, Virginia Woolf seemed in this essay to revise her position on the marriage of granite and rainbow in biography and on the status of biography as art.

The essay opens with the question whether biography is actually an art and argues that if it is an art, it is for sure "the most restricted of all the arts"[487] because it is based on and tied

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483 Mark Van Doren, "A Poetess's Dog", in Eleanor McNees, ed., *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessments,* vol. II, pp. 502-503.
484 Craig Smith, "Across the Gulf: Nonhuman Subjectivity in Virginia Woolf's Flush", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 48 (2003), pp. 348-61, p. 360.
485 Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography", in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91d/index.html (last accessed: 14/07/2014)
486 Guiguet, p. 151.
487 Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography".

to real facts, while fiction needs to obey only the restrictions personally chosen by the artist. After a brief survey of English biography which points out the oppression and censorship of the Victorian period and the change of attitude which occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, Virginia Woolf critically examines Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria* and *Elizabeth and Essex*. In her opinion, while *Queen Victoria* was a success, *Elizabeth and Essex* proved to be a failure: when writing *Queen Victoria* Strachey "used to the full the biographer's power of selection and relation"[488] and was faithful to facts; on the contrary, in *Elizabeth and Essex* he tried unsuccessfully to mix fact and fiction:

> everything seemed to lend itself to the making of a book that combined the advantages of both worlds, that gave the artist freedom to invent, but helped his invention with the support of facts – a book that was not only a biography but also a work of art. Nevertheless, the combination proved unworkable; fact and fiction refused to mix. Elizabeth never became real in the sense that Queen Victoria had been real, yet she never became fictitious in the sense that Cleopatra or Falstaff is fictitious.[489]

As we have seen in chapter III, since there was little information on Queen Elizabeth, Lytton Strachey felt free to invent; as a result, the character of Elizabeth is divided between fact and fiction and does not belong completely to either: it dwells in an ambiguous world. Being unable to combine fact and fiction in a successful way, Lytton Strachey's attempt to make of this biography a work of art failed too.

According to Virginia Woolf, the incompatibility of fact and fiction lies at the heart of their different natures:

> It seems, then, that when the biographer complained that he was tied by friends, letters, and documents he was laying his finger upon a necessary element in biography; and that it is also a necessary limitation. For the invented character lives in a free world where the facts are verified by one person only – the artist himself. Their authenticity lies in the truth of his own vision. The world created by that vision is rarer, intenser, and more wholly of a piece than the world that is largely made of authentic information supplied by other people. And because of this difference the two kinds of fact will not mix; if they touch they destroy each other. No one, the conclusion seems to be, can make the best of both worlds; you must choose, and you must abide by your choice.[490]

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488 Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography".
489 Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography".
490 Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography".

The condition imposed by biography – that it has to be faithful to facts – implies that other people can verify its facts and thus the biographer is tied, while the artist who invents facts in a world created by his/her own imagination is free because no one else apart from him/her can verify the facts and limit his/her art. Therefore, real facts and invented facts belong to two different worlds: invented facts freely dwell in the vision of the artist, real facts are tethered to the world of authentic information. As a consequence, if combined, the two types of facts destroy one another and so the writer is compelled to choose one of the two worlds, respect its limitations in the case of authentic information or indulge its freedom in the case of the artistic vision. But what about the marriage of granite and rainbow suggested in "The New Biography" and the combination of fact and fiction always present so far in Virginia's biographical works, in particular in *Orlando* and *Flush*? Are they failures, too?

Reading "The Art of Biography" in opposition to "The New Biography" could not be more wrong, since the two essays start from the same assumptions. As I pointed out in the subchapter concerning "The New Biography", Virginia Woolf was already conscious of the incompatibility of fact and fiction: "though both truths are genuine, they are antagonistic; let them meet and they destroy each other".[491] She urged the biographer to resort to the artistry of fiction – i.e. using the novelist's methods of arranging the material and manipulating the facts in order to achieve a dramatic effect – only to better transmit the personality of his subject without compromising the integrity of facts. While in "The New Biography" Virginia Woolf explained why Harold Nicolson's *Some People* achieved a precarious equilibrium between success and failure for its combination of truth and fiction, in "The Art of Biography" she states the failure of Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex*. As she predicted in "The New Biography", "if he carries the use of fiction too far, so that he disregards the truth, or can only

491 Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", p. 154.

introduce it with incongruity, he loses both worlds";[492] therefore, Strachey's Queen Elizabeth, as we have seen, "has neither the freedom of fiction nor the substance of fact".[493] From this analysis it is clear that the two essays do not stand in antithesis, they are rather one the confirmation of the other: in 1925 Virginia Woolf proposed the marriage of granite and rainbow underlining its risks and limitations when applied to biography; in 1939 while writing an official biography she reminded the readers and herself of these limitations, particularly in view of Strachey's failure in combining fact and fiction in an official biography.

