

## ABSTRACT

The “Proper Stuff” of Biography: Woolf and the Problem of the Other in *Jacob’s Room* and *Orlando*

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In the following thesis, I will examine Virginia Woolf’s often contentious views concerning the theory and execution of biography. By focusing on the epistemology adumbrated in her essays and fiction, I will argue that the problem of biography, particularly the inability of the biographer to truly “know” the biographee, as is handily demonstrated in the novel *Jacob’s Room*, is for Woolf intractable. Her only solution is to introduce the foreign and ultimately destructive element of fiction; for it is only by means of fiction, Woolf contends, that the biographer can approximate the unwieldy and evanescent kind of “life” the biography purports to illuminate. However, the introduction of fiction into the fact-grounded biography brings with it its own set of epistemological problems, namely, the superimposition of the biographer’s own sense of life onto that of the biographee, thus adulterating the biography with traces of autobiography.

The "Proper Stuff" of Biography: Woolf and the Problem of the Other in *Jacob's Room*  
and *Orlando*

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A Thesis

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To my lovely wife Amy and my wonderful grandmothers, Loretta Wiedenfeld and Inez  
Robbins

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

In “Is the Novel Decaying,” an article written in 1923 for *Cassell’s Weekly*, Arnold Bennett launched his most sustained attack on the modernist novel. For Bennett, the “importance” of a novel depends upon the fulfillment of two related criteria: first, that a novel’s characters are convincing, and second, that “the characters clash one with another so as to produce strong emotion.” “The foundation of good fiction,” he writes, “is character creating, and nothing else” (113). Apparently, it is here, in the sphere of character, where the modernist novel founders. Bennett singles out Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* as an exemplar of this failure:

I have seldom read a cleverer book than Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room*, a novel which has made a great stir in a small world. It is packed and bursting with originality, and it is exquisitely written. But the characters do not vitally survive in the mind because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness. I regard this book as characteristic of the new novelists who have recently gained the attention of the alert and the curious, and I admit that for myself I cannot yet descry any coming big novelists. (113)

This criticism—a criticism to which Woolf would readily accede<sup>1</sup>—is especially remarkable in that it mirrors Woolf’s own quarrel with Bennett and the rest of his cohort. Woolf repeatedly lambasted Bennett and the rest of the “Edwardians” for their slavish attention to materiality and their reductive representations of human subjects. Practitioners of their ilk, complained Woolf, “spend immense skill and immense industry

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<sup>1</sup> Presciently, Woolf wrote in her diary for October 14, 1922, “[*Jacob’s Room*] will be highly praised in some places for ‘beauty’; will be crabbed by people who want human character” (*Writer’s Diary* 51).

making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring” (“Modern Fiction” 8). The result of such prioritization, of course, is that the truly “true and enduring” is either omitted altogether or eclipsed by the overwhelming mass of minutiae. “Life escapes,” Woolf remarks, “and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while” (8). Curiously, this last remark could have as easily been made by Bennett in reference to *Jacob’s Room*. When surveying Woolf’s oeuvre, particularly her early fiction, one cannot help but notice a seeming disconnect between her essays and her creative ventures. Naturally, one expects her fiction and “biographies” to fulfill the respective narrative aesthetics she outlines in her essays, but it seems instead that she simply restates in different terms the very problem she sought to resolve.

The question, then, concerns the constitution of this “life” that so concerns Woolf. Both Woolf and Bennett readily admit that the “foundation of fiction is character creating.” That is to say, human life is, for both parties, the focal point around which all else in a novel revolves. The success or failure of a given piece of fiction, or of a given work of biography, depends entirely upon the characters being at once “life”-like and dynamic. Thus, it seems inaccurate to see the quarrel between Woolf and Bennett as merely a generic dispute, as the terms of the conversations seem to indicate. Both Woolf and Bennett advocate a kind of realism; they simply do not agree on what constitutes reality. Tellingly, the problem each writer has with the other centers on their respective definitions of “details.” For Woolf, Bennett and company are at fault for favoring the materiality of existence and the artifice of form, both of which, she thinks, should be subordinated to subjectivity. Bennett, on the other hand, thinks that Woolf fails because she is “obsessed by details of originality and cleverness”; in other words, one presumes,



Woolf's fault is her style and narrative vision (which is also to say, her metaphysics). The quarrel between Bennett and Woolf is analogous to a quarrel between a proponent of Aristotelian and a proponent of Copernican cosmology: because they take as their foundation different paradigms—and as a corollary, they employ different languages—they inevitably speak past each other.

As the clash between Woolf and Bennett suggests, Woolf's view of the subject—and hence, her view of “life” and “reality,” since these latter terms are only useful insofar as they reflect or emanate from subjectivity—entails significant problems for her aesthetics and narrative theory. In the oft-quoted passage from “Modern Fiction,” one senses a faint intimation of this problem:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible. (9)

Here, the very essence of the “spirit” of life seems its instability: it is “luminous” and “semi-transparent,” “unknown” and “uncircumscribed.” The Edwardians fail because they impose order and symmetry where there is only an amorphous whirl of vitality. This “spirit,” one suspects, is of that ethereal, metaphysical realm beyond language, “whereof one cannot speak”; it is, to follow Wittgenstein a step further, of the very class we had best “pass over in silence” if we mean to speak sensibly (*Tractatus* Prop. 7). I allude to Wittgenstein here because Woolf's narrative project is analogous to the philosophical project about which Wittgenstein writes. Just as the ethicist or metaphysician is forced to adopt a lexicon that lacks referents, so Woolf, in her attempt to achieve in narrative a complete view of the subject, is forced to bend the referentiality of language. An equally

elucidatory passage from another essay underscores precisely what she means by “semi-transparent envelope”:

For what after all is character . . . when we cease to believe what we are told about her, and begin to search out her real meaning for ourselves? In the first place, her solidity disappears; her features crumble; the house in which she has lived so long (and a very substantial house it was) topples to the ground. She becomes a will-o'-the-wisp, a dancing light, an illumination gliding up the wall and out of the window, lighting now in freakish malice upon the mahogany of the wardrobe. The most solemn sights she turns to ridicule; the most ordinary she invests with beauty. She changes the shape, shifts the accent, of every scene in which she plays her part. And it is from the ruins and splinters of this tumbled mansion that the Georgian writer must somehow reconstruct a habitable dwelling-place; it is from the gleams and flashes of this flying spirit that he must create solid, living, flesh-and-blood Mrs Brown [character]. (“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” 35)

The key word here in this passage is substantial, and one should not simply construe her reference to the substantiality of the “house” as a clever jibe at Bennett, though it most certainly is that. Rather, a more significant implication here is that the kind of life that bears on her aesthetics is at its core insubstantial. It cannot be housed within a materialist novel; invariably, it seeps through the cracks. A useful term that she uses in her diary to describe *Jacob's Room* is crepuscular (*Writer's Diary* 22). Life is crepuscular in the sense that it straddles the line between materiality and immateriality—between the world of appearances and the world behind appearances. The life she seeks is something that is at once intimately familiar and utterly enigmatic. If we were to pin down an essence to this “will-o'-the-wisp,” it would be, paradoxically, its refusal to remain pinned down. The self, for Woolf, is essentially amorphous, without any identifiable structure. And yet, somewhat problematically, Woolf maintains that it is still the task of the modernist (or “Georgian”) to somehow impose structure on, “to reconstruct a habitable dwelling place” for, this “dancing light” whose very essence is its structurelessness. That she

retains the metaphor of structure in spite of the obvious incommensurability between life and structure points to the fundamental difficulty she faces in trying to realize her aims.

Accordingly, then, the self when viewed from without is ultimately unknowable, and Woolf's aesthetic project, at least with respect to its boldest aims, seems foiled from the start. One only knows the other as one who resembles one's own self. In *Jacob's Room*, this unknowability becomes a refrain. Though I will provide a more thorough analysis of this novel in the next chapter, it is worth at least noting the pervasiveness of this worry in the novel here. "Nobody sees any one as he is ...", observes the narrator, "They see a whole—they see all sorts of things—they see themselves" (36). This scene, in which an elderly woman on a train ruminates on the possible personality of the "shell" of a person sitting opposite her (Jacob), is itself a refrain—not for the novel, however, but for Woolf's entire *oeuvre*. In the earlier story "The Mark on the Wall," for example, the narrator remarks, "As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes" (41).<sup>2</sup> Clearly then, the implications of this passage are central to both Woolf's epistemology and her ontology. Apparently, as observers, we cannot help but contaminate the observed with traces of our own subjectivity. This is a point to which I will return at greater length later, but for now it will suffice to say that Woolf is skeptical of the efficacy of empirical observation when it concerns other subjects. The observer/observed relationship is for Woolf a complex bilateral process of give and take. This is what she means when, in the above quotation, she claims that character (i.e. Mrs Brown) "changes the shape, shifts the accent, of every scene in which she plays a part."

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<sup>2</sup> A similar passage occurs in "Character in Fiction" (41-2).

Just as Mrs Brown alters her surroundings, her surroundings no doubt work similarly on her. This sense of interconnectedness bears a striking resemblance to Nietzsche's view of ontology, in which the idealist notion of the self disappears altogether. In anticipation of Heidegger, he argues in *Twilight of the Idols* that the self cannot be separated from the world it inhabits:

The fatality of [man's] essence is not to be disentangled from the fatality of all that has been and will be. . . . One is necessary, one is a piece of fatefulness, one belongs to the whole, one is in the whole; there is nothing which could judge, measure, compare, or sentence our being, for that would mean judging, measuring, comparing, or sentencing the whole. But there is nothing besides the whole. ("The Four Errors" 500)

For Nietzsche, as for Woolf, things do not exist in isolation; their identities are as much a result of the myriad relations that make up their day-to-day life as they are of their core consciousness. This is why, as the narrator in *Jacob's Room* observes, "It is no use trying to sum people up" (37). Any attempt to encapsulate a subject—to "sum him up"—is analogous to the Edwardian project of trying to "fasten" character within the artificial "mansion" of the carefully structured novel; such "vestments" invariably prove "ill-fitted" ("Modern Fiction" 8).

