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Virginia Woolf and the Biographical Form:
In Search of a Truthful Presentation of a Life

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Abstract

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By Cayla Bamberger

Critics have repeatedly written *Orlando* off as Virginia Woolf's least substantial novel, a "lark" and a "joke," or a "love letter" to her (at the time, an open-secret) girlfriend, Vita Sackville-West, who inspired the protagonist. *Orlando* is both a satire and a love letter, yes, but it is also an essential stepping stone in Woolf's career and her broader interest in capturing life on paper. Structured as a fictional biography, *Orlando* combines the two forms to come closer to "life" than any traditional biography (too absorbed in external "facts" and conventions) or Realist novel (too concerned with being representational and not committed to any real person) ever could.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Victorian Biographies, or “Life Writing” That Fails to Capture Life	8
The Subject: Great Lives of Great Men	11
The Structure: Standard Trajectories of Time	17
The Sound: Authoritative Voice and Evidence-Based Arguments	20
The Tug Between Fact and Fiction	25
Verifiable Truth and Its Limits	26
The “Ill-Fitting Vestments” for Unconventional Subjects	31
Embracing Fiction: The Bildungsroman	39
Why?	45
To Break Is To Create: Modernism’s Self-Critical Practice	47
“‘The Way to Stronger, More Expressive Art’	52
Expressions of Time	53
Of Gender	57
Of Personality	64
Works Cited	68

“Life? Literature? One to be made into the other? But how monstrously difficult!”

-Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

Introduction

“Biography sets out to tell you that a life can be described, summed up, packaged and sold,” asserts Hermione Lee, author of Virginia Woolf’s touchstone biography. “But Virginia Woolf spent most of her life saying that the idea of biography is—to use a word she liked—poppycock” (Lee, *Virginia Woolf* 4).

To this final statement, it would be nearly impossible for anyone familiar with Woolf’s work to disagree. In both her fiction and nonfiction, Woolf repeatedly brings attention to biography’s precarious position: its call (and fundamental failure) to reconcile solid “truth” and intangible “personality,” terms that she sets forth in her 1927 text “The New Biography.” The public perception of the form is that it will deliver a truthful, substantiated account of a person’s life; and yet, the genre sets forth a series of strict conventions, unadaptable to the individual, that do not account for the subject’s personality. The unimaginative biographies of Woolf’s time and the preceding Victorian era demand facts—but fact is not always synonymous with reality. Could a catalog of names and dates, events and accomplishments, ever truly capture the life of an individual?

Which leads us to the next obvious question: Why would Virginia Woolf—scholar, essayist, women’s activist, member of the Bloomsbury group, and co-owner of Hogarth Press—dedicate so much time to exploring a deeply flawed literary form? Not only did she write several nonfiction essays on the genre, but Woolf also wrote two “fictional biographies,” *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and *Flush: A Biography* (1933), and one traditional biography, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940). The first way to account for her ostensibly puzzling interest is to discredit *Orlando*, her best known of these works, all together. In a 1928 *Evening Standard* review, Arnold Bennett labelled *Orlando* “a high-brow lark”; in an issue of the *Observer* that same year,

J.C. Squire called the novel “a very pleasant trifle” (qtd. in Majumdar 232, 227). Also in 1928, Woolf herself writes of *Orlando* in her diary, “It is all a joke; & yet gay & quick reading I think; a writers holiday” (qtd. in DiBattista, “Introduction” xxxvii). But like a Duchamp, *Orlando* seems to walk the fine line between superficial “lark,” “trifle,” or “joke” and serious aesthetic statement. Meanwhile, other critics offer the explanation that Woolf’s father, the renowned Victorian biographer Leslie Stephen, prompted her interest in the genre. She writes of him in her autobiographical study “A Sketch of the Past” (1939-40): “Give him a character to explain, and he is (to me) so crude, so elementary, so conventional that a child with a box of chalks could make a more subtle portrait” (Woolf 146). Resembling the critiques of Victorian biographies that she had made earlier in “The New Biography,” Woolf judges her father’s work to be stifled by custom, the result being “so crude, so elementary, so conventional.” In his attempt to speak of his subject authoritatively, Stephen’s work fails so utterly to be artful that Woolf insists “a child with a box of chalks” could make a more clever portrait of his subject.

Although it would be irresponsible to claim that Stephen had no influence in his daughter’s interests, I defend that Woolf would not transgress tradition out of sheer pettiness towards her father. In *A Room of One’s Own*, she writes of defying conventional literary forms: “First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence. Very well, she has every right to do both these things if she does them not for the sake of breaking, but for the sake of creating” (Woolf 55). It is therefore possible to extrapolate that Woolf does not break the biographical form “for the sake of breaking”; rather, she is interested in breaking conventions for the sake of “creating” something new and improved. To entertain the notion for a moment longer that a woman can forge her *own* interests, apart from those formed under the guidance of a man (her father), and there are more compelling origins of Woolf’s fascination to consider. For one,

elsewhere in her career, Woolf is concerned with capturing human experiences on paper. In her 1921 essay “Modern Fiction,” Woolf argues that “the quality which distinguishes the work of several young writers,” of which she is a part, “from that of their predecessors” was an “attempt to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them, even if to do so they must discard most of the conventions” (150). Perhaps, then, Woolf’s attraction to biographies stems from a larger preoccupation with life writing, even at the expense of its conventions.

In particular, Woolf is remembered for writing the lives of middle-aged women—a group largely overlooked in Victorian literature. If Victorian fiction had a problem with gender, in that several novels with female protagonists featured young women and concluded with marriage (a storyline so redundant that it has since coined its own name: “the marriage plot”), in comparison, Victorian biographies were even *less* concerned with capturing the complexities of women’s lives, as will be discussed momentarily. For Woolf, biographies are in the privileged position of, at their core, being about life and character (two of the most prevalent concerns in her larger body of work); but traditional biographies had often neglected *women’s* lives and *female* characters. Accordingly, Woolf had the chance to right a wrong, to add marginalized stories to a recognized genre. From this perspective, the biographical form could be a natural point of departure for Woolf, an author interested in using language at its limits to depict human life—principally, women’s lives.

To provide context, Woolf developed her attachments to literature in the Victorian era, a time when biographies generally told the redacted and didactic stories of the public lives of great men (we will scrutinize these terms in a moment). As she grew into adulthood, Woolf’s world began to change—substantially. There was the first World War; with the conflict came the

introduction of poison gas and tanks. Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams* before the turn of the century; psychoanalysis became popular shortly thereafter. The women's suffrage campaign gained momentum; women got the right to vote and the chance to graduate from Oxford University. Considering the drastic changes of her time, both social and political, Woolf recognized the need for innovative literary forms to confront and decipher new realities. To accomplish the task at hand, her plan was to seek the ideal balance between fact and fiction that could most effectively represent modern realities. By embracing the centermost attribute of biographical writing—that is, narrating a life—and discarding Victorian biographies' defunct conventions, Woolf creates a new iteration of the genre that functions as a more expressive art, better suited to its alleged purpose. As a result, Woolf's experiment in fictional biographies was born.

For this project, I chose to focus on Woolf's most popular fictional biography, *Orlando: A Biography*. Woolf built the novel's foundation on fact, inventing a protagonist based on her on-and-off lover and constant close friend, the poet and novelist Vita Sackville-West. Additionally, many of the novel's events are rooted in real-life details from Sackville-West's and her ancestors' lives. The work surrounds the unconventional subject of Vita's fictional counterpart Orlando, who is born a man, supernaturally turned into a woman, and lives through four centuries. The narrator of this eccentric tale, Orlando's biographer is a hyper-masculine historian with traditional values, whose patience is tested as he tries to tell his subject's peculiar life. Throughout the novel, Orlando proves that his or her (depending on the section of the book) life cannot be effectively told using the limited tools of biographical writing. Ultimately, the text renders the mode, in its original form, ineffective: As Orlando transforms into a woman and chooses a life of solitude and contemplation over an existence characterized by big events and

exploits, the narrative moves further away from the Victorians' acceptable subject of the noteworthy man and his notable actions. More subtly, Woolf also comments on the realist novel's claim to be lifelike and its dependence on the similarly flawed biographical approach to storytelling. I argue that in being so idiosyncratic, so uninterested in the guise of realistic fiction, *Orlando* can be perceived as more "real" than both biographies and representational novels, because of its potential to comment on life as it is experienced.

Taken as a whole, this project aims to investigate three overarching questions: First, according to Woolf, why do biographies, in their traditional shape, fail to faithfully depict life? Second, how does Woolf revolutionize the genre? In addition to thinking about how Woolf reworks the biography through fictional techniques, I will also consider how she revises the representational novel and in particular, the realist Bildungsroman, which takes the biographical development of its fictional subject as an implicit structure. Third, if biographies are inherently problematic, why would Woolf use the form as a point of departure?

The first chapter of this paper will explore what it is about the biographical form that fails to achieve its stated goal: to present a truthful, written account of a person's life. Here, I look back on Victorian biographies, the form as it is written by great men, about great men, for great men. This overview of the genre's Victorian iteration emphasizes the elements that traditional biographical writing privileges: conventional and coherent subject matter, standard trajectories of time, verifiable facts, and authoritativeness. To build upon this argument, I will use excerpts from several of Woolf's meditations on the form's shortcomings, with an emphasis on her life writing manifesto, "The New Biography."

In the next chapter, I discuss the manner in which Woolf revolutionizes biographical writing with the injection of fiction and as a result captures the essence of her fictional subject

Orlando, based on Sackville-West. “Fiction is often her version of biography,” explains Lee. “*Orlando* makes an explicit game out of this relationship” (“Biography” 8). This chapter will include the bulk of my close reading of *Orlando* and in particular, passages that deal directly with the biographer’s voice as he tries to adhere to convention. However, as Orlando’s life proves impossible to capture through bits of verifiable information, the biographer begins to turn toward fiction to fill in the gaps in the facts and figures. I argue that regarded as a form of fiction, *Orlando* most directly resembles the Bildungsroman because of its investment in character development and maturation. Combining the biography and the Bildungsroman, Woolf creates a hybrid literary form that better examines human life than what the biography alone can accomplish.

In the last chapter, I question why Woolf, with knowledge of the biography’s interminable inadequacies, nonetheless explores the form in her work, both fictional and nonfictional. In response, I argue that Woolf is interested in undermining the traditional biography’s structure not out of a vindictive desire to break down established forms, but for the sake of creating something new and improved. By highlighting biographical writing’s defining attribute—that is, its design to tell a life story—and getting rid of the defunct, Woolf creates a new iteration of the genre that functions as a stronger, more expressive art, especially to tell stories that do not fit within the constraints of the male-dominated, action-oriented narrative that pervaded Victorian biographies.

Victorian Biographies, or “Life Writing” That Fails to Capture Life

“The days of Victorian biography are over,” Woolf declared in the late 1920s (“The New Biography” 155).

In “The New Biography,” Woolf reflects on the differences between nineteenth-century Victorian biographies and contemporary life writing of the twentieth century. In one of the most quoted portions of the text, she articulates:

On the one hand there is truth; on the other there is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it. (Woolf, “The New Biography” 149)

Woolf presents “truth” and “personality” in juxtaposition with each other, “on the one hand” and “on the other.” Using images of “granite” and “rainbow,” she describes truth as solid (firm and authoritative) and personality as intangible (abstract and elusive)—but no less real because of its indefinite nature. Woolf defines the aim of biographers to be “to weld” hard facts and character “into one seamless whole,” but laments that “biographers have for the most part failed” to do so successfully.

To substantiate her claim, Woolf references biographies of the past. Most interested in the recent precursors to the texts of her time, she directs the larger part of her focus to Victorian biographies. British historian Juliette Atkinson describes the “broad consensus” in *Victorian Biographies, Reconsidered*: “Victorian biographies are wordy hagiographical tomes penned by whitewashing amateurs” (1-2). Stereotypically, nineteenth-century biographies are regarded as the idealized accounts of the notable lives of exceptional people—time and time again, of men.

Often recounted through a series of facts and events, these lives are synthesized and presented as coherent narratives, capped with a lesson to be learned by its conclusion. The subject's stories are usually limited to their public lives, for which empirical evidence could be cited. The emphasis on the verifiable was essential to the biographer's presentation of the self as an expert on his subject: not a creator of characters, but rather a source of information. To further establish an air of authority, the Victorian biographer was inclined to adhere to a recognizable, academic structure, which featured a chronological arrangement of events and the now-caricatured formula of the two-volume life and letters format. Thus the biography came to be regarded as a source of indelible truth, an account that could be trusted; but as we will come to discuss, its veneer of objectivity can mislead.