I have not used the words "official biography" in the previous paragraph by chance: I think they are the key element to save *Orlando*, *Flush* and all the other biographical projects of Virginia Woolf from being considered failures in light of this essay and Roger Fry's biography. I would not classify Virginia Woolf's biographies as official biographies apart from *Roger Fry*. In "Friendships Gallery", "The Lives of the Obscure", *Orlando*, and *Flush* Virginia Woolf chose the subjects herself and they all answered to a vision she had in her mind and allowed her artistic freedom: in the case of the obscure, she took the information she needed from their own memories bringing them back to life; "Friendships Gallery" and *Orlando* were written as biographical tributes to someone she knew would accept the joke; *Flush* was the biography of a dog and therefore necessarily required the use of imagination to penetrate his consciousness. More importantly, as I have just said, none of these projects would be classified as – or had the claim to be – an official biography: they are all *in primis* biographical fantasies and parodies of the official biographical mode, but they are also experiments in biography and as experiments they need to flaunt the limitations of the genre to underline its defects and open the way for a new method. On the contrary, as we will see in the next subchapter, Roger Fry's biography was commissioned by his family and Virginia felt

492 Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", p. 155.
493 Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", p. 155.

an enormous pressure to satisfy their expectations: her artistic freedom was pinned down by the need to be faithful to facts and to the requirements of an official biography. This is why I refuse to consider as failures Virginia Woolf's previous biographical works and, as we are about to see, this same essay explains and justifies their existence and purpose.

Despite its seeming restriction of the biographer to world of factual accuracy, "The Art of Biography" repudiates the idea of the biographer being simply a chronicler:

> Thus the biographer must go ahead of the rest of us, like the miner's canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions. His sense of truth must he alive and on tiptoe. Then again, since we live in an age when a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters, and diaries, at every character from every angle, he must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face. Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners. And yet from all this diversity it will bring out, not a riot of confusion, but a richer unity.[494]

Even if fact and fiction proved to be incompatible, the biographer should continue to experiment by debunking obsolete conventions or censorship and accepting diversity and mutability, thus giving the reader a full personality composed by different – and even contradictory – facets but still coherent. As Amber Regis affirms, "Woolf's theorising in 'The Art of Biography' thus revises and extends her earlier work":[495] what are *Orlando* and *Flush* if not "looking glasses at odd corners"? Moreover, Virginia Woolf voiced in this essay also her constant preoccupation with the worthiness of biographical subjects:

> since so much is known that used to be unknown, the question now inevitably asks itself, whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography — the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what smallness? We must revise our standards of merit and set up new heroes for our admiration.[496]

The obscure deserve the same attention as the notorious, because they too can teach a lot to the reader and their life can sometimes even prove to be more interesting than the "worthy"

494 Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography".
495 Amber K. Regis, "'But something betwixt and between': *Roger Fry* and the Contradictions of Biography", *Selected Papers from the Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, 21 (2012), pp. 82-7, p. 87.
496 Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography".

few, as she had herself demonstrated with her "Lives of the Obscure". Victorian standards of worthiness needed to be revised, so that the value of each individual could be recognized and admired.