At this point, we should begin to sense the significance of the criticism leveled by Bennett at *Jacob's Room* with which we began this discussion. It appears that merely "record[ing] the atoms as they fall" ("Modern Fiction" 9) does not necessarily entail success at actually capturing life, which for Woolf is the ultimate goal of the novel. Not only are such impressions of the other already, in a sense, beyond language, but one also has to account for the subjectivity through which such impressions are filtered and, concomitantly, altered.

Like fiction, biography faces a similar cluster of problems. In line with other members of the Bloomsbury Group, most notably Lytton Strachey, Woolf wrote extensively on biography, penning three of them herself. As the daughter of Leslie Stephen, the creator of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and the friend of Strachey and Harold Nicholson, another “new” biographer, Woolf was perhaps in a better position, at least in terms of influence, to be a biographer than a novelist. Her theory of biography does not stray far from her view of fiction: both are in the business of imparting “truth” and “reality,” and both favor the interior life as opposed to the banal world of “fact.” Moreover, essays like “Modern Fiction” and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” have as much to tell us about the aims and limitations of biography as they do about the modernist novel. In short, Woolf’s novels and the ideas that inform them are very much in the biographical spirit, just as her biographies are tinged with the novelistic. One might even go as far to suggest that Woolf’s aesthetics are identical for both fiction and biography. Obviously, the chief distinction between the two is that biography is bound to a tangible world of hard fact, whereas fiction has the freedom to go where it may. But for Woolf, this distinction proves superficial. The more successful examples of biography she cites in “The New Biography,” like Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* and Harold Nicholson’s *Some People*, manage to move beyond the constraints of fact and come close to apprehending the immaterial essence of the subject at hand, what she here calls “personality”. In other words, part of her criteria for a successful biography is in departing, at least in part, from factuality. In order to accomplish this, the biographer fuses fact and fiction by, in a sense, fictionalizing fact. That is to say, the biographer provides the absent musculature to the factual skeleton. As Woolf argues in “The New

Biography,” “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” (95). That is to say, facts must be interpreted in such a way as to reveal the underlying “luminous halo” of personality, a term that functions identically with the “life” of which she writes in her essays about fiction.

As Ray Monk points out, this manner of “manipulation” seems influenced by Strachey’s exhortation to approach biography from an interpretive “angle” or “point of view” (4). “Uninterpreted truth,” writes Strachey, “is as useless as buried gold” (“Rome” 20). As I have already suggested, this immaterial “personality” is linked to the “life” of which she writes in her essays about fiction:

On the one hand there is truth [fact]; 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. (“The New Biography” 95)

Indeed, even Strachey and Nicholson, whose work in biography Woolf readily admitted was groundbreaking, stumbled here. The “truth of fact” and the “truth of fiction” seem ultimately incommensurable: “For though both truths are genuine, they are antagonistic; let them meet and they destroy each other” (“The New Biography” 99). In “The New Biography,” Woolf does not offer a solution to this problem. Instead, she implies, in spite of her own advice, that the truth of fact should be subordinated to the truth of fiction. She writes, “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 ... Thus, the biographer’s imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist’s art ... to expound the private

life” (100). Yet she does warn of lapsing too far into the novelistic mode; doing so would sacrifice both worlds. To compound the problem of biography further, the biographer encounters the same difficulty faced by the narrator (and the other characters) in *Jacob’s Room*. If biography is in fact “life-writing” and the lives of others are epistemologically unavailable (or at the very most, only available as fragments), then the biographer faces a seemingly insurmountable task.

Much as her epistemology obscures the very “life” she is meant to represent in her fiction, her theory of biography seems to render the writing of one impossible. The biographer is faced with a dilemma: either he goes the path of the Victorians and remains firmly within the world of fact, or he aims for “real” life and introduces a dash of the novelistic, thereby betraying the authenticity of the work. According to “The New Biography,” problems arise for both routes. In the first case, the biographer is restricted to fact, to mere tautology, and consequently fails to pierce the “luminous halo” of personality. In the other case, the “truth of fiction” is introduced as a salve for the granitic world of fact, but since the two are incommensurable—“let them meet and they destroy each other” (99), warns Woolf—either fact is subsumed by fiction (in which case the two become indistinguishable), or both worlds collapse altogether.

In what follows, I hope to demonstrate that the Woolfean biography—that “queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow” (100)—is not as unapproachable as Woolf’s essays seem to allow. I will limit the majority of my analysis to *Jacob’s Room* and *Orlando*. Following the introduction, in which I examine the critical perspective concerning biography that is adumbrated in Woolf’s essays, I will discuss *Jacob’s Room*, which as I will show, is as much concerned

with the problems faced by a biographer as it is with narrative form. In fact, *Jacob's Room*, in its various biographical concerns, mirrors metabiography, a self-reflexive work in which the methodological strengths and shortcomings of biography are foregrounded. Based on this reading, I will argue that the epistemological and linguistic obstacles central to the novel make the prospect of writing a biography faithful to Woolf's view of "life" impossible. In the second chapter, I will treat *Orlando* as the counterpart to *Jacob's Room*. Whereas *Jacob's Room* is tied down by the empiricism it upholds, *Orlando* drifts unmoored into the realm of "rainbow." Nevertheless, this "biography" is not quite the joke that critics have typically deemed it; rather, many of the problems introduced in *Jacob's Room* are resolved in *Orlando*. I will pay special attention to the rhetoric of *Orlando*, specifically as it relates to the duplicity of the biographer, and also to the novel's revised treatment of selfhood. I will conclude by offering a few remarks about *Roger Fry*, Virginia Woolf's only "serious" biography, and will speculate on her ultimate rejection of the biographical mode.



## CHAPTER TWO

### *Jacob's Room* and Metabiography

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

---Virginia Woolf (*Jacob's Room* 129)

*Jacob's Room* arose out of the ferment stewing between the modernists and the Edwardians. It is Woolf's first sustained attempt at “record[ing] the atoms as they fall,” at, in other words, moving beyond the more conventional (i.e. “materialistic”) style she had employed in *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* and actually apprehending “life.” In the novel, character is truly conceived as a kind of *ignis fatuus* or “will-o'-the-wisp.” At least at this point in Woolf's career, “Mrs. Brown” still eludes her; her pursuit resembles the proverbial dog, gleefully chasing its own tail. Woolf's deliberate evasiveness in the crafting of character in *Jacob's Room* is related to her critique of the Edwardians. The thrust of her tirade, as might be recalled, centered on what she perceived to be an unnecessary and slavish over-attention to details. By extension, however, Woolf was indicting the whole practice of character-crafting as arrogant and wholesale misrepresentation. One cannot fasten down something as amorphous and fleeting as the human psyche with a string of words. *Jacob's Room* is her response to the so-called realism espoused by Bennett and company, a realism that in its attention to facts mirrors Victorian biography. It is a novel best conceived as both anti-realist, in the sense that it thumbs its nose at all that the Edwardians stood for, and hyper-realist, as it represents what Woolf conceived as reality.

Thus, it is clear that *Jacob's Room* is not merely an avant-garde aesthetic gesture, as critics like Bennett seemed to believe: the novel is as much concerned with the relationship between the self and the Other as it is with the means by which to convey this relationship. The germ of the novel she discusses at length in her diary:

Suppose one thing should open out of another—as in an unwritten novel—only not for 10 pages but 200 or so—doesn't that give the looseness and lightness I want; doesn't that get closer and yet keep form and speed, and enclose everything, everything? My doubt is how far it will enclose the human heart—Am I sufficiently mistress of my dialogue to net it there? For I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist. Then I'll find room for so much—a gaiety—an inconsequence—a light spirited stepping at my sweet will. Whether I'm sufficiently mistress of things—that's the doubt; but conceive *Mark on the Wall*, *K[ew] G[ardens]*, and *Unwritten Novel* taking hands and dancing in unity. What the unity shall be I have yet to discover; the theme is a blank to me; but I see immense possibilities in the form I hit upon more or less by chance two weeks ago. I suppose the danger is the damned egotistical self; which ruins Joyce and Richardson to my mind: is one pliant and rich enough to provide a wall for the book from oneself without its becoming, as in Joyce and Richardson, narrowing and restricting? (22)

As is evidenced here by the description of her initial conception, *Jacob's Room* is as much a novel about its own narrative technique as it is a novel about Jacob Flanders. As Hermione Lee suggests, “the form of *Jacob's Room* is the subject” (72). The title itself seems to draw attention to the novel's self-reflexivity: the book is concerned with *Jacob's room*—with, in other words, the fictive space created by Woolf. The worries Woolf expresses in this passage are equally revealing. Despite proving to be “sufficiently mistress of things,” Woolf's fear that she might encounter difficulties “enclosing the human heart” is nevertheless intensified in the novel and becomes one of its central concerns. In fact, the elusiveness of the “human heart” seems to fill the thematic “blank” she speaks of; if anything “unifies” the novel, it is this skepticism. She also expresses

concern about the influence of “that damned egotistical self” on the fluidity of the novel and, presumably, on the representation of Jacob. This misgiving also reappears in the novel with thematic significance.

These epistemological problems suggest that perhaps Lee’s claim about the form of the novel being the subject itself is not entirely accurate. Woolf is not merely writing about a form and narrative technique that comes closer to capturing “life”; she is *writing about writing about* that form—the form of biography, to be precise. *Jacob’s Room* is, to use a word coined by Ira Nadel, “metabiographical.” Functioning “at once as criticism and fiction” (140), the novel acts both as a (fictional) exposition of the process of observing and translating into language the dynamism of life and as a means by which to complicate that process. In the following analysis, I will read *Jacob’s Room* as such, and I will argue that this first mature novel of Woolf is an attempt to dramatize the difficulties facing both the modern novelist and biographer.