Although the above description was the predominant view, as is often the case, the form was far more complex than its stereotype. Biographical writing prior to the nineteenth century was regarded as a subsection of historical texts, composed with a special focus on an individual of historical importance, but that was beginning to change in the Victorian era. "Victorian biographers were interested in hidden lives," Atkinson writes, reassessing the genre's reputation, "the lives of failures, and the lives of humble men and women" (3). She recounts:

From the 1830s, reviewers began to note a startling growth in the publication of biographies of subjects with little or no claim to fame. Alongside the traditional lives of monarchs, politicians, military leaders, and writers, appeared biographies of missionaries, clergymen, surgeons, doctors, schoolmasters, ploughmen, temperance workers, shoemakers, and failed artists of varying degrees of fame, fortune, and ability. They included biographies of men but also lives of women. (Atkinson 30)

As Atkinson highlights, coinciding with the beginning of the Victorian era¹, the lives of hitherto ignored people began to appear more frequently "alongside the traditional lives" of leaders and

¹ For reference, the exact period of Queen Victoria's reign over England was from 1837 to 1901.

scholars. These included biographies on religious figures, medical professionals, educators, laborers and craftsmen, who were often men but could be women, too.

Woolf cannot and does not disagree with Atkinson's point. Although her argument in "The New Biography" is often reduced to her criticism, Woolf does acknowledge that Victorian biographers sometimes incorporated unconventional subjects into their work. In the report, Woolf writes:

Biography all through the nineteenth century concerned itself as much with the lives of the sedentary as with the lives of the active. It sought painstakingly and devotedly to express not only the outer life of work and activity but the inner life of emotion and thought. The uneventful lives of poets and painters were written out as lengthily as the lives of soldiers and statesmen. ("The New Biography" 150)

Atkinson's information does not depend upon recent discoveries; Woolf was well informed and aware of these popular trends in Victorian biographical writing, even in the 1920s. In "The New Biography," she applauds nineteenth-century works' attention to "the lives of the sedentary" (equal to "the lives of the active") and to "the inner life of emotion and thought" (equal to "the outer life of work and activity"). She recalls that "the uneventful lives"—the word uneventful not taken to mean unimportant, but rather its literal definition: not marked by major events—"of poets and painters" were described as in-depth as "the lives of soldiers and statesmen." Despite her awareness of its successes, Woolf maintains that the Victorian biographical form still had its irrefutable faults:

But the Victorian biography was a parti-coloured, hybrid, monstrous birth. For though truth of fact was observed... the personality... was hampered and distorted. The convention which... had [been] destroyed settled again, only in a different form. ("The New Biography" 150-1)

Alleging that Victorian biographies were too absorbed in adhering to the tradition of "truth of fact," Woolf defends that subjects' personalities were largely ignored, "hampered" and "distorted." She concludes that strict biographical "convention," although transformed, "settled

again” or was nonetheless maintained throughout the Victorian era. To help explain this phenomenon, I will expand upon three significant categories of conventions—the subject matter, the structure, and the narrative voice—that presented themselves in most biographies published throughout the nineteenth century.

The Subject: Great Lives of Great Men

“What does a person have to do or be to merit one?” Phyllis Rose inquires in reference to biographies. She subsequently answers her own question: “Until recently, one thing you had to be—whatever your calling—was successful” (Rose 189). Disproportionately, Victorian biographers dedicated their careers to writing the lives of remarkable, noble subjects. In its most stock form, that entailed a man of prestige, “successful” in his respective vocation (which could vary). “The proper subject of biography, it seems, is a man who has some role in public life,” Alison Booth specifies. “Then as now, the public was fascinated by privileged personalities” (“Life Writing” 51, 57).

However, the Victorian standard for assessing the importance of men was not limited to conventional notions of success. Although these subjects included men from well-to-do families, the Victorians were even more enamored with people who came from little means and rose through the ranks of English society. Booth explains, “Far from being confined to fashionable circles, successful careers were more remarkable when there were class disadvantages to overcome” (“Life Writing” 57). The nineteenth-century biographies that fell into this mold would feature self-made Englishmen who worked hard and by their own wit, finally achieved renown. These subjects were not the kings and the conquerors, but instead, accomplished yet

earnest individuals—and such sincerity, for example, was one quality that commonly rendered a man “good” enough for biographical recognition.

“The Victorian biographer was dominated by the idea of goodness,” Woolf comments. “Noble, upright, chaste, severe; it is thus that the Victorian worthies are presented to us” (“The New Biography” 151). Like the more standard biographies that concerned themselves with the traditional lives of monarchs, politicians, and military leaders, the Victorian texts on less prominent lives nonetheless continued to feature representations of goodness (“noble, upright, chaste, severe”) as subjects. “Many of these works possess all the outward characteristics of the more traditional Victorian biographies,” observes Atkinson. “Like hero-worshipping biographies, they give credit to morality, temperance, and hard work and frequently seek to inspire a desire for emulation among their readers” (31). Atkinson’s reflections help to explain which subjects saw increased publication during the Victorian era: religious figures, medical professionals, educators, laborers and craftsmen, as she noted earlier. The biographical subjects of the nineteenth century might have been different from those of past generations, but the change was hardly radical. Victorian biographies continued to promote subjects worthy of “emulation,” embodiments of “morality, temperance, and hard work.” Even when the paradigm was no longer a person of action and power, the ideal subject was still one of virtue, perseverance, and intelligence—someone that nearly all Victorians, even the biographer, would admire and be inspired to emulate. “The biographer was a man of lesser talent who wrote the life of a more famous and greater man,” notes Atkinson, highlighting even the biographer’s reverence for his subject (22).

That the Victorian biographer sought “to inspire a desire for emulation” speaks to the form’s didactic potential (Atkinson 31). Atkinson adds: “Biography, far from being concerned

solely with how lives were written, could modify the way in which lives were lived” (29). Expressing a similar sentiment, Booth reframes the act of telling life stories as an “instrument of reform, whether religious, educational, economic or electoral” (“Life Writing” 58). In accordance with Atkinson’s and Booth’s theories, several Victorian biographies sought to teach “greatness,” such as two standard sketches of notable men from the era, *Glimpses of Great Men* (1853) and *The Great Triumphs of Great Men* (1975)—case-in-point, the very titles of these volumes (Atkinson 47). Taken as a whole, the Victorian biographies fashioned subjects—derived from real people, but likely not much more than that—that could inspire masses of English readers. The figures were impressive but recognizable men, and made one believe that with a little effort and following these men’s lead, you too could be successful (and perhaps worthy of your own biography someday).

One esteemed Victorian biographer who was particularly enamored with the notion of the great man to be emulated was Thomas Carlyle. A Scottish philosopher and writer, Carlyle developed what has been termed “The Great Man Theory” in his book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841). Booth writes on Carlyle:

If any one person represents life writing in the Victorian age—and it is very *Victorian* to personify cultural history—it is Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). A historian and biographer who had the podium of public debate for decades, Carlyle subscribed to the idea that individuals can stand for the spirit of an age. It was Carlyle who, in the first lecture collected in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), wrote, ‘the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here.’ (“Life Writing” 59)

Carlyle’s great man theory argues that to a large extent, the history of the world can be explained by the impact of influential, heroic men. To exemplify his hypothesis, Carlyle introduces Abbot Samson of Tottington, an English Benedictine monk that serves as a model of leadership in his 1843 book *Past and Present*. Carlyle lauds the medieval abbot for encompassing that which his

Victorian contemporaries lack: Samson prioritizes beliefs over abstract movements and action over rhetoric, and he inspires the community over which he presides. The biographer presents Samson as the perfect example of a great man for the impoverished people of England (who at the time, were in a period of economic crisis) to emulate. If Carlyle is the individual that “represents life writing in the Victorian age,” a claim clearly laden in rhetoric but based in truth, we can further understand why Victorian biographies are reputed to be taken with these “great men.” Regarded as more than subjects of a certain genre of books, these men were deemed the shapers of history and the unequaled leaders to be followed.

I have addressed several of the subjects that met with increased publication throughout the Victorian era (the missionaries, clergymen, surgeons, doctors, schoolmasters, ploughmen, temperance workers, shoemakers, and artists), but there is another group that Atkinson reconsiders that I have not yet mentioned—the female subjects. Recall: “Reviewers began to note a startling growth in the publication of biographies of subjects with little or no claim to fame,” Atkinson asserts. “They included biographies of men but also lives of women” (30). More specifically, she relates:

As more women participated in the kind of activities that were deemed of sufficient significance for biographical commemoration, such as nursing, missionary work, or teaching, they appeared more frequently as subjects. (Atkinson 22)

Atkinson’s argument suggests that as more women participated in action-based and hero-like activities, pursuits which had already been “deemed of sufficient significance of biographical commemoration” for men, female subjects increased in popularity. As I understand it, the trend does not entail an increase in publication of biographies that address women in general, but rather, the woman that fits into a male mold. That being the case, I find it quite difficult to accept the claim that biographies meaningfully made space for women in the nineteenth century.

First, the more conventional lives of women, in which motherhood and running the family home were often central, continued to be largely ignored throughout the genre. Additionally, when women *did* do waged work outside the home, their jobs were commonly in trades associated with female skills or inclinations—in the textile and clothing sector, metalwares and pottery work, and in a variety of local trades (such as food and drink, seamstressing, laundry work, cleaning, and retail)—but not vocations typically associated with biographical remembrance (Hudson). Politely, Atkinson discusses the problem with biographies on Victorian women: “Biographers were repeatedly presented with the challenge of constructing a narrative from a life containing much that appeared trivial” (146). Atkinson describes writing “a life containing much that appeared trivial” as a “challenge” for the biographer; however, I would rephrase her sentiment a little less graciously. Victorian biographers struggled to construct a “narrative” out of women’s lives, a difficulty that speaks to biases of both the biographers and the general public that have historically deemed activities understood as feminine to be of little importance. There are most certainly stories to be found in common women’s lives (for confirmation, see Virginia Woolf’s oeuvre); rather, the “challenge” was that these stories did not fit the male mold and were thus deemed “trivial.” It is not the lives themselves, but the public’s reception of women’s narratives that posed a problem for female biographies.

Second, even though the woman that attained biographical recognition needed to resemble the great man’s precedent, she nonetheless had to stop short of encroaching on historically male territory. Noting Atkinson’s aforementioned list of “the kind of activities that were deemed of sufficient significance for biographical commemoration”: she was the nurse, while he was the doctor; she the missionary, while he the priest; and she the teacher, while he the professor (22). She had to *resemble* the male mold, she could not *surpass* it—that would be a

threat and assumedly, not a very marketable book. Furthermore, if she did manage the impractical balance (of being neither too trivial nor too great), she still might not secure biographical appreciation. For one, works focused on women's lives were often published and disseminated informally. Atkinson acknowledges: "Many of them were short sketches and pamphlets, and many were circulated only locally or within a network of family and friends" (30). Two, if projects that centered on women did make it to formal publication, several were denied the distinction of the label "history." Atkinson explains:

Accounts of female historical figures by writers such as Agnes Strickland and Julia Kavanaugh were an important nineteenth century development, but were condescendingly denied the status of history and given the more amateurish label of memoirs. (147)

Atkinson references the female historical figures in works from Strickland, author of the twelve volumes of *Lives of the Queens of England* (1840-1848), and Kavanaugh, author of *Women in France during the Eighteenth Century* (1850) and *Women of Christianity* (1852). She highlights that even these women of undeniable consequence were treated "condescendingly." Denied the cachet of the terms "history" and "biography," these books were labelled "more amateurish" and "memoirs." Rare enough as they were, biographies on women were thus largely ignored by scholars and critics, and achieved little commercial success.

Unlike biographies from centuries past, greatness in the nineteenth century could be defined in several different ways, from fame and wealth, to hard work and occupational success, to unparalleled virtue and devotion. This development opened up the standards for who could be considered worthy of biographical recognition, but not as much as one might believe at first glance. The rules and regulations of traditional biographies were not demolished; rather, these conventions were altered in noticeable but ultimately nominal ways. As a result, the call for male subjects was transformed to include some women, but not substantially in practice: the female

subjects still needed to lead lives that followed archetypically male trajectories. Ultimately, Victorian biographies were not revolutionary, but instead cemented preexisting standards and principles of the time. Rose acutely articulates this problem:

Biography is still shaking off assumptions about fit subjects closer to those of classical tragedy, which dealt only with royalty and heroes, although, to satisfy our secular sense of the sacred, it has traditionally added artists and writers. In biography, the bourgeois-democratic revolution is just beginning. (192)

It is important to note that Rose reflects that “biography is *still* shaking off assumptions about fit subjects” (italics added) in 1989, over six decades after the publication of *Orlando*. In other words, biography’s problem of the privileged subject did not disappear with the end of the Victorian era.

The Structure: Standard Trajectories of Time

Victorian biographies’ uncompromising constitution is not just limited to subject matter. If the prevailing biographical subject was the great man, the prevailing biographical structure is chronological time. The basic premise is that in biographies, time unfolds in a linear fashion from the event of the subject’s birth to the occasion of the subject’s death. Rose humorously explains:

Biography has tended to begin placidly and obediently at the start of the subject’s life, to proceed in an orderly and annual fashion, and to conclude with his death. If one volume concerns The Middle Years, you can be sure there will be others about The Early Years and The Later. (193)

Perhaps the most telling details of the quotation are the adverbs that Rose includes: “placidly,” “obediently,” and “orderly.” Together, these three words sum up the effect of biography’s rigid structure—serious, dutiful, and organized. If I could add one more term to the list, it would be

‘predictable.’ Rose wittily guarantees that with one volume called “The Middle Years,” two more titled “The Early Years” and “The Later” can be expected alongside.