Still, going back to the opening question whether biography could be considered an art, Virginia Woolf seems to contradict the title ("The Art of Biography") by depriving the genre of such a title. Indeed, in her opinion,

> The artist's imagination at its most intense fires out what is perishable in fact; he builds with what is durable; but the biographer must accept the perishable, build with it, imbed it in the very fabric of his work. Much will perish; little will live. And thus we come to the conclusion, that he is a craftsman, not an artist; and his work is not a work of art, but something betwixt and between.[497]

Since his work is perishable, the biographer cannot aspire to the eternity of art and therefore, according to Virginia, he is more a craftsman than an artist. Nevertheless, as Amber Regis skilfully notices:

> the biographer's craft is displaced and located at some unnamed, liminal point "betwixt and between" the poles of art and some unnamed other. "The Art of Biography" is not, therefore, a straightforward retraction of the biographer's claim to be an artist. Significantly, craft is not the antithesis of art, and the line demarcating one from the other is indistinct and left unclear.[498]

Biography may not be an art because of its perishable nature, but at the same time it is not a simple craft. It is something that dwells in the indefinite region between art and craft, retaining aspects of both worlds. In particular, according to Virginia Woolf, the value of biography lies in the ability of the biographer to stimulate a tired imagination with authentic information:

> By telling us the true facts, by sifting the little from the big, and shaping the whole so that we perceive the outline, the biographer does more to stimulate the imagination than any poet or novelist save the very greatest. For few poets and novelists are capable of that high degree of tension which gives us reality. But almost any biographer, if he respects facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders.[499]

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497 Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography".
498 Regis, p. 83.
499 Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography".

Instead of resorting to fiction or reporting simple facts, the biographer should aim at telling the creative facts so that the character of the subject reveals itself to the reader through biographical intuition.

In conclusion, it seems from this essay that Virginia Woolf's guidelines for writing a successful official biography consist in avoiding the incompatibility of fact and fiction, accepting the mutability of the subject and focusing in transmitting creative and fertile facts that stimulate the imagination of the reader. Let us see then how she applied these suggestions in her biography of Roger Fry and whether she was successful or not.

Roger Fry (1940)

On 9 September 1934, Roger Fry – one of Virginia Woolf's closest friends – died. Born a Quaker, he was an influential and dynamic art critic and painter who introduced the Post-Impressionist painters (such as Manet, Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Picasso) in England. Fry was one of the oldest members of the Bloomsbury Group; Virginia met him through her sister Vanessa who was Fry's lover for some time. Roger Fry and Virginia Woolf's relationship gradually developed towards a friendship based on similarities of character, stimulating discussions, and mutual admiration: as Lorraine Sim explains, "Fry and Woolf expressed keen admiration for, and interest in, each other's works and there was a regular flow and exchange of ideas and perspectives".[500] Virginia Woolf was impressed by Fry's restless theorizing and inquisitiveness; she wrote to him:

> What intrigued me & moved me to deep admiration was the perpetual adventure of your mind from one end of the room to the other. How you have managed to carry on this warfare, always striding ahead, never giving up or lying down & becoming inert & torpid & commonplace like other people, I can't imagine.[501]

500 Sim, p. 49.
501 Quoted in Quentin Bell, vol. 2, p. 181.

Roger Fry, for his part, was enthusiastic of Virginia Woolf's writing (in particular, of the short stories she wrote between 1917 and 1921), because in his opinion she was the only contemporary writer truly able to use "language as a medium of art"[502] and it seems that he also expressed the wish that she would one day write his biography.[503]

The initial project for Roger Fry's biography consisted in a book edited by Virginia Woolf and Desmond MacCarthy[504] where different people who had known Roger Fry should write their recollections of the aspects of his life they knew best,[505] but this idea never came to anything concrete. In the meantime, both Margery Fry (Roger's sister and literary executor) and Helen Anrep (Roger Fry's companion from 1926 until the end of his life) insisted that Virginia Woolf committed herself to writing Roger's biography on her own and at last she accepted the task. She realized from the beginning the difficulties of writing this biography, which took her more than five years of hard work:

> What do I feel about it? If I could be free, then here's the chance of trying biography; a splendid, difficult chance – better than trying to find a subject – that is, if I *am* free.[506]

She had ambivalent feelings about this project because she was attracted by the possibility of writing an official biography but at the same time she realized the constrictions imposed by Roger's family and friends who were not only still alive but also close friends of hers. Therefore she knew that she would not be free to write what she wanted: Margery Fry, for example, openly asked Virginia to be careful when talking about Roger's private life taking into consideration his family's feelings.[507] Moreover, as I have already mentioned, Virginia Woolf's sister Vanessa had been Roger Fry's lover for some time and Virginia did not feel herself comfortable writing about their relationship.