A number of critics see *Jacob’s Room* as a kind of anti-*bildungsroman*.<sup>31</sup> Such critics argue that the novel deconstructs or feminizes (in the sense that it replaces the hard, masculine world of “fact” with a softer, feminine impressionism) the familiar genre. Herta Newman, for example, argues, “though we are able to discern in *Jacob’s Room* the familiar outline of the ‘bildungsroman,’ the novel’s potential for creating character is strikingly undercut” (31). Significantly, this line of thought, which is typical of the critical literature, underscores the subversive nature of Woolf’s representation of

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<sup>1</sup> See: Kate Flint, “Introduction,” *Jacob’s Room*, New York: Oxford UP, 1992; Judy Little, “*Jacob’s Room* as Comedy: Woolf’s Parodic Bildungsroman,” *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, Ed. Jane Marcus, London: Macmillan, 1981; and Herta Newman, *Virginia Woolf and Mrs Brown: Toward a Realism of Uncertainty*, New York: Garland, 1996.

character in the novel. The conventional *bildungsroman* (e.g., *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Sons and Lovers*) explores the desires and motivations of its protagonist with little or no impediments; in *Jacob's Room*, on the other hand, such information is withheld—is, to be more precise, unavailable. It seems that a foreign criterion is imported into the logic of the novel, a criterion more commonly associated with biography: with respect to Jacob, the narrator can only offer what is empirically available. Indeed, the novel seems to give little room for the kind of *bildung* characteristic of the genre. If Jacob “develops” as a character, it is certainly not for the reader having been shown or told. It should be noted that, like the distinction between Woolf’s concepts of “life” and “personality,” the formal difference between the *bildungsroman* and the biography is nearly indiscernible. Thus, even if Woolf indeed had the *bildungsroman* in mind when writing *Jacob's Room*, as critics like Newman seem to believe, the novel still functions metabiographically, insofar as it interrogates the practice of writing about a life.

Not all critics associate the novel with the *bildungsroman*: Hermione Lee, for example, describes *Jacob's Room* as “a biography of fragments” which offers “an alternative to the false reality of the biography of fact” (*Novels* 72). She notes the similarities between Jacob and Woolf’s brother Thoby, who died in 1906 after contracting typhoid in Greece: “[*Jacob's Room*] reflects not only [Woolf’s] sense of loss ... but also her feeling that Thoby had been a mystery to her” (73). In the novel she sees all the “ingredients of traditional biography”: the subject’s birth, an account of his family, his matriculation at university, his loves, his entrance into the war, and his untimely death (72-3). Though she is right to situate the novel within the discourse of

biography and she is right to point out its trajectory as having a biographical structure, she seems to mistake *Jacob's Room* for a solution to the “false reality” of traditional biography, when in fact it merely reaffirms the intractability of the same epistemological impasse. The “reality” that supplants the false one proves ultimately to be no more successful in penetrating the hard shell of factuality than the traditional biography was in capturing the “personality” of its subject. If traditional biography presented only a false reality in which the world of fact eclipsed the more significant world of personality, *Jacob's Room* posits a reality in which epistemological constraints leave personality in desperate need of facts. As the novel's subject, all the action in the novel emanates from Jacob's presence, and yet, his presence is best conceived as an absence. “We have the luminous halo,” writes Lee, “but nothing inside it” (84). Or as Minow-Pinkney suggests, “Jacob is a lacuna in the consciousness of the text, an absent centre, a fissure in the novel round which the other characters gravitate” (28). The unanswered cries of “Jacob, Jacob” (4, 247) that haunt the novel serve to reinforce this emptiness, suggesting that whatever it is that constitutes “life” for Woolf is always one step ahead of those seeking to apprehend it.

The basic epistemological obstacle set forth in *Jacob's Room* is that a subject can only know other subjects as objects. Thus, to “enclose the human heart,” as Woolf aims to do in her diary, means also to erect an impenetrable wall of fact around it. In other words, “life” or “spirit” or “personality”—“reality,” in other words—is reified immediately upon being apprehended by another. This argument resembles in some respects Sartre's existential phenomenology. In *Being and Nothingness*, he writes:

My body as a thing in the world and the Other's body are the necessary intermediaries between the Other's consciousness and mine. The Other's

soul is therefore separated from mine by all the distance which separates first my soul from my body, then my body from the Other's body, and finally the Other's body from his soul. And if it is as yet not certain that the relation of the For-itself [consciousness] to the body is an external relation ... at least it is evident that the relation of my body to the Other's body is a relation of pure, indifferent exteriority. (199)

The following passage from *Jacob's Room* makes essentially the same claim:

The proximity of the omnibuses gave the outside passengers an opportunity to stare into each other's faces. Yet few took advantage of it. Each had his own business to think of. Each had his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart; and his friends could only read the title, James Spalding, or Charles Budgeon, and the passengers going the opposite way could read nothing at all—save “a man with a red moustache,” “a young man in grey smoking a pipe.” (85)

The sense of impenetrability described in this passage is striking: the passengers have their lives “shut” within them, hidden from the view of others. They can know each other only as sheer “facticity,” to use a Sartrean term, only as “bodies,” as an accretion of facts. What is actually advertised—their clothing, moustaches, and pipes; their smiles, frowns, and smirks—is superficial, inadequate, even misleading. Perhaps a more revealing rendition of this same theme occurs in *The Voyage Out*, as Hirst and Hewet remark on the nature of human relationships:

“The truth of it is that one is never alone, and one never is in company,” [Hewet] concluded.

“Meaning?” said Hirst.

“Meaning? Oh, something about bubbles—auras—what d’you call ‘em? You can’t see my bubble; I can’t see yours; all we see of each other is a speck, like the wick in the middle of that flame. The flame goes about with us everywhere; it’s not ourselves exactly, but what we feel; the world in short, or people mainly; all kinds of people.” (76-77)

Couched as it is in the playful diction of spiritualism, this passage is nevertheless in concert with the passage in *Jacob's Room*. One is never alone for the simple fact that we exist among, and feel the need to associate with, other people; nevertheless, our desire to

connect with others is never truly realized because what we mistake for connection is really only the apprehension of the Other's facticity—his "speck." It is for this reason that the narrator in *Jacob's Room* repeats, "It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done" (37, 214).

However, this "summing up" is precisely the objective of the biographer. The Victorian biographer, typified by Carlyle and later Leslie Stephen himself, made the mistake of assuming the self was merely an agglomeration of things said and done; they "summed up" their subject by compiling every verifiable utterance and action of the personage in question, creating, as Ruth Hoberman quips, a "massive, artless compendium of letters and chronicle" (136). Hoberman argues that this method is bound up with the ideology of Carlyle's "Great Man," according to which the actions of a person, as opposed to his "personality," constitute his life (135). The problem with this conception of history (besides its overt sexism) is that it overlooks the complexity—the doubts, fears, hopes, etc.—intrinsic to every action. According to the ideology of the "Great Man," Hamlet is merely a young man who, in order to avenge the death of his father, kills his usurping uncle. His "life" is altogether overlooked. In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf seems to want to draw our attention to the hegemonic force of this view of history when the narrator notices an essay lying on a table in Jacob's room entitled "Does History consist in the Biographies of Great Men?" (48). Of course, we know Woolf's answer to this question, but since we have only scraps of knowledge about Jacob, we can only rely on the few "hints" he provides us.

This sense of being "shut" off from the Other accounts for the dominant image pattern in the novel: that of the enclosure. The word "shut" occurs a remarkable

nineteen times in this short novel, usually with reference to a door being closed in the face of the narrator (and thus the reader). In one of the opening scenes, the narrator directs our attention to a bucket quickly filling with rain water: “The child’s bucket was half-full of rainwater; and the opal-shelled crab slowly circled round the bottom, trying with its weakly legs to climb the steep side; trying again and falling back, and trying again and again” (14). Here, the crab’s weak attempt to escape its prison mirrors the isolation, the “exile” (92), of each of the characters. Moreover, the carapace-covered crab, itself always already self-enclosed, seems a fitting emblem of the solipsistic isolation encountered by her characters. Similarly, each character is also trapped within his or her own subjective “bucket,” while the narrator as biographer scrambles about helplessly, trying unsuccessfully to facilitate their escape. In the course of the novel, the reader encounters a number of figures imprisoned within such spaces: the butterflies in the killing “boxes” (26); the invalid Ellen Barfoot, tellingly deemed “civilization’s prisoner” (29), engaged within her bath-chair; Mrs. Norman “shut up alone” in a train car (35). A more suggestive case is that of Seabrook, Jacob’s deceased father who, like the doubly imprisoned crab,

lay six foot beneath, dead these many years; enclosed in three shells; the crevices sealed with lead, so that, had earth and wood been glass, doubtless his very face lay visible beneath, the face of a young man whiskered, shapely, who had gone out duck-shooting and refused to change his boots. (15)

Even in death, conventionally conceived as a kind of liberation, the subject remains trapped. Seabrook’s situation is exacerbated by his epitaph, which mistakenly reads “Merchant of this city.” In actuality, “he had only sat behind an office window for three months, and before that had broken horses ...” (15). This misattribution points to the



issue at hand: what is being closed off and obscured is the “truth” for which the biographer searches. Thus, when Jacob closes the “black wooden box,” wherein he kept his mother’s letters and the essays that had been rejected for publication, the narrator remarks, “The lid shut upon the truth” (93).