The general aim of the Victorian biography is not to be experimental, but to relay the facts of a person’s life, and to do so chronologically served the biographer fine. Rose relates what she judges to be the “archetypical biographical plot”:

The subject is born, has a childhood full of latent talent; in early adulthood, the subject has troubles, but they are overcome; his talent, like a bulb pushing its stalk up through the ground, inevitably expresses itself. And, like a flower, his talent after a while withers, and the writer dies. (194)

However, when it comes to capturing a life, which is more than a series of facts, there are several drawbacks to the genre’s fixed structure and rigid approach to time. Most apparently, there is the problem that predictable structures get old quickly and are (arguably) quite dry. Rose’s conception of the standard biographical plot is so recognizable that it has become trite, which she aptly expresses through a banal flower metaphor. However, the problem of more consequence is the framework’s inability to adapt to different lives—because all life stories are different and therefore might be best told in different ways. This “bulb-pushing-its-stalk-up-through-the-ground” chronological narrative might not be the life story of the unconventional subject. Any step along the way can break with this one trajectory: perhaps the child discovers his talent at a young age, perhaps the child never realizes an impressive talent. Perhaps the subject’s troubles come earlier or later in life, perhaps they never come at all or they are never overcome. What if the troubles come and go, and then later come and go again. Maybe the subject dies before his talent is ever expressed. (Maybe, just maybe, the subject does not go by the pronouns “he,” “him,” and “his.”) To account for these differences between lives, any number of things with relation to time might be changed: the biographer might limit the narrative to only one phase of a

person's life, reach before and beyond the years that the subject lived, or organize the volume based on key concerns, to name a couple possibilities.

Posing yet another problem for rigid designs, time is also not as straightforward as the linear motion of chronological structures would suggest. Lived time is not a series of uniform intervals, but a jumbled and incoherent collection of moments, felt differently by disparate people at distinct instances. Rose writes:

In the great age of modernism, novelists like Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner were fascinated by the distinction between external and internal time, between time measured by clocks and time perceived by an individual, speeding up or slowing down in response to emotions, looping through past to future as memory and anticipation, those radical processes of the brain, destroyed the present and with it conventional chronology. (193)

Rose calls attention to “the distinction between external and internal time,” a concept that Woolf explores throughout much of her work. On the one hand, there is external time, which continues to run steadily: the tick of a clock, the passing of a day, the changing of the seasons. On the other hand, there is internal time, which is subject to the individual's perception and subjective experience. Meanwhile, the Victorian biographies implicitly regard external time as the singular conception of how time can unfold. However, the Victorian great man's experience of time, and that of the nineteenth-century housewife, to use one example of an atypical subject, are often not the same. This phenomena can even be experienced within one life: This woman's Thursday might pass slowly as she spends it doing tedious small chores, and her Friday might fly by as she has a list of things to do to prepare for that night's festivities. Time can feel very different to people who lead divergent lives, or to the same person in discrete moments. Time passes differently when we are active and when we are still, or when we are engaged and when we are bored. To make matters more complicated, as several writers and thinkers have been pointing out for centuries, the present moment is consistently shaped by the past (by memories) and the future

(by our abilities to anticipate what is to come). Although the body will be physically rooted in one moment, the mind can move to another point in time. Thus the Victorian biographer's "conventional chronology" is "destroyed"; thus we must admit that most lives cannot be well told by means of a linear form.

The Sound: Authoritative Voice and Evidence-Based Arguments

Much like the commitment to the traditional subject and the chronological retelling of events, following the conventions of historical life writing, the Victorian biographer is encumbered by the explicit demands of factual accuracy. Woolf explains in "The New Biography":

Victorian biographers are laden with truth. The truth which biography demands is truth in its hardest, most obdurate form; it is truth as truth is to be found in the British Museum; it is truth out of which all vapour of falsehood has been pressed by the weight of research. (151)

In Victorian life writing, objective truth "in its hardest, most obdurate form" reigned supreme. Woolf describes this form of truthfulness as "truth is to be found in the British Museum"; in evidence, artifacts, and "research." The fundamental problem with such an approach to biographical writing is that this particular version of truthfulness is constricted to the realm of the verifiable, and that is not the only form of truth to exist.

An influence of Woolf's and a fellow member of the Bloomsbury group, English writer and critic Lytton Strachey was particularly interested in the Victorian biographer's feigned objectivity. In the preface to his book *Eminent Victorians* (1918), a collection of short biographical sketches that pokes fun at the major figures of the nineteenth century, he defines one of the duties of the biographer:

...is to maintain his own freedom of spirit. It is not his business to be complimentary; it is his business to lay bare the facts of the case, as he understands them. That is what I have aimed at in this book—to lay bare the facts of some cases, as I understand them, dispassionately, impartially, and without ulterior intentions. To quote the words of a Master—‘Je n’impose rien; je ne propose rien: j’expose.’

Humorously adapting the authoritative and imperturbable voice of the Victorian biographer, Strachey speaks about his “business” as a biographer to “lay bare the facts... dispassionately, impartially, and without ulterior intentions.” Through the guise of an exaggerated detachment, Strachey mocks the overwhelming trend amongst biographers to sing the praises of their subjects and “be complimentary.” He ironizes the biographer’s belief that one could ever provide a simple transcription of a person’s life, without making a series of active choices—what anecdotes to include, what stories to leave out, who to present on these pages.

To understand Strachey’s quip, there are a couple of things that must be noted. The first is that the French excerpt, for which the biographer cites “a Master,” is completely fabricated—there is no great Frenchman from whom this passage was recounted. Our biographer has *already* deceived us, and this quotation is from the work’s preface. Secondly, in composing his impressionistic portraits, Strachey only consulted one or two primary sources on each of his subjects, and did not even insist that these texts be reliable. “Strachey did no primary research,” John Sutherland notes in an introduction to the work. “If it was not printed, for him it did not exist. And many printed resources he ignored” (xvii). Sutherland expounds:

Eminent Victorians is not, we deduce, the work of a stickler for historical fact, documentary trustworthiness, or modern standards of scholarly citation. Art, yes. Any amount of effort was lavished in that department. But accuracy was something else. (xiii)

By almost completely letting go of “historical fact” and “documentary trustworthiness” in his creative biography, Strachey effectively demonstrates the inherent failure of the form to be objective, even though the nonfiction genre claims to be rooted exclusively in fact. However, in

letting go of verifiable truths, perhaps Strachey gave us one of the earliest honest biographies, one that does not claim to be honest in the first place. Ultimately, Sutherland deems *Eminent Victorians* “a work which spectacularly subverted the certainties on which the Victorian age,” and presumably, its literature, “was founded” (viii).

However, the Victorian biographer had good reason to take on an authoritative voice and feign objectivity, stemming from a deeper desire to present himself as a source to be trusted. Biographers in the nineteenth century were mostly respected for demonstrating knowledge of the genre and for best handling its formal conventions, not for being the writers that experimented with its structure (Atkinson 4). Being a form of nonfiction, the biography’s very ability to *be* a biography is dependent on the reader’s faith in the author’s adherence to his presumed purpose—that what is printed has been proven true; that it all ‘really happened.’ Atkinson explains, “Practitioners of the genre sought to present themselves as cultural authorities providing a commentary on contemporary society and their own role within it” (4). If biographers fail to present themselves as “cultural authorities” and experts on their subjects, all their work could be for naught. Given the societal expectation that these texts would present truth, one that seemed not to do so would fail to fit into the genre at all.

While it might help the biographer garner cultural esteem, prioritization of the verifiable truth over its alternative forms ultimately fails to depict most unconventional subjects. Reliant on documentation and available material, the Victorian biographer, to borrow Woolf’s words, “must toil through endless labyrinths and embarrass himself with countless documents” (“The New Biography” 151). Because he is limited to what can be proven, the biographer must exclude an exploration of the subject’s temperament, descriptions which cannot be corroborated without reservations through hard evidence such as facts, events, dates, and numbers. Woolf describes

the experience of reading a Victorian biography: “We go seeking disconsolately for voice or laughter, for curse or anger, for any trace that this fossil was once a living man” (“The New Biography” 151). Woolf suggests that the Victorian biographer is too consumed by reality that, in a way, his subject becomes flat, unfamiliar, or *unreal*. The result of this weddedness to verifiable fact is that the biographer fails to encapsulate human life and its many facets: “voice,” “laughter,” “curse,” or “anger.” Instead, he presents his subject as a “fossil,” without “any trace” of what “was once a living man.” On the whole, the biographer practically leaves his subject to pass on, rather than revive him with spirit and liveliness, as inventive biography can do through description and creative illustration.

The Victorians’ emphasis on verifiability through documentation and records also meant a serious setback for women—for whom these materials often did not exist. Since most women spent the bulk of their time in the home or doing undocumented work, they lack hard evidence (like dates and numbers) and paper trails to show for their lives. Woolf herself comments upon this problem with regard to female homemakers:

But what do [women] do then? If one asked her, longing to pin down the moment with date and season, but what were you doing on the fifth of April 1868, or the second of November 1875, she would look vague and say that she could remember nothing. For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it... All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded. (*A Room of One’s Own* 87-8)

There is a greater sense of transience in the daily activities of women, especially homemakers, and the result is that the robust forms of biography and history do not have “a word to say” about their lives. Even when women were employed outside of the home, one of the most significant problems that faced their biographers is the absence of reliable information about that work. Since 1841, when *Occupation* was first included as a category, the British census has been a

logical source to consult first for information on a person's work; however, the details provided in the census are historically far more accurate for men than for women (Hudson). That might be because women's work was often part-time and informal, or for a family-run business, and not regarded as serious enough to declare in the census. The most extreme (and far less common) instances that contributed to failed reporting included illegal work (such as prostitution or off-the-book sweatshops, to name a few) or instances in which women preferred to keep their work secret from their husbands (Hudson). Without the official papers, the journals and newspapers, and the certificates and legal agreements, women found almost no place in the rigorous Victorian biographies that demanded corroboration.

These were the qualities of numerous biographies that Woolf would have grown up reading or learning about from her father. Because of the form's commitment to rigid traditions, Victorian biographies failed to depict lives, real lives, of most groups of people. Overlooking unconventional subject matter and the experience of time, and reliant on verifiable and therefore external realities, it is no wonder why biographies, for Woolf, did not convincingly capture "truth" and "personality."

The Tug Between Fact and Fiction

“Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another” (qtd. in Minow-Pinkey 118). Originally written in her diary, that is Woolf’s private description of *Orlando: A Biography*—fact; only with a touch of fiction. The mock-biographical novel is largely based on the writer Vita Sackville-West, Woolf’s close friend and on-and-off lover. From the real person and from her life and lineage, Woolf borrows the setting of Knole (the Sackville’s ancestral home), Queen Elizabeth’s visit to the family estate, the time abroad in Turkey, the stint with the gypsies, and the legal suit to determine the rightful heir of Knole, amongst other anecdotes (DiBattista, “Introduction” xliv). Alongside these hard facts, Woolf adds something unexpected; Vita’s character was to supernaturally transform from a man to a woman. Although she included several substantiated details from Vita’s life in her narrative, as Elizabeth Cooley explains, “Woolf wanted to go beyond facts, beyond the ‘granite’ of Vita’s personality.” (75) To capture the ‘rainbow,’ the intangible but nonetheless real qualities of a real person, Woolf turns to fiction.

Highlighting the central paradox of a genre that regularly falls short at its reputed intent, Woolf develops *Orlando*’s narrator, an ironic, Victorian biographer—traditional and conscientious, but utterly baffled by his subject. The biographer does all that is within his power to tell a coherent and synthesized narrative of a heroic man and his notable life. He includes segments from documents and embeds photographs (both fictions) throughout the text to verify his account; he follows a recognizable, chronological format to relay the narrative of Orlando’s life; and he seeks to present himself as an authority on his subject, until Orlando proves that he is neither conventional nor predictable enough to be grasped through the traditional biographical

style. By embracing fiction and creating the character of the biographer, Woolf comments upon the nonfiction form's shortcomings in telling a life.