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502 Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p. 70.
503 Quentin Bell, vol. 2, p. 181.
504 Desmond MacCarthy (1877-1952) was an English literary reviewer and drama critic involved with the Bloomsbury group. (ODNB)
505 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 29 October 1934, p. 230.
506 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 2 November 1934, p. 232.
507 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 21 November 1934, p. 233.

Basically, Virginia Woolf found herself in the Victorian biographical dilemma: how would she balance truth and respect for family and friends? She felt the weight of what she could not say and at the same time she wanted to stick to the truth. Therefore she decided to rely on facts and apply the biographer's power of selecting and manipulating she mentioned in "The New Biography",[508] but facts turned out to be too many in Roger Fry's case. From early 1935 through 1938 Woolf read hundreds of Roger Fry's letters and felt crushed by the weight of facts and details:

> It's all too minute and tied down – documented. Is it to be done on this scale? Is he interesting to other people in that light? I think I will go on doggedly till I meet him myself – 1909 – and then attempt something more fictitious.[509]

She felt the need to turn to fiction in order to make Roger Fry more alive and interesting to the readers – it seems from her diary that her aim was to combine psychology and body as in painting[510] – but she did not feel free enough to do so. Consequently, Virginia Woolf decided to abandon (except in a few passages, as we are about to see) the possibility of fiction she had suggested in "The New Biography" and had applied in all her previous biographical works; she concentrated solely on facts, but instead of letting herself be helplessly crushed by them, she tried to convey only fertile facts that would leave an impression on the reader – as she theorized in "The Art of Biography". And so she went on with her work, extracting facts, despite the "innumerable doubts"[511] on her ability as biographer.

The book opens with a brief foreword by Margery Fry which confirms that it was Roger's wish that Virginia Woolf would write his biography:

> Dear Virginia,
>
> Years ago, after one of those discussions upon the methods of the arts which illuminated his long and happy friendship with you, Roger suggested, half seriously, that you should put into practice your theories of the biographer's craft in a portrait of

508 Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", p. 150.
509 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 7 July 1938, p. 299.
510 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 18 November 1935, p. 259.
511 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 11 March 1939, p. 311.

> himself. When the time came for his life to be written some of us who were very close to him, thinking it would have been his wish as well as ours, asked you to undertake it.[512]

Probably Roger Fry expected Virginia to use his life to write one of her experimental biographies but, as we can understand from this foreword, Virginia Woolf was not able to do so because she was to work under commission from Roger Fry's family and intimate friends who would judge – and guide – her work. Together with this foreword, the biography contains also an index and an appendix about Roger Fry's development as a painter by an anonymous artist (it was actually written by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant);[513] Virginia Woolf possibly included this appendix because she did not consider herself to be competent enough in the technique of painting to be able to describe Roger Fry's development in this field satisfactorily and indeed in the biography there are very few comments on Roger Fry's painting ability. The first edition included, in addition, a formal portrait of Roger Fry by Vanessa Bell and fifteen illustrations,[514] which were omitted in following editions. While in *Orlando* and *Flush* foreword, index and illustrations served to give the works the pretence of real biographies and at the same time to mock the scholarly apparatus of official biographies, here there is no trace of parody: as we have seen, this *is* an official biography and therefore Virginia Woolf abandoned the irreverent attitude towards the biographical genre and submitted to its demands and structure. The table of contents clearly shows how the biography is divided in chapters which focus on the canonical stages of life, such as childhood, education, travels, marriage, work and achievements.

Apart from the different chapters, the book can be more generally divided into two parts: chapters I-VI and chapters VII-XI. This division is due to the fact until 1910 Virginia Woolf had not met Roger Fry: she had no personal knowledge of the first forty-four years of

512 Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography*, London: Vintage, 2003, p. 5.
513 Mark Hussey, "*Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940)", in *Virginia Woolf A to Z*, pp. 231-232, p. 231.
514 Hussey, "*Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940)", p. 231.

his life and this affected the narration. Instead of using her creative imagination to construct out of facts a view of him in the early years, Virginia Woolf preferred to rely on letters and memoirs. Consequently, the first part of the biography (i.e. the first forty years of Roger Fry's life) does not convey many vivid impressions and is crushed by the weight of the innumerable amount of quotations from Fry's letters. Virginia Woolf was the first to realize the plainness of the first part and the consequent discrepancy between the two parts of the biography, but she explained that the first part was conceived to be "a solid pavement for the whole to stand on"[515] and therefore needed to be well-grounded. The second part begins in chapter VII with Virginia Woolf's recollection of the first time she met Roger Fry:

> To a stranger meeting him then for the first time (1910) he looked much older than his age. He was only forty-four, but he gave the impression of a man with a great weight of experience behind him. He looked worn and seasoned, ascetic yet tough. And there was his reputation, of course, to confuse a first impression – his reputation as a lecturer and as an art critic. He did not live up to his reputation, if one expected a man who lectured upon the Old Masters at Leighton House to be pale, academic, aesthetic-looking. On the contrary, he was brown and animated. Nor was he altogether a man of the world, or a painter – there was nothing Bohemian about him. It was difficult at first sight to find his pigeon-hole.[516]

From this moment, the biography becomes less heavy with facts and quotations and more lively thanks to personal recollections and anecdotes. Nevertheless, as we can deduce from the quotation above, Roger Fry's life was complex and composed by many different aspects, all of which contributed to shape his personality.

Virginia Woolf, however, decided not to deal with every one of them. In particular, she was reticent about two aspects: Roger's family life and sexual relationships. Concerned about the feelings of Roger Fry's relatives who were still alive, as Diane Gillespie informs us, Virginia Woolf chose to soften the description of Roger's family life and his relationship with his parents.[517] Moreover, Virginia Woolf also decided to gloss over Roger Fry's liaisons with

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515 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 6 August 1940, p. 341.
516 Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry*, p. 149.
517 Gillespie, p. xxx.

women. Helen Fry, Roger's wife, was a delicate matter because of her mental illness which compelled Roger to commit her to a mental institution, where she remained for the rest of her life. Virginia Woolf suppressed in particular any account of the relationship between her sister Vanessa and Roger Fry, who had an affair for a couple of years; she only mentioned the beginning of their friendship in this passage:

> There was the new friendship with Vanessa Bell, who, as a painter belonging to the younger generation, had all the ardour of the young for the new movements and the new pictures and urged him away from the past and on to the future. There was her painting and her studio and the younger generation arguing with him and laughing at him, but accepting him as one of themselves.[518]

Even if Vanessa Bell had no objections to the revelation of her love affair with Fry,[519] Virginia preferred to keep it concealed but, as Josephine O'Brien Schaefer underlines, "leaving that whole experience out gives a false view of that period in Fry's life".[520] Only Helen Anrep was excluded from this censorship:

> With a simplicity that makes it unnecessary either to emphasise the fact or to conceal it, he disregarded the law. He lived with Helen Anrep from 1926 to the end of his life – "il n'y a que la formule qui manque". The reality […] was of such immeasurable importance that the formula could be brushed aside without hesitation.[521]

As Quentin Bell reports, this freedom in mentioning Helen Anrep and Roger Fry's relationship was due to the fact that Helen Anrep herself insisted that Virginia Woolf mentioned frankly her relationship with Roger Fry[522] and Virginia obliged since it was Helen Anrep – together with Margery Fry – who asked her to write Roger's biography.[523] However, it is undeniable that Virginia Woolf in *Roger Fry* chose reticence over truth, concealing some facts that could be embarrassing both for dead and alive people, exactly like Victorian biographers used to do.

As I have already mentioned, Virginia Woolf does not resort to fiction in this

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518 Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry*, p. 162.
519 Vanessa wrote to Virginia: "I hope you won't mind making us all blush, it won't do any harm" (quoted in Quentin Bell, vol. 2, pp. 182-183).
520 Schaefer, "Moments of Vision in Virginia Woolf's Biographies", p. 375.
521 Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry*, p. 255.
522 Quentin Bell, vol. 2, p. 183.
523 Quentin Bell, vol. 2, p. 183.

biography, except for some rare occasion. When she does, it is to speculate about Fry's thoughts and feelings or, as in the following quotation, to imagine what his life would have been like if he had been a precocious painter:

> Had he shown at Julian's a strong original bent as a painter, he would have been a member of that little artists' republic which, whatever the age or the state of society, is always actively in being. His contemporaries would have praised or abused his work. His elders would have taken notice of him. He would have come to know both painters and writers at first hand, not only through the reports of others. As it was, he rambled about Paris for himself and nobody took any particular interest in him or in his work.[524]