If these figures in *Jacob’s Room* are denied exit, there is the equally troubling sense that the outside world is denied entrance, that these “shells” are impenetrable. This is certainly the case with Jacob. In this sense, the sheep’s skull that Jacob finds at the beginning of the novel represents Jacob in life, as well as death. He is to his mother, to Clara Durrant, to Bonamy, to all he encounters, a “windswept, sand-rubbed” emptiness, a vacancy, an “empty sign” (Minow-Pinkney 35). The novel’s title also calls attention to this fact; indeed, as Dorothy Brewster has cleverly suggested, “Jacob’s ‘room’ is more vividly realized than Jacob” (106).

This sense of being shut off from the Other is certainly the foremost obstacle in writing a biography (or novel) that apprehends this “truth,” but it is not the only one. As Ray Monk observes, “Woolf, it is suggested [in *Jacob’s Room*], can describe her thoughts, her feelings, and possibly those of a woman the same age as herself, but the thoughts of a young man like Jacob are closed to her” (11). By Monk suggesting that Woolf is perhaps capable of writing about a woman close to her age but not of similarly aged young man, he is alluding to another epistemological problem central to the novel: what Woolf refers to in her diary as “the damned egotistical self.” In “The Mark on the Wall,” the narrator comments, “As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes” (41). The narrator in *Jacob’s Room* offers an almost identical

observation when considering Mrs. Norman, the woman who sits opposite Jacob on a train to Cambridge, “Nobody sees any one as he is, let alone an elderly lady sitting opposite a strange young man in a railway carriage. They see a whole—they see all sorts of things—they see themselves” (36). What she is implying here is that when one sees or imagines the Other, she can only think of him as a reflection of her own self. In other words, we superimpose our own subjectivity onto the figure of the Other.

In the essay “Characters in Fiction,” Woolf further develops this idea. In it, she suggests that an observer’s nationality colors his or her reading of a subject. “Mrs. Brown,” she argues, will be construed quite differently by an Englishman, a Frenchman, and a Russian (42). “You see one thing in character,” she writes, “and I another. You say it means this, and I that” (43). We might add that if nationality or ethnicity alters a person’s perception, then certainly gender, class, and experience will do the same, perhaps even in a more pronounced manner. Obviously, she has fiction in mind when she makes these comments, but there is no reason why the same impediment does not apply also to the biographer. As the narrator observes in *Jacob’s Room*,

It seems that a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow-creatures is utterly unknown. Either we are men, or we are women. Either we are cold, or we are sentimental. Either we are young, or growing old. In any case, life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him.

Such is the manner of our seeing. Such is the conditions of our love.  
(96)

The either/or structures in this passage recall the similarly phrased comments (“You see one thing ... and I another”) in “Characters in Fiction.” However, significantly, the

conjunctions of the essay, which suggest a kind of Barthesian glee in the possibilities of different perspectives, are replaced in *Jacob's Room* by disjunctions and subsequently a sense of loss and disengagement. The somber, almost elegiac mood of this passage—the frustration, the despair—informs much of the narrator's commentary in the novel. The love we have for others, she suggests, is always in a sense premature, incomplete—even duplicitous. That is to say, we never really know whom we love, so the love we have for others is, at least in part, unmerited. One is reminded of Woolf's own relationship with her brother Thoby: though Woolf dearly loved her brother, he remained a mystery to her (Lee 72). She never "knew" her brother in the manner she would require of his biographer, nor did, presumably, her love ever .

The implication of this line of thought is that all biography, all "life-writing," is contaminated by the author's own sense of self. Thus, biography is, at least in part, also autobiography. Thus, to return to Monk's comment, insofar as the interior life of another woman resembles Woolf's own, she can at least *appear* to pierce through the shell of facticity. This is surely the reason that we seem to get more complete pictures of Mrs. Norman, Mrs. Flanders, and Mrs. Pascoe than we get of Jacob, Timothy Durrant, or even Florinda, whose difference in class and education seemingly place her at an even further remove. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between appearance and actual "life." The narrator is quick to tell us of Mrs. Pascoe that she is in actuality as much a blank to her as is Jacob. She observes,

The picture papers were delivered punctually on Sunday, and she pored long over Lady Cynthia's wedding at the Abbey. She, too, would have liked to ride in a carriage with springs. The soft, swift syllables of educated speech often shamed her few rude ones. And all night to hear the grinding of the Atlantic upon the rocks instead of hansom cabs and footmen whistling for motor cars ... So she may have dreamed, scouring

her cream pan. But the talkative, nimble-witted people have taken themselves to towns. Like a miser, she has hoarded her feelings with her own breast. Not a penny piece has she changed all these years, and, watching her enviously, it seems as if all within must be pure gold. (70)

I include this paragraph in its entirety because it provides a good example of the limits of the narrator's knowledge. The only verifiable action described in this passage is Mrs. Pascoe's reading of the "picture papers." The narrator's speculations about Mrs. Pascoe's desires and dreams are what lend this scene a sense of interiority, and thus a sense of "life." And yet they are marked as such: "So she may have dreamed," she muses. Moreover, it should be noted that these hypothetical day dreams are the narrator's own hypothetical daydreams pieced together from the narrator's preconceived ideas about women of Mrs. Pascoe's temperament and facticity. There is no limit to what Mrs. Pascoe could be thinking while she reads the papers, and the narrator acknowledges this in frustration: the "pure gold" of her interior self is unavailable to the narrator, "hoarded" by the silent woman.

This previous passage concerning Mrs. Pascoe typifies the novel's erratic manner of narration. The narrator freely jumps back and forth from characters, many of whom are only mentioned once or twice; at times, she offers first person commentary and speculations, while at others she only observes what is immediately apparent to her. Nancy Topping Bazin sees in this "inconsistency of the author's point of view" a "serious" flaw, and points out that Woolf must have realized it as such, for in her later novels this mode is absent (98). But she fails to note that, though this manner of narration is certainly inconsistent, to do otherwise would destroy the integrity of the novel. This inconsistency is very much in accord with the metabiographical aspect of *Jacob's Room*. Let us consider the following scene, in which a letter from Jacob's

mother lies unread on a table in Jacob's sitting room while Jacob and Florinda are presumably mid-coitus in the next room:

The letter lay upon the hall table; Florinda coming in that night took it up with her, put it on the table as she kissed Jacob, and Jacob seeing the hand, left it there under the lamp, between the biscuit-tin and the tobacco-box. They shut the bedroom door behind them.

The sitting-room neither knew nor cared. The door was shut; and to suppose that wood, when it creaks, transmits anything save that rats are busy and wood dry is childish. These old houses are only brick and wood, soaked in human sweat, grained with human dirt. But if the pale blue envelope lying by the biscuit-box had the feelings of a mother, the heart was torn by the little creak, the sudden stir. Behind the door was the obscene thing, the alarming presence, and terror would come over her as at death, or the birth of a child. (123-24)

The significance of this scene is central to Woolf's metabiographical project. To begin with, Woolf, probably with Joyce and Lawrence in mind, is slyly undercutting the significance typically conferred on male sexuality in the *bildungsroman*. Here, as far as the narrator (and thus, the reader) can tell, there is no crisis of conscience, no "awakening." We are not even told if this is Jacob's first or twentieth sexual experience. Instead of focusing on Jacob and Florinda, the narrator shifts the emphasis to Mrs. Flanders, one with whom she presumably has enough in common to at least appear verisimilar. The shutting of the door behind them marks the limits of our vision; we are left, along with the narrator, to ruminate on truisms ("The sitting-room neither knew nor cared") and speculate on its (the sex act's) potential effect on Jacob's mother. The shutting door closes not only on the enamored pair, but also on our ability to measure its significance. In this scene, Woolf also seems to have the Edwardians in mind. It is the Edwardians, one might recall, who would suggest that the sitting room could actually tell us something about what was occurring in the next room. Such fancies are for Woolf, of course, "childish." In this case, the narrator's focalization shifts from Florinda to Jacob's

room and finally to Jacob's mother. This inconsistency, along with the remarks about the house and the letter, is what for Bazin constitutes such a glaring "flaw." However, when viewed with respect to the epistemological constraints with which this novel is concerned, it becomes clear that the narrator's apparent clumsiness is symptomatic of the limits of empirical observation. She offers truisms and speculations because there is nothing much else for her to do. One gets the sense, as one often does in this novel, that the narrator is actually present in the scene, that, in this case, she is perhaps seated at the table, nervously fingering Mrs. Flander's letter while she impatiently waits for Jacob and Florinda to emerge from the closed door of the bedroom.

In many cases, the narrator explicitly acknowledges her limits. For example, after describing Jacob's reaction to seeing Florinda with another man, the narrator notes, "Whether we know what was in his mind is another question. Granted ten years' seniority and a difference of sex, fear of him comes first" (128). Again, one is struck by her helplessness: all she can do is speculate, and her ability to speculate is considerably hampered by her difference in age and sex, and her concomitant fear. Her befuddlement is even more pronounced in describing a night at Cambridge:

The young men were now back in their rooms. Heaven knows what they were doing. What was it that could *drop* like that? And leaning down over a foaming window-box, one stopped another hurrying past, and upstairs they went and down they went, until a sort of fulness settled on the court, the hive full of bees, the bees home thick with gold, drowsy, humming, suddenly vocal. (54)

Here what prevents her from gaining access to the "hive" is not epistemological but social, presumably her gender. At this point, the goings-on of Cambridge—formative experiences for those involved, no doubt—are explicitly off limits for women. Thus, as a

biographer, she is denied access to what is surely crucial to a complete understanding of Jacob, even if it is predominantly factual.