Verifiable Truth and Its Limits

As discussed last chapter, the Victorians prioritized one form of truth over another: truth which could be corroborated through hard evidence, set in contrast with intangible, abstract, and elusive realities. But to leave out this entire subset of truth is to do the genre a substantial disfavor; to omit so large a part of life is to flounder at the original task itself. Despite the biographer's initial, albeit insecure, optimism in his abilities to narrate Orlando's life, the tale he must recount becomes increasingly impossible to share through the Victorian mode of telling. This trouble brings the biographer to a halt when Orlando, heartbroken from his failed relationship with Sasha, the daughter of a Muscovite Ambassador, falls into a deep slumber for a full week, without medical explanation. The narrator shares:

Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write finis on the tombstone above our heads. But now we come to an episode which lies right across our path, so that there is no ignoring it... Our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may. (Woolf, *Orlando* 49)

Orlando's biographer maintains that thus far, he has abided by his Victorian predecessors' conventions and configured his narrative around "documents." He explains that this is the "first duty" of the biographer: to "plod" forward in pursuit of "truth"—that is, truth of fact. He describes the biographer's process as a linear motion forward, without "looking to right or left" or the distractions of "flowers" and "shade." Perhaps these 'diversions,' not rooted in hard evidence—including theories, conjectures, and insights into the subject's private life—could be

of service to the book, but the narrator chooses to treat the Victorian biographical style as decree. He aspires to write “methodically” until he reaches the culmination of his narrative with the end of his subject’s life. But the caricatured biographer that Woolf crafts is quickly disoriented; without a scientific explanation as to how it is possible to sleep for a week, he lacks the tools to pick up where the proof has left off—tools from fiction. The biographer, who was supposed to be an authority on his subject, offers “to state the facts” and “let the reader make of them what he may,” and then quickly scurries away from the topic that he cannot explain.

What the biographer does not recognize is that “up to this point in telling the story of Orlando’s life,” he has already engaged in a sort of fiction-making. Through the process of selecting which parts of Orlando’s life to include in his narrative, the biographer has been creating character, not unlike a novelist. In her nonfiction, Woolf explains:

So drastic is the process of selection that in its final state we can often find no trace of the actual scene upon which the chapter was based. For in that solitary room, whose door the critics are for ever trying to unlock, processes of the strangest kind are gone through. Life is subjected to a thousand disciplines and exercises. It is curbed; it is killed. It is mixed with this, stiffened with that, brought into contrast with something else; so that when we get our scene at a café a year later the surface signs by which we remembered it have disappeared. (“Modern Fiction,” 41-2)

Woolf argues that life, once one attempts to put it down on paper, is always altered. “Subjected to a thousand disciplines and exercises,” it is impossible to directly transmit the human experience through the written word. Woolf goes so far as to maintain that in a work’s “final state,” there is often “no trace of the actual scene upon which the chapter was based.” In *Orlando*, this “process of selection,” the conscious decisions the fictional author has to make about what to include and what to give little attention to or to gloss over entirely, has already shaped the narrative, which the biographer defends has hitherto been rooted in “truth” and evidence. In her nonfiction survey of Victorian biographers, Juliette Atkinson notes: “It became

apparent that the meaning imposed on a life was not fixed but was instead a matter of opinion” (26). Like the Victorian biographers, *Orlando*’s narrator has chosen to depict his subject’s life one specific way and attach a meaning that is “a matter of opinion.” Despite a guise of objectivity, the subject’s essence, as one encounters it on the page, is the biographer’s construction, and therefore not substantially different from the novelists’ fabricated characters. Phyllis Rose adds, “In choosing to include this and not that, you have, at every moment, to invoke the authority of a chosen design, an intent to create such a portrait but not another” (198). Through these choices, the biographer repeatedly mediates the reader’s perception of his subject’s life, creating one “portrait,” “not another”—conceivably, equally defensible—depiction. “To plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth” renders itself impossible; it is a fiction of the biographer’s to think such total detachment attainable (Woolf, *Orlando* 49). Rather, the biographical form, even though it is nonfiction, makes use of techniques that resemble fiction’s approach to character creation. The biographer’s very decision to write a book on Orlando in the first place was spurred by opinion; he had to deem *this* life story to be worth telling before he (fictitiously) took pen to paper.

On the biographer continues, in either ignorance or a stubborn unwillingness to dispose of the inherited form’s shortcomings. He writes:

It is, indeed, highly unfortunate, and much to be regretted that at this stage of Orlando’s career, when he played a most important part in the public life of his country, we have least information to go upon. We know that he discharged his duties to admiration — witness his Bath and his Dukedom. We know that he had a finger in some of the most delicate negotiations between King Charles and the Turks — to that, treaties in the vault of the Record Office bear testimony. But the revolution which broke out during his period of office, and the fire which followed, have so damaged or destroyed all those papers from which any trustworthy record could be drawn, that what we can give is lamentably incomplete... We have done our best to piece out a meagre summary from the charred fragments that remain; but often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to use the imagination. (Woolf, *Orlando* 88)

The biographer expresses that it is “unfortunate” and “much to be regretted” that at the time Orlando had the most political power, there is little documentation to bear witness to his report. He lists what “we know” and how we came to know it, but recounts that a revolution and a fire ruined the materials from which “any trustworthy record” could be determined. Compelled to express his grievances, he notes that his account will be “lamentably incomplete” and little more than a “meagre summary.” Having delayed a confession for long enough, the biographer must finally admit: “Often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to use the imagination.” Whereas he had previously maintained that he would “state the facts as far as they are known” and nothing more, the biographer now concedes that he has “*often*” (emphasis added) needed to construct stories out of the amount that is known (Woolf, *Orlando* 49, 88). We have a word for this guessing, inferential approach to writing, rooted more in the imagination than in hard evidence—fiction. More specifically, it is the fictional form of the novel; it is narrative interested in asserting some degree of realism. The biographer must confess that “it is with fragments” of corroborated truth that “we must do our best to make up a picture of Orlando’s life and character at this time” (Woolf, *Orlando* 92). From the handful of verifiable details that he possesses, the biographer must add to them his impressions of Orlando’s character and his interpretation of what the facts entail.

From this point onward, the biographer’s task is only further complicated. Though he struggled to write when limited to damaged documents, the biographer is even less prepared to give reports of the stretches of his subject’s life for which no factual evidence ever existed. Thus is the biographer’s plight as he is obliged to provide context for something intangible—London society at the turn of the eighteenth century. He writes:

To give a truthful account of London society at that 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. (Woolf, *Orlando* 141)

The biographer defends that it is “beyond the powers of the biographer” to relate a “truthful account of London society.” Instead, he hands off the task to “the poets and the novelists,” who, he defends, “have little need of the truth, and no respect for it”—because a “truth” of something as elusive as society, he announces, “does not exist.” To reword, because society is not a tangible concept and its qualities cannot be explicated through the use of literal language, for this biographer, it ceases to exist. However, shortly after announcing that “nothing exists,” he reworks his argument, noting that “the whole thing is a miasma—a mirage.” At this moment, the biographer begins to change his tone. Despite himself, the biographer embarks on a lengthy meditation regarding the effects of society on the individual. “There is an essential contradiction in *Orlando*’s biographer,” explains Elizabeth Cooley. “While he superficially follows the traditional rules of biography, while he disparages poets and novelists for trying to express more than they can know, he blatantly defies his own rules” (Cooley 76). Without doing so explicitly, the biographer admits the necessity of something beyond material facts to provide critical context for Orlando’s life, because to understand the subject, one needs to understand the space that the individual occupies. Once his ruminations have gone on for longer than is appropriate for archetypal biography, he comes to the end of this train of thought:

At one and the same time, therefore, society is everything and society is nothing. Society is the most powerful concoction in the world and society has no existence whatsoever. Such monsters the poets and the novelists alone can deal with; with such something-nothings their works are stuffed out to prodigious size; and to them with the best will in the world we are content to leave it. (Woolf, *Orlando* 142)

The narrator concludes that society has immeasurable power and dominion, but no physical presence—a notion that he, obsessed with the external and empirically proven, can hardly bear.

He decides that he wants nothing more to do with this pontification, and again calls upon “the poets and the novelists,” the specialists in “something-nothings” (intended as an insult, but sounding more like a compliment when we imagine Woolf, behind the biographer, writing the scene), to continue on the topic from here.

In telling Orlando’s life, the narrator continually finds himself up against the boundaries of the biographical form. With content limited to the realm of the verifiable, the biographer recognizes and eventually admits that there is much more to Orlando’s life than that which can be proven by irrefutable evidence. Although he tries to stop himself, the biographer naturally gravitates towards things that he cannot explain, from anecdotes that he does not have the documents to corroborate, to matters for which such documentation never existed. In piecing together one possible representation of Orlando, filling in the space between what is known with his best guesses, and considering large philosophical questions, such as how an individual relates to his society, the dutiful biographer strays away from Victorian biographical writing and towards Modernist novelistic practices. To reiterate the obvious, however, the biographer is not the legitimate author of *Orlando*. Through the creation of a bewildered narrator with several values that stand in direct contrast with her own, Woolf satirizes the biographical voice: its claim of absolute knowledge and expertise when in fact, he too struggles to understand his subject, to piece together a real person, from a heap of verifiable evidence.

The “Ill-Fitting Vestments” for Unconventional Subjects

Looking to the “monstrous birth” (as she deems it in “The New Biography”) of the Victorian biography, Woolf recognizes that the genre necessitated an intervention (150). Even though it opened itself up to subjects that never would have been included in biographical works

previously, the nineteenth-century iteration of the form had its own host of problems. Most notably, the *great man* narrative still persisted, only transformed. Even if the man no longer had to be one of action and exploits, he still needed to embody a new version of “great”—that which became “goodness.” Without the status of worthiness for emulation, the individual would cease to be a suitable subject for the Victorian biographer at all. Be that in traditional triumphs (in war, romance, or occupation), or in admirable qualities (temperance, loyalty, perseverance, or intelligence, to just name a few that first come to mind), the central personage had to be notable. And in these rare situations in which the subject was called “her,” she was bound by definitions of “goodness” that were long-established and solidified by the genre’s forefathers and for male subjects. In turn, it is difficult to unequivocally applaud the Victorians’ strides; to include female subjects, but to cram them into the “ill-fitting vestments as we provide” (as Woolf calls established literary structures in “Modern Fiction”) is not that large a favor (160). In sympathy with the modern authors whose creativities get stifled by these outdated conventions, Woolf remarks, “The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability” (“Modern Fiction” 160).

Despite the challenges present in telling the unusual life story of his subject, Woolf’s satiric narrator begins the novel in an ardent attempt to follow these rules of biography, without incorporating tools from fiction to account for his peculiar subject. The book begins with Orlando as a child, “in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters” (Woolf, *Orlando* 11). Throughout the first chapter, the biographer does his best to adhere to biographical conventions, speaking authoritatively about sixteen-year-old Orlando, a young boy destined for greatness. Orlando practices for battle with his blade, he is beloved by the Queen of

England, he lives through the well-documented Great Frost, and falls in love with an ambassador's daughter. The biographer can handle these elements of the story—combat, royalty, historical events, and love stories all have precedent in biographical life writing. However, he cannot accomplish his goal without overlooking “a thousand disagreeables,” which, he admits, “it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore” (Woolf, *Orlando* 13). These include but are not limited to Orlando's love of solitude, nature, and poetry, and his attraction to members of his own sex—Orlando mistakes the Muscovite Ambassador's daughter, Sasha, for a boy (“for alas, a boy it must be”) and is “ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question” (Woolf, *Orlando* 28). Although these parts of Orlando's character are either alluded to or mentioned briefly, they are given an disproportionately small amount of attention in the first chapter. As the section comes to a close, the biographer still attempts to latch onto a recognizable narrative, even as it slips out of his reach. He writes:

Suddenly [Orlando] was struck in the face by a blow, soft, yet heavy, on the side of his cheek. So strung with expectation was he, that he started and put his hand to his sword. The blow was repeated a dozen times on forehead and cheek. The dry frost had lasted so long that it took him a minute to realize that these were rain drops falling; the blows were the blows of the rain. (Woolf, *Orlando* 44)

The biographer itches for a familiar plot point, some scene of combat or moment of action that he can use to regain control of his project. Revealing very little about his subject, the novel's inclusion of this incident speaks more to the narrator's need for something to ‘happen’ than it does to Orlando's character. The biographer recounts this “blow” to Orlando's face, repeated dozens of times, which gets mistaken for some form of an attack, and Orlando reaches for his sword. However, Orlando realizes that he is not in danger; “the blows were blows of rain.” Here, the biographer tries to recreate the familiar narrative of great men, but the subject of Orlando

proves incompatible with the traditional framework. There will be no battle; there will be no action as the Victorian biographer understands action to be.