But these moments of imaginative speculation are few and the biography essentially remains tethered to the solid ground of facts and quotations. Here Virginia Woolf's ability rather consists in writing deft summary statements, entertaining the reader with interesting anecdotes and creating images that occur on different occasions throughout the biography and thus act as linking motifs, like the red poppy that – in Schaefer's words – "emerges as an emblem to be opposed to the Quaker background of his childhood and youth and to the English public of his middle and later years".[525] More importantly, Virginia Woolf focused on selecting facts and connecting them as to achieve "not a riot of confusion, but a richer unity" that she mentioned in her essay "The Art of Biography"; as Diane Gillespie notices, the repetition with little variations at the end of one chapter and the beginning of the next (so that each chapter is the smooth continuation of the previous one) skilfully serves to better achieve unity throughout the whole book.[526] Also the frequent quotations from Fry's letters or reported conversations which seem to weigh down the book constitute Virginia Woolf's attempt to suppress herself and let Roger Fry speak for himself creating what Gillespie defines a "verbal *self*-portrait":[527] the spotlight is thus always on the subject and never on the biographer who in this way avoids expressing any judgement in the biography. But what about the freedom of judgement

524 Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry*, p. 80.
525 Schaefer, "Moments of Vision in Virginia Woolf's Biographies", p. 372.
526 Gillespie, p. xxiv.
527 Gillespie, p. xxv.

advocated by Lytton Strachey and the modern biography? Here Virginia Woolf seems to be, as many critics argue, stuck in the shoes of the Victorian biographer.

As I have made clear from the beginning of this subchapter, Virginia Woolf was conscious of the limitations in writing this biography (the family's censorship, the reticence to talk about sexual matters, the lack of personal knowledge of nearly two thirds of Fry's life, and the little expertise she had of the art of painting) and felt a great responsibility:

> What a curious relation is mine with Roger at this moment – I who have given him a kind of shape after his death. Was he like that? I feel very much in his presence at the moment; as if I were intimately connected with him: as if we together had given birth to this vision of him: a child born of us. Yet he had no power to alter it. And yet for some years it will represent him.[528]

It is true that at a first reading it might seem that Virginia Woolf abandoned her revolutionary approach to biography and ended up writing a biography similar to the Victorian ones. But if it is true that Virginia Woolf renounced to turn to fiction to convey Roger's personality, she did not surrender to the Victorian model she had criticized and parodied so far. In *Roger Fry* she tried, instead, to put into practice the new biographical method she suggested in "The Art of Biography". She basically tried to find a compromise between the restraint and pedantry of Victorian biography and the freedom and the light-hearted attitude of modern biography: she limited the freedom of the modern biographer by imposing factual accuracy but, instead of recounting pedantically all the facts as a Victorian biographer would have done, she selected the fertile and creative facts and shaped "the whole so that we perceive the outline" of Roger Fry's character. As she explained in "The Art of Biography", the biographer needs to accept the mutability of the subject who is in constant evolution throughout his/her life; instead of a finished and fixed characterization, the biographer should convey a sort of structure of the development of his/her subject so that the reader can, at the end of the biography, reconstruct by him-/herself what the subject was like and have the impression of knowing him/her

528 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 25 July 1940, p. 339.

personally throughout the various phases of his/her life. As Elena Gualtieri underlines,

> Fry offers therefore the ultimate challenge to the art of biography. He is both the ideal, elusive subject for a modern biography that rejects permanence and embraces the provisional and, at the same time, the point at which biography as 'the truthful transmission of personality' stops being a viable option.[529]

Roger Fry was the ideal subject because he rejected fixed categorizations throughout all his life and, as Virginia Woolf wrote toward the end of the biography,

> Certainly he would have refused to sit for the portrait of a finished, complete or in any way perfect human being. He detested fixed attitudes; he suspected poses; he was quick to point out the fatal effect of reverence.[530]

As Amber Regis affirms, "in sympathy with Fry, Woolf attempts no perfect portrait in her biography, no detailed or exact likeness".[531] Also when talking about Roger Fry's written works, as Thomas Lewis points out, Virginia Woolf preferred to focus on his method of presenting ideas rather than on a critical and detailed analysis of his writings.[532] In conclusion, what Virginia Woolf achieved is not a fixed and finished portrayal but rather a depiction of the development of Roger Fry's personality and aesthetic theory in all its mutability.