Though primarily concerned with the epistemological constraints faced by the biographer, *Jacob's Room* seems also to express misgivings about the adequacy of language to transmit the real. Woolf's view of language is remarkably similar to that of Roland Barthes. Barthes viewed language as a free-floating "intertext." He argues that "the classical sign," conventionally conceived as "a sealed unit, whose closure arrests meaning, prevents it from trembling or becoming double, or wandering" is an "authoritarian" lie intended to reinforce the hegemonic metaphysics—a metaphysics Barthes associates with "truth" and Woolf would likely associate with masculinity ("Theory of the Text" 33). In its stead, he argues for a "textual" language, a language of *signifiance* rather than signification: "As soon as the text is conceived as a polysemic space where the paths of several possible meanings intersect, it is necessary to cast off the monological, legal status of signification, and to pluralize it [i.e. to adopt *signifiance*]" (37). For Woolf also, the nature of language is such that univocality is a chimera; reference is necessarily hampered, meaning always disseminated. In the essay "Craftsmanship," Woolf observes,

Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations—naturally. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing today—that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages. (88)

And later in the same essay she adds,

Perhaps ... one reason why we have no great poet, novelist or critic writing today is that we refuse words their liberty. We pin them down to one meaning, their useful meaning, the meaning which makes us catch the

train, the meaning which makes us pass the examination. And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die. (90)

The ambivalence that these two passages suggest is noteworthy. On the one hand, Woolf seems reluctant to relinquish the “classical sign”; thus, she conceives of writing without the guarantee of unimpeded signification as “one of the chief difficulties in writing today.” It is for this reason that the young poet Orlando in Woolf’s mock biography observes in frustration, “Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another” (*Orlando* 14). The prospect of the Barthesian text, in its “trembling” plurality, seems almost frightening to Woolf. To surrender to this view of language seems to entail the sacrifice of truth. At the same time, however, she laments our insistence on the univocal sign, that we “refuse words their liberty.”

One senses this ambivalence throughout her work, but it is in her early work where it is most prominent. In “The Mark on the Wall,” for example, the narrator clearly savors the play, the *jouissance* even, afforded by the “liberty” of the sign: “I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciously, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle. I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts” (39). One is also reminded of the aforementioned comment in “Character in Fiction” (“You see one thing . . . I another”) in which she celebrates the primacy of perspective in interpretive acts. But Woolf seems also to recognize the danger of this state of oceanic potentiality: solipsism. Just as the delight she exudes in “Character in Fiction” turns to despair in *Jacob’s Room*, “The Mark on the Wall” exhibits a similar reversal. At the conclusion of the story, the narrator’s reverie is abruptly broken by an impinging figure with a newspaper; “there is a vast upheaval of matter” (46), and she awakens to the world



of facts: she immediately notices that the mark, the “sign,” on the wall, is a mere snail. Though the bulk of this story champions the free play of imagination, Woolf ends this story with a reluctant affirmation of the Other, suggesting that the flight from “the surface, with its hard separate facts” comes only at the expense of interpersonal relations.

*Jacob's Room* begins where “The Mark on the Wall” ends. The gleeful solipsism of the narrator in “The Mark on the Wall” is replaced by a sense of helplessness at the prospect of infinite deferral in *Jacob's Room*. In the novel, Woolf's attitude about language is apparent in her treatment of names. Proper names are, for most characters in the novel, the only identifying markers Woolf provides. And yet, as Hermione Lee has observed, it is frequently difficult to distinguish one from the other. If Jacob is an impenetrable shell in the text, then the minor characters are not even shells, only names. Lee lists a number of the homonymous minor characters: Norman, Budgeon, Sturgeon, Masham, Bonham, Stretton, Gresham, and Sherborn; Gage, Graves, and Gruvé; Miss Edwards, Milly Edwards, and Cissy Edwards; Barnet and Barnes (both gardeners); Mallet, Springett, Lidgett, and Barrett; Pearce, Perry, and Parry (87). Lee argues that Woolf is “interested in putting an emphasis on the names, so that we end by feeling a sense of irritation at the pointlessness of their number and their similarity. They become symptoms of the futility of public life” (87). One might add that in emphasizing the similarity of the names, Woolf is suggesting their repeated failures to function as they are intended. This point is perhaps better illustrated by the case of Florinda: “As for Florinda's story, her name had been bestowed upon her by a painter who had wished to signify that the flower of her maidenhood was still unplucked. Be that as it may, she was without a surname, and for parents had only the photograph of a tombstone beneath

which, she said, her father lay buried” (103-04). Of course, the irony here is that Florinda’s name is no longer significant in the manner intended by the author of her name. Her name now functions much in the same manner as “Tiny” does to the oversized gangster. Her sexual promiscuity has transformed her name into a cruel joke, the emptiest of signifiers.

Throughout the novel, language is always one step behind reality; it ossifies what once was real but has since changed. Language functions much like Florinda’s photograph of her father’s tomb: divorced from the site of meaning, it becomes equivocal, perhaps even simulacral. Florinda’s photograph stands in for, takes the place of, her parents, and yet the photograph only captures a tombstone “beneath which, she said, her father lay buried.” Revealingly, the syntax here seems to be deliberately distancing. The solidity of the tombstone (complicated by its photographic representation) is meant to supplant the immaterial essence of her parents, but as with language, the real meaning of the tombstone is disseminated and eventually dispersed in the several levels of translation.

Similarly, language is doubly removed from the reality it purports to transmit.

Thus, the narrator’s critique of letter-writing:

Let us consider letters—how they come up at breakfast, and at night, with their yellow stamps and their green stamps, immortalized by the postmark—for to see one’s own envelope on another’s table is to realize how soon deeds sever and become alien. Then at last the power of the mind to quit the body is manifest, and perhaps we fear or hate or wish annihilated this phantom of ourselves, lying on the table. (125)

The problem with letters, as this passage indicates, is that they seem to imply a stable, fixed identity, when in fact, as soon as they are written, they are forever cleft from their origins; they become, in other words, obsolete, “alien.” The narrator points to another

problem with letters: “Whether we gain or not by this habit of profuse communication it is not for us to say. But that letter-writing is practiced mendaciously nowadays, particularly by young men travelling in foreign parts, seems likely enough” (171). The biographer, like Mrs. Flanders, is given no other choice but to take the import of a letter at face-value. It is not the job of the biographer to “read between the lines,” but rather, to quote from Leslie Stephen, to relay “the greatest possible amount of information in a thoroughly business-like form” (850). And yet, letters, particularly those written “by young men traveling in foreign parts,” are as frequently employed as disinformation as they are for genuine information. About Jacob’s experience in Versailles, with Edward Cruttendon, an itinerant artist, and his (Cruttendon’s) lover Jinny Carslake, Jacob says nothing to his mother: “No—Mrs. Flanders was told none of this, though Jacob felt, it is safe to say, that nothing in the world was of greater importance” (179). And yet, his omission was not motivated by shame: “Jacob had nothing to hide from his mother. It was only that he could make no sense himself of his extraordinary excitement, and as for writing it down—” ( 180). The dash here reinforces the sense in which signification through language is never complete—it is only, and often abruptly, suspended.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Jarvis, an otherwise knowing figure in the novel, observes without hesitation, “Jacob’s letters are so like him” (180). Here, the reader is seemingly granted the rare opportunity of surveying the action of the novel from a privileged position. We are able, in other words, to see the dramatic irony as such. However, it is not as if the reader knows what Jacob “is like” and Mrs. Jarvis does not; our position is privileged only because we know that *we do not know* what Jacob is like, whereas Mrs. Jarvis obviously does not. Perhaps the letters do evince Jacob’s personality; we, however, can

never know. In *The Post Card*, Derrida associates letter-writing with death: “Understand me, when I write, right here, on these innumerable post cards, I annihilate not only what I am saying but also the unique addressee that I constitute, and therefore every possible addressee, and every destination” (33). Though his argument is slightly different than Woolf’s (being more concerned with “iterability”), the suggestion is the same: the letter, like Florinda’s photograph, posits absence as presence, and in so doing, freezes the “addressee,” denying him his “life.” Thus, as Makiko Minow-Pinkney observes regarding *Jacob’s Room*, “Writing is the death of the origin” (30). The significance of language to the project of biography is obvious: without it functioning properly, the biography unravels, becomes all “rainbow.” Moreover, in *Jacob’s Room*, as exemplified by her use of proper names and her critique of letter-writing, Woolf shows the factual aspect of biography to be not only inadequate, but also misleading.

The problem of biography, so long as it retains its criteria of factual authenticity, seems an intractable one. It seems that the “rainbow” of which Woolf speaks in “The New Biography” can only be produced from oneself, since apparently we only “know” ourselves. Thus, to be precise, there is no biography in the Woolfean sense of the word, only autobiography. There is a sense in which the protagonist of *Jacob’s Room* is not Jacob but rather the narrator herself. We certainly have a better picture of her than we do Jacob. The unexpected benefit of not being able to observe another without projecting our own sense of reality onto him or her is that we at least get the sense of *a* reality, even if that reality is only the narrator’s. Moreover, hers, I would suggest, is the heroic project: trying to apprehend a mere “shadow” is on par with the task of Sisyphus. Not to downplay Jacob’s untimely death, but it does seem as if the conflict in the novel is at the

level of narration, rather than being internal to the plot. *Jacob's Room* is tragic, then, at two levels: it is tragic for the demise of its subject, and it is tragic for the failure of that subject's biographer.

## CHAPTER THREE

“Multiplicity becomes unity”: *Orlando* and the Truth of Fiction

*"My God, how does one write Biography? ... How can one deal with facts – so many and so many and so many? Or ought one, as I incline, to be purely fictitious. And what is a life? ... And if one cant say, whats the good of trying?"*

--- Virginia Woolf (*Letters* 3 May 1938)

In “The New Biography,” Woolf asserts that the goal of biography should be to “weld” the “granite-like” truth and the “rainbow-like” personality of the subject into a “seamless whole” (95). Traditional biography restricted itself to factual truth and would only evince personality incidentally, by stumbling upon those rare truths which “transmit personality” (95). It is the job of the “new biography,” claims Woolf, to move beyond mere fact to the shadowy realm of personality. Ultimately, as I have already suggested, the goals of both fiction and biography are one and the same for Woolf: to pierce through the “luminous halo” and apprehend the “real” reality (as opposed to the material reality) of the subject. Yet, as *Jacob’s Room* demonstrates, that realm is shut off from view, self-enclosed. The one, albeit morbid, consolation for the biographer facing this impasse is that there seems little advantage in having a subject who is still living: the subject is always already entombed.