Throughout the book, one of the matters that continues to trouble the biographer the most is Orlando's stillness. A lover of reading, writing, and nature, Orlando pauses often and for long stretches of time. The biographer expresses: "Still he looked, still he paused. It is these pauses that are our undoing. It is then that sedition enters the fortress and our troops rise in insurrection" (Woolf, *Orlando* 60). The biographer sets forth an image of trouble in a castle; he imagines troops rioting against their commander, and equates such action with Orlando's inaction. Already, fiction has begun to knock on fact's door, as the biographer turns to metaphorical imagery to fill up the emptiness of a pause. These moments of stillness continue to come, and come more often and for longer stretches of time. With nothing to do but to pass the time, the biographer writes:

Here he came then, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. He saw the beech trees turn golden and the young ferns unfurl; he saw the moon sickle and then circular; he saw—but probably the reader can imagine the passage which should follow and how every tree and plant in the neighbourhood is described first green, then golden; how moons rise and suns set; how spring follows winter and autumn summer; how night succeeds day and day night; how there is first a storm and then fine weather; how things remain much as they are for two or three hundred years or so, except for a little dust and a few cobwebs which one old woman can sweep up in half an hour; a conclusion which, one cannot help feeling, might have been reached more quickly by the simple statement that 'Time passed' (here the exact amount could be indicated in brackets) and nothing whatever happened. (Woolf, *Orlando* 72)

When literary critic Nick Greene publishes his satire "Visit to a Nobleman in the Country," publically parodying Orlando and his estate, Orlando removes himself from social life and spends his time alone outdoors. But since traditional biographies rely on plot, the narrator is unsure how to keep his readers engaged as Orlando sits still. In the passage, years pass by, in which no events take place that the biographer considers to be of any importance. The narrator

fills the space with poetic descriptions of the natural world, but he eventually interrupts his own thought and pleads the reader to “imagine the passage which should follow” so that he does not have to continue the section. Despite himself, he does in fact proceed with this train of thought, beginning with descriptions of the trees and the moon and moving towards portraits of the seasons, the passage of the days, and the changes in weather. The biographer remarks on how much things stay the same, except for “a little dust and a few cobwebs which one old woman can sweep up,” which is the entire concern of the second chapter of Woolf’s preceding novel, *To the Lighthouse*, published one year before *Orlando*. In more experimental literary forms, that small anecdote of time passing and a woman cleaning up its effects can be the gist of a whole section of a book. Unlike *To the Lighthouse*’s second chapter, however, here we have persistent human life—and not just any person, but our main character. Rather than wait for his subject to take action, in a text not bound by the Victorians’ constraints, the biographer could have considered the mind and explored the inner workings of his subject, to better demonstrate his character than a catalog of major life events ever could. Despite the subject’s suitability for another kind of text, the biographer concludes that “nothing whatever happened.” He suggests substituting the larger part of this paragraph for “the simple statement that ‘Time passed,’” with “the exact amount” of time “indicated in brackets.” However, we are left to wonder if the biographer has chosen not to or simply forgotten to mention the amount of time that had passed, because although they are alluded to, there are no brackets to indicate the occasion.

The pauses of Orlando’s life multiply when he first begins to focus on his writing, and then wakes up female. As a woman, Orlando spends even longer periods of time sitting still, focused on her compositions and banished from the traditionally active life that is reserved for

men. The biographer reaches the pinnacle of his frustration as Orlando sits down to finish her poem “The Oak Tree” and remains thus for the course of a year:

It was now November. After November, comes December. Then January, February, March, and April. After April comes May. June, July, August follow. Next is September. Then October, and so, behold, here we are back at November again, with a whole year accomplished. 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 Hogarth Press may think proper to charge for this book. But what can the biographer do when his subject has put him in the predicament into which Orlando has now put us? Life, it has been agreed by everyone whose opinion is worth consulting, is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer; life, the same authorities have decided, has nothing whatever to do with sitting still in a chair and thinking. Thought and life are as the poles asunder. Therefore—since sitting in a chair and thinking is precisely what Orlando is doing now—there is nothing for it but to recite the calendar, tell one’s beads, blow one’s nose, stir the fire, look out of the window, until she has done. (Woolf, *Orlando* 196-7)

The biographer cites the passage of time through listing the standard demarcations of months, revealing little about Orlando and her writing process. DiBattista describes these passages as “moments of inaction in which nothing and yet everything happens,” because although Orlando is motionless, she is in the process of composing her most important literary work, “The Oak Tree” (lxii). To regain favor, the biographer expresses his sympathies for the paying reader, who he implores to pity his plight. He thrusts the blame upon his subject, holding her responsible for putting them all “in the predicament into which Orlando has now put us.” The biographer claims that “life” (“the only fit subject for . . . biographer”) “has nothing whatever to do with sitting still in a chair and thinking,” and that “everyone whose opinion is worth consulting”—and by that, he likely means men of letters—is in agreement. Since Orlando is sitting still in a chair and thinking, the biographer pauses his narrative and vows to wait “until she has done.” Lee comments on the biographer’s commitment to the conventions of the form, even when it cannot accomplish its purposes: “Orlando’s biographer is written in as a character in pursuit of his subject, always self-consciously referring back to the conventions, which are not always

adequate for the task in hand” (“Biography” 8). The stillness, the non-*physical* activity of “sitting” and “thinking,” is enough to render the biographical form defunct, but the narrator is nonetheless reluctant to let go of it. The biographer continues:

Suppose she had got up and killed a wasp. Then, at once, we could out with our pens and write. For there would be blood shed, if only the blood of a wasp. Where there is blood there is life. And if killing a wasp is the merest trifle compared with killing a man, still it is a fitter subject for novelist or biographer than this mere wool-gathering; this thinking; this sitting in a chair day in, day out, with a cigarette and a sheet of paper and a pen and an ink pot. (Woolf, *Orlando* 197)

The biographer has grown desperate and, despite his distaste for fiction, enters the realm of “suppose.” He conjures up a fantasy in which something happens in that chair, even if that something is no more than Orlando standing up and killing a wasp. “Then, at once, we could... write,” he professes, because at least there would be action and bloodshed—even “if only the blood of a wasp.” He laments that “killing a wasp is the merest trifle compared with killing a man” (which he morbidly seems to prefer but already realizes will not happen), but that anything would be better than this stillness, “this mere wool-gathering; this thinking; this sitting.” He continues:

If only subjects, we might complain (for our patience is wearing thin), had more consideration for their biographers! What is more irritating than to see one’s subject, on whom one has lavished so much time and trouble, slipping out of one’s grasp altogether and indulging—witness her sighs and gasps, her flushing, her palings, her eyes now bright as lamps, now haggard as dawns—what is more humiliating than to see all this dumb show of emotion and excitement gone through before our eyes when we know that what causes it—thought and imagination—are of no importance whatsoever? (Woolf, *Orlando* 197)

Again, the biographer paints himself as Orlando’s victim, wishing that subjects “had more consideration for their biographers.” He pities himself for spending “time and trouble” on Orlando, only to be let down in his noble, literary pursuit. However, despite continually maintaining that sitting still writing is not a proper subject for the biographer, he deviates from

this opinion. He paints a brief portrait of Orlando as she writes, commenting on “her sighs and gasps, her flushing, her palings, her eyes now bright as lamps, now haggard as dawns.”

Recognizing the external cues to Orlando’s state of mind as she writes, the narrator is only one step away from interpreting them and providing insight about Orlando’s inner self. However, the biographer reverts back to his conventions; he expresses irritation at his failure to maintain control of his subject and humiliation that such a devastating loss is due to something “of no importance whatsoever”—that thing being “thought and imagination.”

Losing hope that his subject will soon get up from her chair, the biographer searches for a different source of plot. He defends that since Orlando is now a woman, action can be replaced with another prevalent storyline, that of love. He writes:

When we are writing the life of a woman, we may, it is agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love instead. Love, the poet has said, is woman’s whole existence. And if we look for a moment at Orlando writing at her table, we must admit that never was there a woman more fitted for that calling. Surely, since she is a woman, and a beautiful woman, and a woman in the prime of life, she will soon give over this pretence of writing and thinking and begin at least to think of a gamekeeper (and as long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking). And then she will write him a little note (and as long as she writes little notes nobody objects to a woman writing either) and make an assignation for Sunday dusk and Sunday dusk will come; and the gamekeeper will whistle under the window—all of which is, of course, the very stuff of life and the only possible subject for fiction. Surely Orlando must have done one of these things? Alas—a thousand times, alas, Orlando did none of them. (Woolf, *Orlando* 198)

Maintaining that “love... is woman’s whole existence,” the biographer comments that “surely, since [Orlando] is a woman,” attractive and young, she will soon give up what he calls “this pretence of writing and thinking”—as though her work is but a show put on for the purposes of being observed. The biographer retells the familiar narrative that would ensue: The landed woman scandalously falls in love with ‘the help.’ She thinks, but surely she thinks about a man; she writes, but surely she writes to a man. The scandal in the story that he invents is one that the traditional storyteller could handle because it is what he deems to be “the very stuff of life.” But

“alas,” he must note,” “Orlando did none” of these things. He concludes: “If then, the subject of one’s biography will neither love nor kill, but will only think and imagine, we may conclude that he or she is no better than a corpse and so leave her” (Woolf, *Orlando* 198).

When the subject of the life he has set off to write does not match up with the common themes of Victorian biographies, the narrator-biographer ironically pivots towards *fiction* and the world of “what if,” while continuing to disparage it. The biographer is most strenuously tested in moments of stillness, which he cannot transmit onto the two-dimensional piece of paper without taking creative liberties with the traditional structure. These limitations trap the biographer and keep him from effectively representing character; instead, it is the moments in which he loses his tight grip and fails to make his subject fit the mold of the great Victorian man, that Orlando’s true nature peaks through the bars.

Embracing Fiction: The Bildungsroman

“[Woolf] begins her writing life in the era of what she calls ‘the draperies and decencies’ of Victorian biography: censored, reverential, public Lives of ‘great men,’” writes Hermione Lee. “For her the crucial problem in the biographies that her generation has inherited is the tug between fact and fiction and the difficulty of getting to the ‘soul’” (“Biography” 9-10). As Lee explains, Woolf was exposed to biographies as its “censored, reverential” approach to the “public Lives of ‘great men’” was growing intolerably stale. As demonstrated through her nonfiction think-pieces, Woolf acutely understood the genre’s problematics and sought methods to update it to better suit modern needs. Of these recent demands, “the crucial problem” for Woolf and her contemporaries was the task of capturing the subject’s inner self, or “the difficulty of getting to the ‘soul.’” Because biographies had hitherto relied on the verifiable to a fault, the

stories told were limited to the realm of the external. Meanwhile, modern ethos favored the internal: the thoughts, emotions, impressions, and motivations of the mind, or the private self. We can see the demand of the changing times in “Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer,” who Woolf introduces during Orlando’s supernatural sex change to encourage the perturbed biographer to write; we can imagine them as “they demand in one blast, Truth! And again they cry Truth! and sounding yet a third time in concert they peal forth, The Truth and nothing but the Truth!” (Woolf, *Orlando* 99). Because in the 1920s, biographical “Truth!” entailed something entirely different—both the external and the internal elements that make up a life, both the factual and the inexplicable.

As a result, Modernist writers, including Woolf, needed to find or adapt literary techniques that could grapple with and understand the current climate. Luckily for these authors, a form that concerned itself with capturing life already existed—the novel. Although it is a work of fiction, given its emphasis on realism, the novel can be situated in between fabrication and fact. Woolf explains:

For it would seem that the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than in the act... Thus, the biographer’s imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist’s art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life. Yet if he carries the use of fiction too far, so that he disregards the truth, or can only introduce it with incongruity, he loses both worlds; he has neither the freedom of fiction nor the substance of fact. (“The New Biography,” 155)

Woolf describes the “increasingly real” life to be the “fictitious” life, which is one more concerned with “personality” than the notable actions and events that fill up the pages of most biographies. She observes the biographer’s attraction to the novelist’s artful approach to writing, including the usage of several tools “to expounds the private life” of any given subject. However, although she does not prioritize hard facts, Woolf is not in favor of a blatant “disregard” of truth. Instead, she recommends a balance between fiction and fact, which can provide both “freedom”

and “substance” in depicting the human experience—a promising recipe for the transmission of truth.

To take into account the elements of a life that cannot be captured through the Victorian method of biographical writing, *Orlando*'s mock-biographer increasingly devalues verifiability in favor of fictional approaches to life writing. Of these, the genre that *Orlando* comes to resemble the most is the realist Bildungsroman, a term composed of two German words: *Bildung*, meaning “education,” and *Roman*, meaning “novel.” Accordingly, a Bildungsroman is a novel that centers around the protagonist's growth within the context of a given society. The first Bildungsroman is often credited to Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-96), in which the young protagonist resists but then learns to embrace what he at first sees as the bourgeois businessman's futile life. Thomas Carlyle translated Goethe's novel into English in 1824, after which several British authors wrote novels inspired by it.

Putting aside the obvious for a moment—that one is categorically nonfiction and the other is fiction, the biography and the Bildungsroman share a lot in common. Both genres center around one at first young protagonist, who understands very little about the world that he inhabits. From the adolescent's introduction, the book unfolds chronologically, spanning the main character's formative years. An inciting incident of some sort thrusts the narrative forward and as a result, the protagonist or the subject is tested and can begin to mature. The main character might have an epiphanic moment, in which he learns to navigate adult life (in the case of the Bildungsroman) and/or he flourishes in a particular field or practice (in the case of both the Bildungsroman and the biography). The two genres are so interrelated that in fact, in his text *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, Gregory Castle regards “a biographical narrative” as one of “the rudiments of the form” (4). Even so, the Bildungsroman has much that the Victorian

biography could benefit from borrowing. The most essential, of course, is that the Bildungsroman is a fictional genre, meaning that it does not depend on verification in order to relate to real life. The Bildungsroman could instead assert realism by presenting that which *seems* realistic—familiar or at least plausible to the reader.