After finishing *Roger Fry*, Virginia Woolf was happy with the result:

> I can't help thinking I've caught a good deal of that iridescent man in my oh so laborious butterfly net. I daresay I've written every page – certainly the last – 10 or 15 times over. And I don't think I've killed: I think I've brisked.[533]

She was "proud of having done a solid work"[534] and was relieved when Margery Fry, Helen Anrep, Vanessa Bell, and many friends declared to be satisfied with her biography:

> The book delights friends and the younger generation say Yes, yes, we know him: and it's not only delightful but important. That's enough. And it gave me a very calm rewarded feeling – not the old triumph, as over a novel, but the feeling I've done what was asked of me, given my friends what they wanted.[535]

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529 Gualtieri, p. 360.
530 Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry*, p. 291.
531 Regis, p. 86.
532 Lewis, p. 394.
533 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 9 February 1940, p. 326.
534 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 26 July 1940, p. 340.
535 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 4 August 1940, p. 341.

As Quentin Bell remarks, “to bring back Roger to those who knew him was a great part of Virginia's intention”.[536] Leonard Woolf, instead, judged *Roger Fry* negatively because, even if “like everything of hers, it had things in it which could only have been hers and very good they were”,[537] Virginia “allowed the facts to control her too compulsively so that the book was slightly broken-backed and never came alive as a whole”.[538] While many critics (such as Elizabeth Cooley, Josephine O'Brien Schaefer and Bernard Blackstone) agree with Leonard Woolf and find the biography disappointing because it lacks the liveliness and imagination of Virginia Woolf's previous biographical works, others (in particular, Leon Edel, Thomas Lewis and Diane Gillespie) consider this biography an interesting and successful experiment. Even if it is not generally considered to be among her best works, I believe *Roger Fry* represents another important step in Virginia Woolf's approach to biography (despite the limitations Virginia Woolf was *in primis* aware of) and is perhaps more significant than her other biographical projects because it is an official biography and not a fantasy.

536 Quentin Bell, vol. 2, p. 214.
537 Leonard Woolf, *An Autobiography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, vol. 2, *1911-1969*, p. 401.
538 Leonard Woolf, *An Autobiography*, vol. 2, p. 401.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen throughout chapter 4, Virginia Woolf wrote several biographical works during her lifetime and she did not apply a fixed scheme to all of them; on the contrary, she used different techniques and changed her theoretical approach depending on the case. To sum up, her development in biography can be divided into two phases: until and after *Flush*.

The first phase was characterized by her scornful rejection of the Victorian biographical tradition, especially its commonplaces, its censorship and its restriction to "worthy" people. Virginia Woolf, in agreement with the modern biographical movement, wanted to make biography an art; as Lyndall Gordon writes,

> she saw biography as a portrait, not as a compendium of fact. Her subject had to be composed as a work of art. Memories and facts were vital of course, but in the end only a guide to questions.[539]

Therefore, all her biographical works in this phase were experiments to free biography from its Victorian limitations, mainly through the combination of fact and fiction. But each work stressed a different aspect and constitutes a step in Virginia Woolf's biographical revolution. "Friendships Gallery", the earliest of her biographical sketches, marked her refusal of Victorian biographical conventions and the need for fun and freedom, standing thus as a precedent for *Orlando*. "The Lives of the Obscure" focused on the ideal of worthiness: here, Virginia Woolf aspired to do justice to those – especially women – ignored by Victorian biographers. Then in 1927, with the essay "The New Biography", Virginia Woolf linked her approach to biography with other modernist works, in particular Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicolson's, and professed the delicate marriage of granite and rainbow to convey the complexity of personality. As we have observed, she applied this method to both *Orlando* and *Flush*. In *Orlando* the main feature was parody, yet this work rejected any strict categorization

539 Lyndall Gordon, "'This loose, drifting material of life': Virginia Woolf and Biography", *Selected Papers from the Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, 13 (2005), pp. 11-18, p. 11.

because of its richness of aspects. *Flush,* instead, constituted an experiment in canine subjectivity and, as such, an interesting exploration of new possibilities for biography. Moreover, in *Flush* the need for fiction was justified by choosing a dog as subject; therefore I think that *Flush*, and not *Orlando*, can be considered Virginia Woolf's highest achievement in combining granite and rainbow.