In order to move beyond this obstacle—in other words, to apprehend “life”—Woolf paradoxically proposes to add a “pinch” of fiction (99) despite the fact that “truth of fact and truth of fiction are incompatible” (100). “For it would seem,” she writes, “that the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than the act” (100). Surprisingly, it is in *Jacob’s Room*, a work of

fiction, where Woolf comes closest to proving this claim. Of course, this is not to say that Jacob or any other of the characters in the novel seem real; quite the contrary, in fact: they seem markedly un-real, if by un-real we mean lacking “life.” Rather, *Jacob’s Room* works by a kind of *apophasis*. It, in other words, supports Woolf’s contention about the “reality” of fiction negatively, by underscoring the overwhelming sense of un-reality we encounter in a world tethered down by empiricism. It is in *Orlando*, however, where she first addresses her theory directly and attempts that “queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow” (“The New Biography” 100).

*Orlando: A Biography*, published the year after “The New Biography,” was first conceived by Woolf as a kind of literary joke. She writes in her diary,

One of these days, though, I shall sketch here, like a grand historical picture, the outlines of all my friends. ... There may be something in this idea. It might be a way of writing the memoirs of one’s own times during people’s lifetimes. It might be a most amusing book. The question is how to do it. Vita should be Orlando, a young nobleman. There should be Lytton; and it should be truthful but fantastic. (112)

The writing of it was to provide Woolf with an “amusing” respite, a writerly vacation, from the “seriousness” of her “mature” novels. In her diary she describes the novel variously as “a treat,” “a book ... which I write after tea,” a “farce” (115), a “joke” (116), “half laughing, half serious,” and “an escapade” (118). In light of such characterization, it is tempting to discount this “biography” on the grounds that since Woolf herself treats it so deprecatingly, it must not represent Woolf’s mature artistic vision. Moreover, *Orlando* is written “half in a mock style very clear and plain [*sic*], so that people will understand every word” (*Diary* 115); thus, stylistically at least, the book eschews Modernist arcana, aiming instead for a broader readership. The comparatively conventional style in which *Orlando* is written thus seems another reason to ignore it.

Indeed, for both of these reasons—its simplistic style and Woolf’s own attitude towards it—a number of critics have done just that. Quentin Bell, for example, remarked in his seminal biography of Woolf, “I think she saw well enough that *Orlando* was not ‘important’ among her works (*Vol. 2* 138). Nancy Bazin seems to share this opinion, for she omits Woolf’s “biography” from her wide-ranging study of Woolf’s oeuvre. This fact is especially revealing in light of the book’s title, *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*, which, as implied, is concerned precisely with the kinds of thematic issues that occupy *Orlando*. More recently, Ray Monk, in his otherwise admirable study of Woolf’s biographical theory “This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography and Reality,” avoids any sustained discussion of *Orlando*, which would seem to be the *locus classicus* of any such discussion. To be fair, Monk does point out that, “*Orlando* is not ... a biography, and that, precisely, is the point: only by *not* writing a biography did Woolf believe that she could achieve what a biography seeks, and necessarily fails, to achieve” (29), but this and a few other brief references constitute the entirety of his treatment of *Orlando*.

This is not to say that *Orlando* has not attracted its fair share of scholarship; in the past fifty years, particularly the last twenty (coincident with the rise of gender studies and queer theory), *Orlando* has seen considerable attention, though certainly far less than *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse*. Nevertheless, just as book venders were unsure how to classify and market the book when it was first published, critics have expressed similar anxieties about how to measure the significance of *Orlando* within Woolf’s body of work.



*Orlando*'s questionable place within Woolf's corpus mirrors Woolf's own ambivalence toward the book. Though she initially conceives of *Orlando* as a joke, her diary suggests that the "biography" quickly outgrew the boundaries she had set for it. She writes on December 20, 1927, "I have had of course to give up the fancy of finishing [*Orlando*] by February and printing this spring. It is drawing out longer than I meant" (117). And later in the same entry: "How extraordinarily unwilling by me but potent in its own right ... *Orlando* was! as if it shoved everything aside to come into existence (118). After its publication she reflects, "The truth is I expect I began it as a joke and went on with it seriously" (126). She later concedes that *Orlando* is "a very quick brilliant book" (133). It is clear, then, that in Woolf's final analysis, *Orlando* is not merely "joke" or "farce" and should thus be considered as "serious" as her other novels.

In terms of narrative, *Orlando* is the antithesis of *Jacob's Room*. Though it at times resembles *Jacob's Room* in its attention to the limits of the biographer, *Orlando* more often exemplifies the "rainbow-like" quality Woolf champions in "The New Biography." That is to say, whereas *Jacob's Room* restricted itself to empirical observation, *Orlando* uses every tool available: it bends time, fact, and fiction in order to glimpse what fact concealed. Thus, as Nadel quips, "throughout the text [of *Orlando*], biography is both victim and victor" (141). The dynamic "reality" of Vita Sackville-West (*Orlando*) is illuminated by means of a number of fictional ploys, fantasy being chief among them. Her factual life is subordinated to and transformed by her "real" life. This is not to say, however, that the narrator does not experience difficulties similar to those faced by the narrator in *Jacob's Room*. *Orlando*, like *Jacob's Room*, functions

metabiographically. In fact, Nadel coins this term with *Orlando* in mind (140). Leon Edel seems also to be thinking of this quality when he observes of the book,

imbedded in this would-be biography is a full-fledged theory of biography and ... the book seems to be saying a great deal about this art or science or craft [of biography] ... *Orlando* is in reality neither a literary joke nor entirely a novel: it belongs to another *genre*. It is a fable—a fable for biographers, embodying those views of biography which had often been exchanged among the Bloomsbury Group, but to which are now added a series of commentaries and illustrations by Mrs. Woolf. (*Literary Biography* 94)

The difference between *Jacob's Room* and *Orlando* is that whereas in the former the problems faced by the narrators remain intransigent, in *Orlando* the biographer, often without his knowing, points us toward solutions to the problems he encounters. This blindness, to borrow a term from de Man, whereby the biographer affirms his inadequacy even as he works his way around it, perhaps accounts for the ambivalence expressed by Woolf regarding the biography. In any case, this duality necessitates a kind of double reading. With this in mind, in the following analysis, I will first demonstrate that *Orlando* is an extension of the project began in *Jacob's Room*. It offers, in another words, variations on the same theme—namely, the futility of factual biography. I will then show how these apparent problems with biography are finally undercut by the narrative, suggesting in the end that the Woolfean biography is not quite the chimera suggested by *Jacob's Room* and “The New Biography.”

The actual narrative of *Orlando*—in which a young man at the close of Elizabeth's reign pursues a life of letters, falls in and out of love and in and out of melancholy, is inexplicably transformed into a woman who marries, succeeds as a poet, and continues living well into the twentieth century—is itself a testament to the problem of character treated in *Jacob's Room*. It seems that in order to capture the life of another,

space and time must be bent. Woolf rewrites the factual history of Vita Sackville-West so as to better accommodate her more dynamic, actual “life.” Temporal and sexual restraints are abrogated and transformed in order to limn a personhood with a historical consciousness and fluid sexuality.

Nevertheless, the novel is still very much concerned with the problem of capturing the complexity of life. In each of its departures from normative biographical practice, it seems to have in mind the impasses encountered in *Jacob’s Room*. We are, in fact, frequently reminded of the shell-like quality of the Other. At one point in the novel, the biographer remarks about Sasha, the Russian princess with whom Orlando first falls in love,

For in all she said, however open she seemed and voluptuous, there was something hidden; in all she did, however daring, there was something concealed. So the green flame seems hidden in the emerald, or the sun prisoned in a hill. The clearness was only outward; within was a wandering flame. It came; it went ... (35)

This passage recalls both “Modern Fiction,” in which character is described as a “will-o’-the-wisp” (“wandering flame”), and the scene in *Jacob’s Room* in which the inhabitants of an omnibus stare dumbly at each other: “Each [occupant] had his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart; and his friends could only read the title” (85). The gist of each of these passages should be familiar by now: life-writing is futile, as life itself is self-enclosed and shut off from empirical observation.

The inadequacy of language is also a worry in *Orlando*. Early in the novel, for example, the biographer observes, “Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces” (14). Though it is feasible to construe this passage as a

testament to Orlando's immaturity as a poet, the language suggests a categorical problem. This passage, too, has an antecedent, but in this case it is not in *Jacob's Room*, but rather in "The New Biography," which, it is helpful to remember, was completed the year before *Orlando*. In this essay, she had written that "though both truths are genuine," "truth of fact" and "truth of fiction" were nevertheless "antagonistic"—"let them meet and they destroy each other" (99). The similar syntax and phrasing suggest that she is likely invoking this same problem. All this goes to say, Woolf's views on language and epistemology have not changed; *Orlando* is not merely written to ridicule Victorian biography; it has the more significant function of solving, or at the very least, circumventing, these impasses.