But compared with other novelistic styles, the Bildungsroman had more that it could offer Woolf in addition to the freedom of fiction: the form lends itself to solving several of the problems of Victorian biographies that Woolf calls attention to in her nonfiction essays. First, the Bildungsroman, like novels more generally, opened itself up to unconventional protagonists earlier in literary history than the biography did. For example, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, a slew of popular Bildungsromans written by women and about women were published, from Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). The Bildungsroman's liberation of subject-matter would have appealed to Woolf and her persistent interest in telling the stories of hidden lives.

Second, the Bildungsroman provides a framework from within Woolf could explore the relationships between individual subjects and their respective societies. In addition to the aforementioned "biographical narrative," Castle also deems "problems of socialization" to be one of the "rudiments of the form" (4). Inherent to the Bildungsroman's narrative arc, the protagonist repeatedly comes into conflict with a fixed social order, prompting the process of maturation that often caps the novel. Elizabeth Abel attributes character development to the influences of societies, explaining: "Successful *Bildung* [education] requires the existence of a social context that will facilitate the unfolding of inner capacities, leading the young person from ignorance and innocence to wisdom and maturity" (6). That being said, although the traditional Bildungsroman ended with the main character conforming to societal expectations, according to

Castle, the modernist iteration that came into prominence in the 1890s begun “to critique the very society it was meant to validate and legitimize,” especially those that centered on women and others at the margins of society (23). Returning to the scene in which the biographer attempts to explain London society, we can reconsider the passage as Woolf’s incorporation of the Bildungsroman’s temporospatial concerns. In the episode, Woolf seems to engage in *neither* or in *both* an adulation and a critique; either way, she makes it clear that an interrogation of London society at that time is essential to understanding Orlando’s person.

Third, the Bildungsroman gets reflected in *Orlando* through Woolf’s concern for not only her main character’s actions and exploits, but also for her subject’s inner self. Castle asserts, “The Bildungsroman accentuated dynamic psychological changes” (10). Because of its deep-rooted interest in character development and the process of maturation, the Bildungsroman privileges the mind in a way that the Victorian biographies do not. Incorporating this element of the Bildungsroman into her fictional-biography increasingly more as the biographer lets go of conventions, Woolf is better able to respond to the previously discussed modern spirit that reflected an increasing interest in “the personality” over “the act” (Woolf, “The New Biography” 155). This use of fiction allows the mock-biographer to enter his subject’s thoughts to access his feelings and impressions, and it presents the reader with a more fully realized portrait Orlando’s character, including both his public and his private self.

Although it does not impart verified facts, the Bildungsroman’s structure, when applied wisely, has the potential to investigate the realities of human life (another version of truth, not unlike empirical evidence), such as the inner psyche and the individual’s relationship to society. In *Orlando*, Woolf injects just enough of the fictional form to explore Orlando’s character, beyond an external catalog of the facts and dates of his or her life. However, if the gist of

Orlando is a fantastical Bildungsroman, and the form has a great deal of advantages to offer the novelist interested in human life, why then, one might ask, does Woolf reference biographies at all?

Why?

By now, it is evident that the Victorian biographical form had several substantial limitations and often fell short of its presumed purpose in telling a life. Woolf knew the genre's defects as well as anyone, or perhaps even *better* than most, being the daughter of distinguished Victorian biographer Leslie Stephen and maintaining an ongoing interest in the form throughout her life. Considered alongside even limited familiarity with most of Woolf's other fictional work—novels that are and never pretend to be something other than novels—one might wonder why Woolf called upon the biographical structure at all in *Orlando*. If the form's inclusions comes with a throng of issues that must then be remedied, what good does its slanted imitation accomplish?

In doing the research for this project, the trend that revealed itself amongst scholars attributed Woolf's interest in biographies to her father's related attachment to the form. Allison Booth writes: "When in 'The New Biography' (1927) Woolf called for a fusion of 'rainbow' and 'granite,' the art of fiction and the craft of fact, in concise lives expressive of personality and experience instead of public events, she might be interpreting the principles that her father Leslie Stephen had laid down in 1885 for articles in the *Dictionary of National Biography*" (52). With a focus on her nonfiction work, Booth judges Woolf's ideologies to be embedded in Stephen's convictions, without any assessment of her own stake in the form. Alongside Booth, several other scholars have rooted Woolf's vision in that of her father's theories. Atkinson, in particular, continues to see Woolf's interest as unoriginal, contending that "Woolf's strategy is not entirely new," but rather an extension of her father's interests (258). She writes, "Not only did Woolf often share her father's conception of biography, but she also has much in common with the diverse range of Victorian biographers who had tackled hidden lives before him. As this

conclusion argues, Woolf did not create a new biographical trend but instead recast a pre-existing one” (Atkinson 253). Atkinson maintains that Woolf is not only inspired, but rather “*share[s]*” [emphasis added] her father’s, as well as his contemporaries’ and forebears’, theories of biographical writing. Certainly both Booth and Atkinson have substantial evidence to defend their points, and it would be irresponsible for one to claim that Woolf’s fascination with the biographical form had nothing whatsoever to do with her father. Discussing her childhood in her autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf herself reminisces:

He had very strong opinions; and he was extremely well informed. What he said was thus most respectfully listened to... I twisted my hair, imitating him. “Father does it,” I told my mother when she objected. “Ah but you can’t do everything father does,” she said, conveying to me that he was licensed, for he was somehow not bound by the laws of ordinary people. (111)

When she looks back on her early relationship with her father, Woolf recalls considering his judgments “well informed” and regarding him “most respectfully.” She describes a juvenile desire to imitate him, not only inadvertently, but also consciously. In conversations with her mother before her untimely death in 1895 (therefore presumably before Virginia was thirteen years old), Woolf remembers vocally attributing her behavior to her father, even when advised against it. Her adolescent impressions demonstrate Stephen’s authoritative position within the family unit; as Woolf indicates, “he was somehow not bound by the laws of ordinary people,” situated in a unique position of power.

That being said, it is also imprudent to think that Woolf mindlessly adapted all her father’s penchants. (Stephen, for one, was an enthusiastic mountaineer; and yet, did Woolf share this same ‘predilection for peaks?’) Moreover, that the discourse still lingers in crediting the concerns of a female author—not to mention, one of the most highly regarded of the twentieth century—to her male guardian is rather disappointing, to say the least. It therefore might be

appropriate to consider what it is about Victorian biographies that fascinated the Modernist writer, apart from Stephen's influence.

To Break Is To Create: Modernism's Self-Critical Practice

I began an investigation with one central question in mind: Why would Woolf refer to biographical practices if she planned on breaking them down immediately? The beginnings of an answer could be found in the nonfiction *A Room of One's Own*, as the narrator, a voice often equated with Woolf, considers the fictional writer Mary Carmichael's first novel, *Life's Adventure*. At first, she finds Carmichael's prose distasteful, but as the shock of its experimentation wears off, she later revises her opinion. The narrator reflects: "First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence. Very well, she has every right to do both these things if she does them not for the sake of breaking, but for the sake of creating" (*A Room of One's Own* 80). Woolf, not someone interested in being radical for radical's sake, does not support breaking conventions, such as the sentence or the sequence, solely to interrupt the present state of affairs. Rather, she suggests that these disturbances are only appropriate when they can pave the way to an improved iteration of the art.

This sentiment is—plainly speaking—broad; however, it served as an effective starting point to move toward a more substantial analysis. Considered in relation to other artists of her time, Woolf shared an impulse to part with defunct traditions with countless Modernists, ranging in crafts. One authoritative voice who sought to establish commonalities between several distinct Modernist practices within the categories of art and literature was Clement Greenberg. In his treatise "Modernist Painting," he introduces his central argument, stating:

I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency... The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic

methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself—not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. (Greenberg 193)

Greenberg locates Modernism's core in its "use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself." In the case of painting, the text's primary focus, these distinctive qualities might include the paint's viscosity or the canvas' flat surface and rectangular shape. Castle observes a similar trend in Modernist literature: "Generic rudiments are not only retained but embraced with new vigor—a vigor often ironic and stylized, but vigor nonetheless" (4-5). Although much of his argument emphasizes visual art, Greenberg's language immediately resonates with Woolf's outlook on literature²; while Woolf discourages breaking conventions "for the sake of breaking," Greenberg advises against doing so "in order to subvert." Rather, Greenberg suggests that the Modernist's ultimate goal is to "entrench [a work] more firmly in its area of competence." For painting, that meant not prioritizing *likeness* to life or setting forth *realism* as the standard by which all art is assessed; rather, it meant embracing the art form's unique strengths to demonstrate something more profound.

Consider, then, the biographical genre; forgoing its faults, its presumed "area of competence" is situated in telling a life. Phrased in this manner, Woolf's attraction to the form makes more 'sense'—one might guess that her interest stems from an ongoing desire to capture what it is like to be human through the written word. Mark Hussey refers to this impulse as Woolf's reckoning with "an abstract 'gap' in actual life that cannot be directly referred to in

² Furthermore, it is important to note that *Orlando* does include visual elements, too. One example of the biographical novel's combination of fact and fiction is in its use of photographs of Vita Sackville-West and her ancestors, with captions that claim the images to be of Orlando and friends (including first love Sasha, suitor Archduchess Harriet/Archduke Harry, and husband Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine) scattered throughout the text. There is "Orlando as a Boy" before the first page of the novel, "Orlando as Ambassador" before the change of sex, "Orlando on her return to England" as she is about to enter London society for the first time as a woman, "Orlando about the year 1840" in the Victorian era and in want of a husband, and "Orlando at the present time" in 1928 (Woolf, *Orlando* lxviii, 95, 118, 181, 234). These images, intended to serve as hard evidence (as photographs usually do), actually further blur the line between fact and fiction. It is not only words, but also visuals, that cannot be trusted because of the biographer's (or rather, Woolf's) power to change their contexts to suit present needs.

language, but is certainly a potential experience of human being” (96). In one of her most often quoted passages, Woolf herself asserts:

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small. (“Modern Fiction” 161)

Woolf expresses her impulse to “record” or “trace” life and the human mind, even if it might be “disconnected and incoherent.” She encourages the writer not to focus on “what is commonly thought big” alone (such as the exceptional or the major events), but rather, to recognize that “life exists... in what is commonly thought small,” too (such as the everyday and trivial or the seemingly disjointed). This quotation has come to be emblematic of Woolf’s broader preoccupations with modern fiction, or namely, with novelists interested in representing human life.

And fundamentally, writing biographies *is* representing human life on a piece of paper. “Biography” is the wholesale epithet that has been given to an array of texts—ones that claim to capture the individual and disseminate character through a handful of written volumes. “Whether we think of biography as more like history or more like fiction, what we want from it is a vivid sense of the person,” explains Hermione Lee. “What makes biography so endlessly absorbing is that through all the documents and letters and witnesses, the conflicting opinions and partial memories and fictionalised versions, we keep catching sign of a real body, a physical life” (*Virginia Woolf’s Nose: Essays on Biography* 1-2). That being the case, Woolf’s interest in a form vested in depicting “a vivid sense of the person” stands in line with the rest of her oeuvre and the concerns that these works reveal. Significantly, that would mean that Woolf’s turn toward a Modernist iteration of pseudo-biographies is not a complete rupture in her career, but

rather the exact opposite. “Modernism has never meant, and does not mean now, anything like a break with the past. It may mean a devolution, an unraveling, of tradition, but it also means its further evolution,” Greenberg writes. “Art is—among other things—continuity, and unthinkable without it” (200). Beginning with *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919), considered to be her more traditional works, Woolf’s fiction gradually became more innovative, and made a large jump in 1922 with *Jacob’s Room* toward the experimental. From there on came *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and then *Orlando* (1928), and with these texts came Woolf’s distinctive style for which she is best known today. Elizabeth Cooley notes a similar pattern in Woolf’s career: “Understanding the ‘reality of characters’ and expressing this reality in words are two problems that troubled and fascinated Woolf throughout her life” (71). Considered like so, a turn toward biography is not a radical shift; rather, it is Woolf’s continuation down a logical path, a perpetual desire to own up to descriptive realities in her written works—to comment on life as it is experienced and human beings as they really exist. DiBattista shares a similar sentiment: “*Orlando* is a fiction that is best regarded, then, as [Winifred] Holtby³ regards it—as ‘one step further’ in Woolf’s creative drive to overcome the constraints, including those originating within her own mind, that would impede her imaginative encounter with reality” (“Introduction” xliii).