The second phase revolved around the essay "The Art of Biography" and Roger Fry's biography. Here it seemed that Virginia Woolf reversed her convictions and abandoned the attempt to achieve the marriage of granite and rainbow in favour of greater factual accuracy. In "The Art of Biography" she exposed the dangers of combining facts with fiction and concluded that biographers should stick to the world of factual accuracy and this was what she did in *Roger Fry*, which is her only official biography. But, as I explained in the subchapter about *Roger Fry*, Virginia Woolf did not simply reverse her approach to biography. What she did was rather finding a compromise between the restraint and pedantry of Victorian biography and the freedom and the light-hearted attitude of modern biography. As I pointed out, Virginia Woolf was the first to admit some undeniable faults present in *Roger Fry*; nevertheless, the work proved a success in adapting a new creative biographical method, which respected the fundamental principles of modernism (such as the mutability of the subject), to an official biography.

Some critics, however, believe that Virginia Woolf's approach to biography proved a failure. Ray Monk in "This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography and Reality" judges Virginia Woolf's influence on contemporary biography even "a misfortune"[540], while according to Elena Gualtieri in "The Impossible Art: Virginia Woolf on Modern Biography",

> Far from being the realisation of a precarious balance between the opposite poles of an impassable binary, Woolf's modern biography remains a mirage projected in the future,

540 Monk, p. 1.

as elusive and evanescent as the rainbow it should have incorporated.[541]

Apart from the fact that Ray Monk's judgement cannot be considered thorough since he only takes into consideration "The New Biography" and *Orlando*, both Monk and Gualtieri argue that Woolf's focus when theorising about biography remained on fiction and that her work, together with the general approach of modern biography, would have brought to the "the collapse of any remaining generic boundaries"[542] between biography and novel. In addition, Gualtieri comments that Virginia Woolf had "very strong anxieties about the contamination of the one by the other"[543] and this contradiction is what leads her to define Virginia Woolf's approach to biography an impossible art. But Virginia Woolf was very conscious of the difference between biography and novel. Once she wrote: "it is a good idea I think to write biographies; to make them use my powers of representation reality accuracy; & to use my novels simply to express the general, the poetic"[544]. From this note, it is clear that for Virginia Woolf biography and novel were two distinct genres with different focus and characteristics, since biographies deal with real lives and need to be accurate, while in novels the characters are normally invented and the attention is usually on the plot and the style. Moreover, Virginia Woolf did not want to bring biography closer to fiction and so contaminate the two genres, as Gualtieri and Monks suggest. She wanted to bring biography closer to art through the methods of fiction – such as the selection and manipulation of facts, the use of the imagination (when facts allow it), the manipulation of time (especially evident in *Orlando*), the use of images and symbols, and the technique of the stream of consciousness – which were to be used in order to convey facts and the subject's personality to the reader in a more interesting and attractive way and are indeed, as we have seen, a major feature in all her biographical works. She

541 Gualtieri, p. 361.
542 Gualtieri, p. 355.
543 Gualtieri, p. 352.
544 Quoted in Caughie, "*Flush* and the Literary Canon: Oh Where Oh Where Has That Little Dog Gone?", pp. 519-520.

professed the marriage of granite and rainbow as an extremely delicate equilibrium and not as a simple mixture of reality and invention, because her focus in biography was constantly on the need for factual accuracy. Finally, both Elena Gualtieri and Ray Monk base their assumptions on the marriage of granite and rainbow proposed in “The New Biography” and take into little consideration – if not ignore – the importance of “The Art of Biography” in which Virginia Woolf identified the true skill of the biographer with the power of selecting creative facts that stimulate the reader and thus found her personal solution to the “impossible” biographical dilemma between fact and fiction.

In conclusion, Virginia Woolf not only exposed the limitations of biography and tried to free it from its Victorian constrictions through the exploration of new possibilities, but also managed to find a new biographical method which respected both the importance of factual accuracy and the innovative principles of modernism. It is therefore undeniable that, by “hanging up looking glasses at odd corners”, Virginia Woolf played a fundamental role in the modern revolution of biography.

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