Not surprisingly, it is in the beginning of the novel where Woolf's initial satirical intentions are most prominent. In an inflated and obviously barbed preface, Woolf mocks the self-deprecating acknowledgements characteristic of biography by enumerating a litany of personages, many of whom were novelists and long since dead, who "helped me in writing this book" (5). The satirical mood is thus established. As early as the opening page of the actual novel, Woolf makes it clear that *Orlando* is to be at once inside and outside the parameters of factual biography: Orlando is slicing at the head of a Moor suspended from the rafters of his attic. The head is a trophy, a relic of the heroic times of Orlando's forebears: "Orlando's fathers had ridden in fields of asphodel, and stony fields, and fields watered by strange rivers, and they had struck many heads of many colours off many shoulders, and brought them back to hang from the rafters" (11). Here, Orlando mirrors his biographer, who also is in the business of head-slicing. Traditional biographers "sever" the factuality from its corresponding "life," presenting a

reductive, granitic bust of their subjects. Shortly after this introduction, the biographer remarks on Orlando's compatibility with the aim of biography:

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 herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet. From deed to deed, from glory to flory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach what ever seat it may be that is the height of their desire. Orlando, to look at, was cut out precisely for some such career. (12)

Orlando is a perfect candidate for a biography, then, because he appears monolithic to the biographer. The biographer need not seek the aid of "novelist or poet" because at least at this point he appears entirely reducible to fact; hence, the biographer's delight in Orlando's "candidness" and his propensity for activity, for "deeds." Later he will tellingly remark that "If ... the subject of one's biography will neither love nor kill, but will only think and imagine, we conclude that he or she is no better than a corpse and so leave her" (199).

Shortly after praising Orlando's "candid" face, however, the biographer expresses dismay at Orlando's forehead and eyes. He laments,

we must admit that he had eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them; and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two blank medallions which were his temples ... Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore. (13)

That Orlando is not only fact, that he is more complex—which his eyes and forehead betray—troubles the biographer. Indeed, he is forced to "invoke the help of novelist or poet," as the baroquely-styled *blason* suggests. The tension between fact and fiction (or lyricism), interior and exterior, is here made clear. Moreover, this passage typifies the blindness characteristic of Orlando's biographer. This blindness resembles in function

the rhetorical device of paralipsis, in which something is invoked in the very process of denying to do so. “I will not mention a, b, and c,” goes the classic formula. Here the narrator inverts the formula: after describing Jacob’s eyes and forehead in stilted poetic diction, he then concedes that these are the very items which are incompatible with biography, which it is the duty of “every good biographer to ignore.” Thus, Woolf is able to reconceive—to rebuild—the biography, even as she lays waste to it.

Indeed, the use of paralipsis is common in the novel for this very reason: the novel is able to rebuild what it destroys. *Orlando* is thus not satire in the classical sense, as is commonly suggested. Though it certainly satirizes a number of conventions, biography being chief among them, the novel is, at least with respect to biography, more didactic than satiric. The novel is meant to broaden our conception of biographical methodology, and in doing so, must first clear the path of the Victorian detritus still clinging to the thoroughfare. The following example reflects this duality,

To give a truthful account of London society at that [eighteenth century] or indeed at any other time, is beyond the powers of the biographer or the historian. Only those who have little need of the truth and no respect for it—the poets and the novelists—can be trusted to do it, for this is one of the cases where the truth does not exist. Nothing exists. The whole thing is a miasma—a mirage. To make our meaning plain—Orlando could come home from one of these routs at three or four in the morning with cheeks like a Christmas tree and eyes like stars. She would untie a lace, pace the room a score of times, untie another lace, stop, and pace the room again. Often the sun would be blazing over Southwark chimneys before she could persuade herself to get into bed, and there she would lie, pitching and tossing, laughing and sighing for an hour or longer before she slept at last. And what was all this stir about? Society. (141-2)

The biographer continues, “Yet this intoxication, this seductiveness, entirely evade our analysis. At one and the same time therefore, society is everything and society is nothing” (142). Society is then much like the “life” Woolf seeks to apprehend: it is

phantasmal, “miasmal,” “crepuscular,” etc. Society, like the will-o’-the-wisp, has no “truth”; that is to say, it has no facts. Again, the biographer delegates this rarefied realm to the poets, suggesting the limitations faced by the conventional biographer who cannot wander into this netherworld. But does not the biographer’s description of its effect on Orlando belie his claim that society does not exist, that it is in fact “a mirage”? She (she is a she by this point) is frenzied, nervous, ecstatic, “intoxicated”. If we can deduce a personality from a hand, then surely we can paint an approximate picture of what society must be like based on its effects on Orlando. Thus, the example the biographer provides in order to demonstrate the truth of his claim that society was out of the biography’s reach ultimately suggests precisely the opposite, that society is indeed apprehensible.

The biographer provides the key to this paraliptic manner of depiction. After a period of intense gloom in which he spent most of his time in the family crypt, Orlando finally emerges resolute and begins reading Sir Thomas Browne. The narrator observes,

For though these are not matters on which a biographer can profitably enlarge it is plain enough to those who have done a reader’s part in making up from bare hints dropped here and there the whole boundary and circumference of a living person; can hear in what we only whisper a living voice; can see, often when we say nothing about it, exactly what he looked like, and know without a word to guide them precisely what he thought and felt and it is for readers such as these alone that we write ...  
(54-5)

This manner of dropping hints corresponds with the artful manipulation of facts she describes in “The New Biography.”

At the beginning of the second chapter, the biographer describes the *ethos* of traditional biography: “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” (49). Despite this bravado, the biographer frequently does just the opposite. He seems to spend as much time in the garden savoring the flowers as he does in the “indelible footprints of truth.” Of course, he does so without drawing our attention to his transgressions. One manner in which he frequently veers from what he later calls “the firm, if rather narrow, ground of ascertained truth” (97) concerns his habit of interpreting events. Consider, for example, the following description: “[Orlando] sighed profoundly, and flung himself—there was a passion in his movements which deserves the word—on the earth at the foot of the oak tree” (15). Here the biographer does not acquit himself in the “business-like” manner suggested by Leslie Stephen; neither does he “plod, without looking to the right or left.” He is clearly employing the language of fiction in order to limn a more compelling, “life-like” picture of his subject. As Strachey so eloquently put it, “Uninterpreted truth is as useless as buried gold, and art is the great interpreter.” Gone are the weak-kneed speculations and timid qualifications of the narrator in *Jacob’s Room*; the biographer here attempts to get at the rainbow undergirding the granite. Of course, he is aware of this, and he accounts for his liberality by attempting to relate it back to the world of fact: “there was a passion in his movements which deserved the word.” Another example of this technique occurs when Orlando meets Queen Elizabeth. Overwhelmed by timidity in the face of such a commanding presence, Orlando can only feebly kneel and hold forth a bowl of rosewater:

Such was his shyness that he saw no more of her than her ringed hand in water; but it was enough. It was a memorable hand; a thin hand with long fingers always curling as if round orb or scepter; a nervous, crabbed, sickly hand; a commanding hand; a hand that had only to raise itself for a head to fall; a hand, he guessed, attached to an old body that smelt like a cupboard in which furs are kept in camphor ... All this he felt as the great rings flashed in the water ... (17)



Here the biographer (and presumably Orlando) not only deduces the “life” of the Queen merely from her hand, but he also is able to represent the cadence and intensity of Orlando’s impressions from seeing this hand. This passage recalls Woolf’s claim in “The New Biography” that “in order that the light of personality shine through, facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity” (95). The description of the Queen’s hand, then, is surely an exemplar of “those truths which transmit personality” (95).

In some cases, the narrator concedes that following the “indelible footprints of truth” often results in some rather dull material, especially in instances where Orlando is inactive. After having to indicate a passage of time that would otherwise go unnoticed because of Orlando’s inactivity, he allows, “This method of writing biography, though it has its merits, is a little bare, perhaps, and the reader, if we go on with it, may complain that he could recite the calendar for himself and so save his pocket whatever sum the publisher may think proper to charge for this book” (197). As has already been suggested, however, the biographer often seems incapable of preventing himself from veering off the path of truth. For example, when the facts fail him or prove especially unenlightening, as when the biographer’s source material is “scorched a deep brown in the middle of the most important sentence,” he “often” finds it necessary “to speculate, to surmise, and even to make use of the imagination” (88). This, of course, is exactly what he has previously forbidden himself from doing.

If Orlando’s biographer moves beyond the methodological problems he enumerates by using the imagination, by adding a dash of the novelistic, there still remains the larger problem broached by *Jacob’s Room*: how does the biographer pierce

the “luminous halo”? The answer, it seems, is in reconceiving the parameters of the self. *Jacob’s Room* provides the germ of this change. At one point in *Jacob’s Room*, the narrator settles on Jinny Carslake, one of the many characters in the novel who appear only once or twice. She notes:

Then Jinny Carslake, after her affair with Lefanu the American painter, frequented Indian philosophers, and now you find her in pensions in Italy cherishing a little jeweler’s box containing ordinary pebbles picked off the road. But if you look at them steadily, she says, multiplicity becomes unity, which is somehow the secret of life, though it does not prevent her from following the macaroni as it goes round the table, and sometimes, on spring nights, she makes the strangest confidences to shy young Englishmen. (180)

One is tempted to treat this passage, particularly Jinny’s claim that the “secret of life” lies in seeing the “unity” of “multiplicity,” as pretentious, quasi-mystical nonsense. Indeed, it is difficult to take seriously a character so mystified by the passing of macaroni, and as Julie Kane has observed, Woolf, especially in her early work, had little sympathy for theosophists, spiritualists, or any of the other varieties of mystics that were fashionable in the first half of the century. Kane makes in so many words this same claim, arguing that in Jinny, Woolf was “mock[ing] a female character whose interests turned to Indian philosophy” (347). Certainly, the woman is painted as a kind of eccentric, but then so also are Mrs. Pascoe and Mrs. Jarvis, both of whom serve as veritable fountains of wisdom in the novel. Thus, it seems rash to discount Jinny’s claim merely on the basis of her questionable demeanor and tastes. Moreover, it seems clear that the idea of finding “multeity in unity,” to use Coleridge’s more familiar phrasing, is fundamental to Woolf’s artistic vision. As is often the case in her work (see, for example, the frequently gorgeous babbling of Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*), Woolf tucks this little gem in the margins, where we least expect to find it. One sees the centrality of this idea both in her

emphasis on perspective, which is a constant throughout the course of her *oeuvre* and in what I call for lack of a better term her latent Spinozism, typified in *The Waves*<sup>41</sup>, though discernible in most of her work. One could argue that even in *Jacob's Room*, where there is a great deal of multiplicity but seemingly no unity, the many impressions of Jacob the reader is offered constitute a kind of oneness, even if that oneness is not entirely satisfactory.