But just as the Modernist painters did not seek to feign life (one does not look at a Pollock or a Rothko for its semblance to the natural world), Woolf does not attempt to trick the reader into believing Orlando’s life, as it is written, ‘really happened.’ This detail ties into a trend Greenberg observes: “Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism used art to call attention to art” (195). Calling attention to something inherently

³ One of Woolf’s contemporaries, English novelist and journalist Winifred Holtby wrote a critical study on Virginia Woolf in 1932.

unreal in realism, Greenberg highlights realistic art's charge to deceive the audience (be that the viewer or the reader). As formerly addressed, one of biographies' centermost "area[s] of competence" is in relaying a real life; however, it is critical that we do not overlook how that life gets relayed. At its core, a biography is a *written* form; it is a genre of books—and books (excuse my stating the obvious) are not life itself. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*.⁴ The novelist Margaret Atwood clarifies: "I began to recognize [biographies] for what they are: the stories of lives, the *stories* of lives. They were not the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth, the bare-naked truth; they were composed of selected truths, and therefore subjective" (6). Atwood emphasizes that even standard biographies (not solely novels that pose as biographies) cannot represent "the whole truth." Meanwhile, unlike these texts, *Orlando* is a book that does not attempt to "conceal" its status of being a book; this detail is perhaps no better demonstrated than in the novel's supernatural elements, such as Orlando's inexplicable sex change or centuries-long life span. In her introduction to *Orlando*, Maria DiBattista writes, "Rather than attempting to come closer to human life, as a proper modernist should, Woolf seems eager to distance herself from it" (xxxvii). Alongside DiBattista, Monk Ray astutely expresses *Orlando*'s predicament:

Indeed, *Orlando* is not only fiction but pointedly and determinedly unrealistic fiction. It describes things that *could not possibly* be true. The central character, for example, lives for three hundred years and magically changes sex from male to female. No one could possibly mistake *Orlando* for "truth of fact." On the other hand, it is quite clearly *about* a real person, Vita Sackville-West, as Woolf herself made clear in letters to Vita herself and indicated to at least some of her readers by illustrating the book with pictures of Vita dressed as Orlando and with photographs of Knole, Vita's country estate. (28)

Whereas many others have praised Woolf for marrying fact and fiction in *Orlando*, Ray ultimately denounces Woolf for such an attempt—he writes: "If real life and fiction destroy each other when they meet, then how did Woolf think *Orlando* would survive?" (28). To respond, I

⁴ Translation: "This is not a pipe." The quotation references René Magritte's "The Treachery of Images" (1929), a surrealist painting that depicts a pipe, but admits to being an image of a pipe, not the thing itself.

revise DiBattista's argument: It is not "human life" that Woolf was "eager to distance herself from" through fiction, but rather it is typical sub-genres of realism that she hoped to leave behind (just as she had done with its related nonfictional form, the biography). Instead of bluffing that Orlando the person existed and these events took place, Woolf embraces storytelling as a medium and uses "art to call attention to art." 'This is a *story*,' she seems to say; because crucially, this feature is biography's second "area of competence." Combined with the form's first aptitude in telling a life, she seems to say more specifically: 'This is a *story* that has something to say about *life*.'

"The Way to Stronger, More Expressive Art"

Toward the end of his evaluation, Greenberg moves from commenting on Modernist trends to interpreting the purposes behind these tendencies. He concludes: "Certain inclinations and emphases, certain refusals and abstinences seem to become necessary simply because the way to stronger, more expressive art seems to lie through them" (198). Here, Greenberg reflects on the need to embrace certain tendencies and let go of others, dependent upon the art medium. He insists that by doing so, the artist engages in a self-critical process that can produce "stronger, more expressive art," embedded in its competencies and isolated from its limitations. Applying this concept—of rooting an art form in its competencies to create a more compelling work—to biographies, Hermione Lee observes:

When we are reading other forms of life-writing—autobiography, memoir, journal, letter, autobiographical fiction, or poem—or when we are trying ourselves to tell the story of a life, whether in an obituary, or in a conversation, or in a confession, or in a book, we are always drawn to moments of intimacy, revelation, or particular inwardness. (*Virginia Woolf's Nose 2*)

Lee denotes what biographies needed in order to become more “expressive” of real life: “moments of intimacy, revelation, or particular inwardness.” Susan Dick recognizes a similar impulse in Woolf’s work specifically, that the choices she makes in her writing “evolve from a shift of focus so that ‘life’ is conveyed not only in its external aspect, but as it is experienced” (“Literary Realism” 50). In *Orlando*, Woolf takes the biographical form and highlights its design to tell life stories but, looking beyond external facts, shifts its focus to moments of closeness and interiority. The biographical subject, then, that was once too great a man and impenetrable, becomes a dynamic, conceivable person—one that exists in real time, outside the limitations of *maleness* and *greatness*.

Expressions of Time

Woolf’s hybrid of factual and fictional forms, *Orlando* surpasses both the biography and the realist Bildungsroman at their own ‘games’—at presenting character in a context that resembles reality. Through a self-critical approach to the traditional structures of literature, Woolf creates an art that does not feign life, but is better able to capture the human experience of time. Repeatedly throughout the narrative, time will pass and nothing that the biographer deems notable will happen. At one such occasion, despite his frustrations with his idle subject, the biographer contemplates lived time:

But Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no such simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second. This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation. But the biographer, whose interests are, as we have said, highly restricted, must confine himself. (Woolf, *Orlando* 72)

Despite being an unconventional topic for a biographer to tackle, Woolf delves into a contemplation on lived time, which the narrator admits is not “simple.” Speaking of Woolf’s novels, Hussey refers to this concept as “the great discrepancy that exists between the time of the waking mind and that ticked off by clocks” (121). The biographer discusses the “strangeness” upon which the “mind of man” works on the “body of time,” and vice versa. In other words, he presents “clock length” and “the timepiece of the mind,” which both tell time and are related to one another but do not always correspond identically. When considered in the mind, the passage of an hour on the clock might feel like “fifty or a hundred times” that, or it might feel like “one second,” in the mind. The biographer recognizes this tangent’s importance, noting that it “is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation.” However, here the biographical tradition asserts itself again and stunts the subsequent discussion. Through the voice of the biographer, she employs characteristics of biographical writing to satirize the genre and highlight its defects. Woolf calls attention to the biographer’s limitations, noting that his “interests are... highly restricted” and he must therefore leave behind the valuable deliberation that he had briefly begun.

However, when the topic of time becomes relevant again later in the novel, the biographer has become more comfortable with letting go of certain defunct traditions. He observes in *Orlando*: “The true length of a person’s life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute. For it is a difficult business—this time-keeping” (Woolf, *Orlando* 224). With direct jab at biographies—specifically, the *Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by her father, Leslie Stephen, Woolf’s voice seeps through. She writes that while the *DNB* will assign life lengths to each subject that reflect time on the clock, the length of a life is harder to measure because time is not always felt the same way. Essentially,

Woolf connects the word “true” with the phrase “a matter of dispute,” complicating a basic assumption about truth itself: just because something has been deemed accurate does not mean that it is conclusive. Real life, she suggests once more, exists outside of the bounds of the definitive and the proven. The effect of time on an individual is not limited to the decades that one might live through. While the *DNB* might designate a lifespan from birth to death, the individual’s identity might reach before and beyond those borders. Even in the case of our protagonist, who lives for multiple centuries, Orlando is the product of moments outside the duration of her life—of her ancestors who are referenced eighteen different times throughout the novel. “Time-keeping,” she argues, is a “difficult business” that often gets simplified for ease and clarity by writers less interested in capturing life than in arranging one to fit into a conventional mold.

To further her argument on time’s effect on the individual—beyond the stretch that one lives, Woolf creates a character that quite literally inhabits four centuries of history. By placing Orlando in different historical contexts, Woolf demonstrates the complicated relationship between the individual and his or her time, characterized by both moments of supreme influence and of negligible effect. Of all the eras considered in the novel, Orlando has particular difficulty adapting to the Victorian age. Her biographer comments:

Tomorrow she would have to buy twenty yards or more of black bombazine, she supposed, to make a skirt. And then (here she blushed), she would have to buy a crinoline, and then (here she blushed) a bassinette, and then another crinoline, and so on... One might see the spirit of the age blowing, now hot, now cold, upon her cheeks. (Woolf, *Orlando* 172)

It is the first day of the Victorian era, and Orlando, biologically female, cannot adjust to the times. She considers with a sense of embarrassment the changes she will have to make to adapt to the nineteenth century. As a woman in the 1800s, she prepares herself to purchase the popular

material to make a skirt, the fashionable petticoat, and the sought-after wicker cradle (for the children she feels compelled to bear). These items are of little importance to Orlando and, if they stir up any emotion at all, bring about more discomfort than happiness. But these are the items that she feels she needs to be a proper woman in the Victorian era, to fit in with “the spirit of the age.” Once she recovers from the initial shock, however, Orlando is able to think pragmatically about all that has remained the same:

At length the colour on her cheeks resumed its stability and it seemed as if the spirit of the age—if such indeed it were—lay dormant for a time. Then Orlando felt in the bosom of her shirt... the manuscript of her poem, “The Oak Tree”... She had been working at it for close three hundred years now... She began turning and dipping and reading and skipping and thinking as she read, how very little she had changed all these years. She had been a gloomy boy, in love with death, as boys are; and then she had been amorous and florid; and then she had been sprightly and satirical; and sometimes she had tried prose and sometimes she had tried drama. Yet through all these changes she had remained, she reflected, fundamentally the same. She had the same brooding meditative temper, the same love of animals and nature, the same passion for the country and the seasons. (Woolf, *Orlando* 172-3)

Reconnecting with her manuscript of “The Oak Tree,” Orlando gets back in touch with the parts of her that are constant through the changing times. She reflects on how she transformed alongside history’s variations, but that “she had remained... fundamentally the same”: the same ruminating lover of nature, with a taste for animals, the countryside, and the seasons. Everything about Orlando’s relationship to history is exaggerated (in real life, of course, people do not live for centuries); however, in overstating the facts, Woolf amplifies the core of her argument. The self is simultaneously time-dependent and timeless. Either way, in narrating a life—if the biographer or novelist hopes to come close to real life—temporal considerations must be accounted for.

Of Gender

The glaring consideration omitted from the discussion above is that not only time, but also gender plays a role in what is expected of Orlando in Victorian England. Had she not been a *woman* in the nineteenth century, one might expect that the “bombazine,” the “crinoline,” and the “bassinet” would have been of little desire to her (Woolf, *Orlando* 172). Like scrutiny of time, the consideration of gender is not one of the conventional matters tackled in biographies, although it considerably shapes one’s life experiences. Because long-established forms of life writing developed and hardened when women’s stories were decided to be not worth telling, no space was originally paved out in the discourse for their accounts (as is discussed with regard to biography in this paper’s first chapter). Most eloquently, Hermione Lee insists that Woolf’s “feminist agenda” is “linked to her interest in history and biography,” in adding women’s overlooked stories to the prevailing modes of writing (“Biography” 93). Herman fleshes out Lee’s assertion and comments on the need for simultaneously maintaining and updating traditional modes of writing:

Woolf drew on the resources of modernist narration to broaden the scope of life writing—in part by grafting onto biographical discourse modes of consciousness presentation conventionally associated with fictional narratives, and in part by moving once marginalized experiences to the forefront of biographical attention—whether the experiences in question are those of women categorized as invalids, members of the servant class, or nonhuman animals like Flush. (547)

Although he primarily focuses on Woolf’s *Flush: A Biography* (1933), the fictitious life story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cocker spaniel, Herman highlights Woolf’s incorporation of modernist techniques into traditional life writing to move “marginalized experiences to the forefront of biographical attention,” including “those of women.” He contends that this action is done in part by mapping fiction’s approaches to “consciousness presentation” onto the biographical structure. On the most basic level, this bit of progress is Woolf’s outward

accomplishment in *Orlando*—penning a biography on a woman (at least in part). Atkinson interprets: “To uncover hidden female lives is, for Woolf, to uncover a narrative of oppression” (256). Although I agree that Woolf is concerned with the exclusion of marginalized people, especially women, from the discourse, I also believe that there is something more complicated at work. Take the basic “What If” book club exercise: *Orlando* could have been the fictional narrative of one unidealized woman’s life story, but that is not the novel that Woolf eventually writes.

Orlando is not originally born a woman, but a man whose biological sex suddenly changes while he is fast asleep. Although this detail is merely stated as a narrative fact—“It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since,” the language’s simplicity is so jarring that it provokes distrust (Woolf, *Orlando* 103). The biographer further elaborates:

Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity... His memory—but in future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his,’ and ‘she’ for ‘he’—her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle... The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. (Woolf, *Orlando* 102-3)

Although her sex had changed, “in every other respect” Orlando remained the same. The biographer qualifies his assertion, noting that even though her future will be different, her internal identity did not change with the transformation of her body (which took place in isolation, alone in her bedroom). In fact, Orlando herself is not taken aback by the unexpected transition. Meanwhile, the biographer’s most pressing concern is how to adapt an established language to fit these unusual circumstances. He begins to use “her” and “she” for “convention’s sake,” but these words are not necessarily the correct terms either—because as the biographer

points out, Orlando does not shed her past as a man, but instead retains much of her experiences and memories as members of both sexes. The mystical and inexplicable qualities of this fiction pushes representational writing to its breaking point. The biographer stumbles as he looks for the words to explain the supernatural event, reflecting traditional structures' struggle to capture marginalized characters, only exaggerated (because as far as we know, true nonfiction writers need not worry about their characters undergoing supernatural sex changes). The scene ultimately reads like a metaphor for how unprepared traditional structures of realist writing, both fiction and nonfiction, are to tackle unconventional subject matter.