The view of the self expressed in *Orlando* seems directly related to this idea. Of course, in accordance with the duplicity of the text, there are a number of false characterizations that we must first overlook. (At one point the biographer avers, "life, it has been agreed upon by everyone whose opinion is worth consulting, is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer; life, the same authorities have decided, has nothing to do with sitting still in a chair and thinking" (197). Clearly this description is intended to discredit the conventional view of biography and says nothing about the actual constitution of the self.) That said, the biographer, in spite of himself, offers a more nuanced account of selfhood. The first insight he offers occurs early in the second chapter, after Orlando, quill in hand, suddenly pauses. The biographer speculates that this pregnant pause is a consequence of an irreducible heterogeneity essential to the human self:

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Louis's first soliloquy: "Flower after flower is specked on the depths of green. The petals are harlequins. Stalks rise from the black hollows beneath. The flowers swim like fish made of light upon the dark, green waters. I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre. All tremors shake me, and the weight of the earth is pressed to my ribs. Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing. I am a boy in grey flannels with a belt fastened by a brass snake up here. Down there my eyes are the lidless eyes of a stone figure in a desert by the Nile. I see women passing with red pitchers to the river; I see camels swaying and men in turbans. I hear tramlings, tremblings, stirrings round me."

Nature, who has played so many queer tricks upon us, making us so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite, and stuffed them into a case, often of the most incongruous, for the poet has a butcher's face and the butcher a poet's; nature, who delights in muddle and mystery, so that even now ... we know not why we go upstairs, or why we come down again, our most daily movements are like the passage of a ship on an unknown sea ... nature, who has so much to answer for besides the perhaps unwieldy length of this sentence, has further complicated her task and added to our confusion by providing not only a perfect ragbag of odds and ends within us ... but has contrived that the whole assortment shall be lightly stitched together by a single thread. Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. Thus, the most ordinary movement in the world, such as sitting down at a table and pulling the inkstand towards one, may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim, hanging and bobbing and dipping and flaunting, like the underlinen of a family of fourteen of a line in a gale of wind. (58)

This motley assortment of “clay and diamonds,” this “perfect ragbag of odds and ends,” is what it is the duty of the biographer to represent. To compound things further, motivation and volition are at the very least unidentifiable (she seems even to suggest nonexistent); thus, “our most daily movements are like the passage of a ship on an unknown sea.” As Nietzsche argued, the self is inextricably entangled in the world that at once surrounds and constitutes it. We can infer then that the conventional biographer imposes will where there is none, motive in lieu of indeterminacy—in short, structure on chaos. To attempt “to reconstruct a habitable dwelling place” for this “dancing light,” as Woolf says with reference to the Edwardians and their materialism, is thus not only futile; it is categorically dishonest, unnatural. This characterization of life does not bode well for any biographer, old or “new.”

What then is the “new” biographer to do with this fleeting and amorphous self? Orlando, who at this point seems also to be contemplating the ineffable, finds comfort in the image of “a shabby man with bright eyes” and in “the divine melody” of the words of

Sir Thomas Browne. The “shabby man,” we learn later, is none other than the bard himself, and Sir Thomas Browne, whose “sublime genius” (“Elizabethan Lumber Room”), particularly in *Religio Medici*, exemplified the kind of life-writing that was able to adumbrate the vibrant psychology that Woolf admired. About Sir Thomas Browne, Woolf writes in “The Elizabethan Lumber Room”, “His immense egotism has paved the way for all psychological novelists, autobiographers, confession-mongers, and dealers in the curious shades of our private life. He it was who first turned from the contacts of men with men to their lonely life within” (58). And later, in reference to *Religio Medici*, she remarks, “Whatever he writes is stamped with his own idiosyncrasy, and we first become conscious of impurities which hereafter stain literature with so many freakish colours that, however hard we try, make it difficult to be certain whether we are looking at a man or his writing” (59). Orlando finds solace in the image of Shakespeare and the words of Sir Thomas Browne because they, through imagination and art, are able to harness the unseen dynamism of the human spirit. They do so not through representation, as the biographer attempts, but instead by means of art. We “become conscious” of the life within through aesthetic impressions, not explication or representation.

Surely it is this idea that motivates Woolf to have Orlando undergo a sexual transformation: in doing so, she is able to accommodate for the androgyny of Vita Sackville-West; factuality is subordinated to the inner self of her subject and is thus transformed. One is reminded of Mrs. Flanders whose eyes, at the beginning of *Jacob's Room*, fill with tears: “The entire bay quivered; the lighthouse wobbled; and she had the illusion that the mast of Mr. Connor’s little yacht was bending like a wax candle in the

sun” (3). One’s inner self alters the world around it, even as the world reciprocally influences the self. Thus, we read *Orlando*, and as if through an inversion of the funhouse mirror, we see through the fantasy a more accurate image of a dynamic Vita Sackville-West. Supposing that Orlando’s gender remained uniform throughout, the priority would be reversed, and “life” would be subordinated to the unyielding and deceptive world of facts. As the biographer argues, “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. Of the complications and confusions which thus result every one has had experience” (139). Here we again see the self-reflexive manner in which the biographer stands in for Woolf, justifying her narrative choices with an astute observation completely at odds with his previous remarks about biography.

The biographer offers another important observation about the self toward the end of the novel. In this case, his description corresponds to the temporal liberties Woolf has taken in the narrative. According to the biographer, the self is a composite of a number of selves, each corresponding to different moments and aspects in the person’s life. Intuitively, this claim seems true, for most can attest to the different phases, different personae, etc. that constitute one’s life. What Woolf is suggesting here is that there is neither a one true self nor former selves. Each Orlando we encounter—from the adolescent slicing at the severed head of some “vast pagan” to Orlando the poet to Orlando the mother—each is constitutive of Orlando’s personhood. Thus, the biographer claims, “For if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not—Heaven help us—all having lodgment

at one time or another in the human spirit?" (225). Of Orlando, he observes, "she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand" (226). This statement, of course, is ironic, since the life the biographer relates to us is already repackaged—even reimagined—in such a way so as to find room for the many selves Sackville-West presumably possessed; in other words, the biographer's claim is superfluous.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Afterword

*“And what is eloquence that lacks peroration?”*

---Virginia Woolf (*Orlando*)

Much as Woolf expounded in “The New Biography,” *Orlando* thus points biography in the direction of fiction. The “biography” functions at once as a critique of Victorian biography and as a manifesto for the New Biography. The question then is: at what expense do we rewrite the factual history of a self in order to elicit his or her “real” life? Does not the disregard for fact render *Orlando*, in a sense, *lifeless*? The answer, I venture, is not easily identifiable. Woolf had warned in “The New Biography” that the truth of fact and the truth of fiction were antagonistic, that the combination of the two made for a volatile mixture always on the verge of combustion. And yet, she wrote, the biographer “is now more than ever urged to combine them” (100).

In “The Art of Biography,” written in 1939, Woolf still favors the biography that captures a sense of the inner life of its subject, but the tone of the essay is markedly more resigned. Whereas in “The New Biography,” the mixture of “granite and rainbow” seemed possible, in this later essay, Woolf goes out of her way to distance herself from this claim. Here the incompatibility of fact and fiction becomes increasingly clear. No longer is the biographer an artist; he is now a “craftsman,” “something betwixt and between” (122). No longer are “facts manipulated”; they are now respected as inviolable. The biographer’s goal now is to search out “the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that



creates and engenders” (123). The inner life is only available insofar as it is adumbrated by these “fertile facts.”

As Elizabeth Cooley points out, it is not unrelated that this dramatic shift in tenor coincides with the writing of *Roger Fry*, Woolf’s only serious biography. “Woolf is more absolute in her criteria for good biography,” speculates Cooley, “because she was struggling with the biography of Roger Fry” (74). One might also speculate that intimations of her own mortality and the brutal factuality of the Second World War, in which that “perfect ragbag of odds and ends” became entirely reducible to flesh, bones, and the inhuman statistics of body count, had also a role in her renewed attention to the harder world of fact. Whatever the case, *Roger Fry* consciously rejects the tenets set forth in “The New Biography.” It is a biography her father would have approved of, a biography of unadorned, largely uninterpreted, fact. Thus, we see Woolf toward the end of her career coming full circle, resorting ultimately to the very conventions she lambasts in *Orlando* and “The New Biography.” Critics, for obvious reasons—it is, after all, “factual”—have tended either to neglect or to disparage this last of Woolf’s foray into the ugly world of fact. Leon Edel calls the book “wooden” (98), and Hoberman points out that Woolf “was so traditional as to be reticent about [Fry’s] love affairs” (182). (Woolf’s own sister being among Fry’s many mistresses, this latter claim fact seems less alarming.) Nevertheless, it is clear that the theory of biography expounded so vehemently in her early years was eventually shelved, if not discredited, by Woolf.

This is not to say that Woolf gave up on the idea of the truth of fiction; she did, after all, continue writing fiction until her death. Indeed, novels like *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* seem very much in the biographical spirit, even if the boundaries of the

subject have at this point become nearly indistinguishable. Rather, it appears that *Fry* confirmed the fears expressed in *Jacob's Room*: the successful biography is itself a will-o'-the-wisp. It is, in other words, a chimera. One has to choose either the truth of fact or the truth of fiction, and as Woolf claimed, "the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life" (100).

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