I would like to return to the problem of the pronouns—of this rigid binary of male and female, of “he” and “she.” Traditional modes of writing interested in representing reality, like the Victorian biography or much of the *Bildungsroman*, have typically taken for granted that there are two genders: the (masculine) man and the (feminine) woman. As demonstrated above, through the construction of Orlando, Woolf uses supernatural fiction to present a character that is neither one gender nor the other. That being said, Woolf more subtly addresses the implausible tidiness, the unreality, of these two discrete categories of male and female through her deconstruction of the Victorian *great man* stock character. To do so, Woolf writes these *great men*, the subjects of countless epic biographies, into the plot of *Orlando*. By fleshing out their characters and showing them for both their well-known impressive qualities as well as some hypothetical faults, Woolf creates a more lifelike iteration of the *great man*—one that is neither too great nor too male to be found in real life.

In the latter half of the novel, Orlando receives an invitation for a gathering to be attended by some of the most renowned literary minds of her age, including Joseph Addison,

Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift. She looks forward to the event with great excitement, as her biographer adds:

Something, perhaps, we must believe in, and as Orlando, we have said, had no belief in the usual divinities she bestowed her credulity upon great men—yet with a distinction. Admirals, soldiers, statesmen, moved her not at all. But the very thought of a great writer stirred her to such a pitch of belief that she almost believed him to be invisible. Her instinct was a sound one. One can only believe entirely, perhaps, in what one cannot see. (Woolf, *Orlando* 145)

Through the biographer, Woolf directly alludes to the aforementioned Victorian practice of hero-worship. The biographer remarks that with a cultural devaluing of religion, the Victorians sought to place their beliefs someplace else: in the “great men.” However, Orlando expresses a preference for a certain version of the *great man* trope—not the admirals, soldiers, and statesmen, but the “great writer.” Although he would not be considered the traditionally action-oriented subject, the great male writer became a popular subject in the Victorian era for fitting into the concept of “goodness”: of virtue, restraint or composure, and hard work, to name some of the most common. Here, the biographer presents the beginning of a commentary that will unfold for the rest of the scene. He cryptically describes Orlando’s “instinct” that the great writer would be “invisible” to be “a sound one,” adding that “one can only believe... in what one cannot see.” Through the biographer, Woolf argues that something so “great,” so flawless as the *great man*, cannot exist in the real world.

The highly anticipated reception comes to pass, and the biographer begins to narrate what the reader might expect to be the conversations and occurrences of the gathering. He writes:

On both sides of her sat men and women of the highest distinction. Every man, it was said, had been a Prime Minister and every woman, it was whispered, had been the mistress of a king. Certain it is that all were brilliant, and all were famous. Orlando took her seat with a deep reverence in silence. After three hours, she curtseyed profoundly and left. (Woolf, *Orlando* 146)

Orlando enters a room filled with some of the most illustrious people in England: the Prime Ministers and the kings' mistresses, the brilliant and the famous. Despite such an introduction and our risen expectations, the reader gets no information about the event, except that Orlando sat, remained so for three hours, curtsied and took her leave from the group. Indeed, the paragraph ends here. The biographer recognizes what he assumes might be the reader's discomfort and confusion:

But what, the reader may ask with some exasperation, happened in between. In three hours, such a company must have said the wittiest, the profoundest, the most interesting things in the world. So it would seem indeed. But the fact appears to be that they said nothing... The truth would seem to be—if we dare use such a word in such a connection—that all these groups of people lie under an enchantment... It is all an illusion (which is nothing against it, for illusions are the most valuable and necessary of all things, and she who can create one is among the world's greatest benefactors), but as it is notorious that illusions are shattered by conflict with reality, so no real happiness, no real wit, no real profundity are tolerated where the illusion prevails. (Woolf, *Orlando* 146)

Through the character of the biographer, Woolf recognizes the reader's "exasperation" and broken expectations that the narrator will not provide an account of the party's company. She seems to point a finger at the reader, scoffing at our desire to know more about "nothing." She furthermore addresses the reader's preconceived notions (rooted in some societal bent and perpetuated in its art) of the guests' alleged greatnesses: their wit, intelligence, and charm. "So it would seem indeed," the biographer empathizes, but presents "the fact" that "nothing" was said (or rather, nothing of real substance). Continuing in this matter-of-fact tone but with an awareness that there is much here that is not empirically proven, he notes "the truth" that there is "enchantment" and "illusion" at play amongst these people. Woolf specifies, however, that she does not mean to disparage these terms; rather, these intangibles are "valuable and necessary." Still, she notes, "illusions are shattered by conflict with reality," for which the event provides an appropriate example. Orlando entered the room under the allure of these *great men*, only to find

they do not match up to the ideal versions of them that she had created in her mind, under the influence of a shared general opinion. Like the writer of fiction, she constructed characters out of these people's lives, so formidable and so brilliant that no real person could embody the expectations that she had set forth.

In the next scene, Orlando gets even closer to these *great men* as she goes home with the "great writer" (I use quotations marks to quote from above and to question his status, not to debate his skill as a writer) Alexander Pope. As they travel by carriage under the street lamps, Orlando and Pope alternate between passages of light and of darkness. In the darkness, Orlando's mind is flooded with illusions of Pope's greatness. She remarks to herself, "This is indeed a very great honour for a young woman to be driving with Mr Pope" (Woolf, *Orlando* 150). However, as soon as the carriage moves into the light, the reality of Pope's being seeps through and shatters all enchantment. "What a foolish wretch I am!" she thought" (Woolf, *Orlando* 150). She then turns onto an unlit road again:

Here again was darkness. Her illusion revived. 'How noble his brow is,' she thought (mistaking a hump on a cushion for Mr Pope's forehead in the darkness). 'What a weight of genius lives in it! What wit, wisdom, and truth.' (Woolf, *Orlando* 150)

Although she was just able to see him for who he is in the light, Orlando is again subsumed by the idea of Pope as a consecrated figure, a man above all other men, when she cannot see him. The exaggerated sequence is reminiscent of the biographer's earlier declaration: "One can only believe entirely, perhaps, in what one cannot see" (Woolf, *Orlando* 145). In the dim streets, Orlando *believes*. Everything about Pope is "noble"—even his eyebrow. Pope is a hub of "genius," and everything connected to him is doused in "wit, wisdom, and truth." Woolf takes the joke a step further: although Orlando has been overtook by the *great man's* magnetism, the

reader is made aware that the supposed “noble... brow” is actually a “hump on a cushion.” Here, Orlando and Pope emerge again into the light:

They drove beneath one of the street lamps in Berkeley Square and she realized her mistake. Mr Pope had a forehead no bigger than another man’s. ‘Wretched man,’ she thought, ‘how you have deceived me! I took that hump for your forehead. When one sees you plain, how ignoble, how despicable you are! Deformed and weakly, there is nothing to venerate in you, much to pity, most to despise. (Woolf, *Orlando* 150-1)

Orlando reaches the pinnacle of her frustrations as she discovers that Pope is not exceptional (and neither is his forehead). Unnerved by how reality can deviate from her expectations, she launches into a succession of insults, calling him “ignoble,” “despicable,” “deformed and weakly.” She claims that there is “nothing” about him to hold in high esteem, and much more to hate. Her reaction amounts to the complete opposite of her previous temper but is still prescribed by preexisting expectations. Once Orlando recovers from the shock of her broken illusions, her biographer expounds:

It was happy for Orlando, though at first disappointing, that this should be so, for she now began to live much in the company of men of genius. Nor were they so different from the rest of us as one might have supposed. Addison, Pope, Swift, proved, she found, to be fond of tea. (Woolf, *Orlando* 152)

Although she is at first dismayed, Orlando grows to be pleased that these men, who she had once put on a pedestal, were not “so different” from herself. Her heroes, the writers that she had believed to be unequaled, turn out to be ordinary people—after all, they are “fond of tea.” She discovers that these *great men* were raised above the rest of society by cultural valuations, not by their everyday wit or intelligence. This conclusion reflects one of Woolf’s larger preoccupations with traditional literary structures. By centering her pseudo-biography on Orlando, Woolf suggests that the *great men* are not the only fit subjects for biography; however, by also presenting these *great men* without veneration or allure, Woolf proposes that the Victorians’ obsession might not even exist. The pedestals they are put on, the greatness and hyper-

masculinity with which are ascribed, make them characterized versions of real people that could never be found in the natural world. Thus Woolf's intervention (into nonfiction and fiction alike) creates an art form that is better grounded in life writing's original, purported focus: capturing narratives of real life on paper.

Of Personality

Because of its investment in connecting with reality over adhering to established literary structures, Woolf's pseudo-biographical form is better disposed to writing a life than either the novel or the biography ever could be. Speaking specifically about the modern Bildungsroman but in a way that applies to other Modernist forms, Castle writes: "Modernism... can be regarded as a dynamic critical project in which aesthetic (especially literary) experimentation is directed at one of the most pressing concerns of the time: How do we define what it is to be a human being?" (1-2). Castle describes Modernism as an experimental project that explores the human experience, making use of unconventional aesthetic and literary techniques. Such a definition seems to sum up Woolf's approach to literature, as we have hitherto described it. In *Orlando*, Woolf updates conventional structures in ways that make them more demonstrative of the lived experience. More specifically, Woolf's experimentation lends itself to exploring time as it is felt and gender as it is perceived, rather than present these facets as they are traditionally expressed in literature. Lived time is not a number on the clock, but the product of several factors; gender is not limited to the great man or the obliging woman, but exists along a spectrum. Ultimately, Woolf demonstrates that people, *real* people, cannot be so simply packaged as traditional literature would have in mind. By creating a fictional character, Woolf does not convince the reader that Orlando is a real person; instead, she insists that Orlando is a work of art that can better demonstrate the human condition. Orlando lived in neither the sixteenth nor the twentieth

century alone; Orlando was neither a man nor a woman exclusively. Albeit exaggerated, is this description not of us? Of ourselves and of the people we know? What are human beings if not the compilation of past and present, of the characteristics traditionally reserved for either men or women?

The self does not exist within these conceptual bounds. Woolf makes this point clear through Orlando, who by the end of the novel, is unmistakably composed of all of her history (from the past to the present) and all of her identities (both male and female), all in one singular body. By means of the biographer, whose voice seems to have coalesced with her own, Woolf remarks:

[Orlando] 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. (*Orlando* 226)

Woolf presents Orlando as made up of various “selves,” or distinct individuals that Orlando can “call upon” as she sees fit. As outlandish as it might sound, there seems to be something more *real* in Woolf’s inventive description of the self than in the stock personalities presented in generic Realism or life writing. Woolf, here, is writing a new kind of character; one that cannot be packaged, summed up, or neatly synthesized. Rose observes in Woolf’s work, “Character was becoming a fluid stream of consciousness, or a discontinuous series of gestures and structures, but not something that could be described in a paragraph and illustrated in a series of dramatic episodes” (195). Orlando in the contemporary moment of 1928, which is where the novel concludes—not at the end of her lifetime but at the cap of what the reader will get of her life story—has become the indiscriminate compilation of all of her selves, and “not something that could be described” through traditional means. Orlando is more than the selves that the

biographer was “able to find room for,” since there is more to a life than that which can be spelled out in a couple hundred pages.

To answer then the question of: “Why biography?” I will do so here explicitly. Biography exists in a privileged position in that it promises to comment on *real* people as they exist in the *real* world. Throughout her writing career, Woolf repeatedly expressed an interest in coming closer to life in literature—what better form is there for Woolf to use as a starting point than the genre that alleges exactly that? However, Woolf recognized deficiencies in biography’s (as she inherited at the turn of the century) ability to accomplish its goal—it simplified life in order to create a well ordered final product and along the way, lost the ability to account for the complexities of experience. With an injection of fiction, however, providing both the freedom from verifiable fact and the chance to borrow from forms like the Bildungsroman that made space for the consideration of larger philosophical questions and psychological growth, Woolf found the best possible balance between the “granite” and the “rainbow,” the truth of fact and the truth of personality.

Ultimately, Elena Gualtieri calls Woolf’s meeting of the biography and the novel, of fact and fiction, “a rhetorical gesture, of a polemical intervention that attempts to change the terms within which biography is practised and understood” (353). Of course, to call *Orlando* a bona fide “biography” is a farce. However, to call the bulk of Victorian biographies “biographies” might be nonsensical as well. In *Orlando*, Woolf does not solve the problems of the biographical form; instead, she suggests a “polemical intervention” for not only the biography but also the realist novel, through which we can work towards a more effective style of life writing that captures all people and all personalities. I will conclude, then, with a quotation from Woolf herself:

“Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers.” (“Modern Fiction” 162)

And for Woolf, that thing which she “[wishes] to express” is life, which has failed to be captured by traditional literary forms.

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