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(Re-)Constructing *her-/history*: Forms
and Functions of Problematising Time
in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*
in the Context of Modernism

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1. Introduction

In a review of Virginia Woolf's 1925 collection of essays, *The Common Reader*, Hussey argues that it shows "a clear thematic interest in reading literary histories and with bridging contemporary reality with the past" (qtd. in McIntire 122), while Albright proposes that Woolf had an "abiding obsession with autobiography" (123). It is this interpenetration between recollection, revision, truth and fictionality that Woolf seemed especially keen to explore in writing *Orlando*, an oeuvre which was supposed "to revolutionise biography in a night" (qtd. in Cooley 71). In *Orlando*, Woolf's (pseudo) biographer-narrator consistently satirises the Victorian conventions of biographical and historical writing – and this metafictional self-reflexivity essentially takes the form of a narrative conflation of various epochs ranging from the Elizabethan Age to the twentieth century into a timeless continuum, thus undermining the belief in a linear developmental personal and historical narrative, in which *his/her*story culminates into a finely conclusive present.

This essay attempts to reveal that the problematisation of the perception of time becomes Woolf's most important disarming device in the arsenal of her anti-novelist's guerrilla warfare to confront both contemporary discussions on the question of identity and on the representation of biography and history. Embedding Woolf's anti-novel in the framework of influential theories mainly by Bergson, Einstein and Freud, it will become evident from the discussion in Chapter II that Woolf's foregrounding of the Bergsonian concept of *durée* not only challenges the artificiality of confining a lifetime to its calendrical span, but also typically exemplifies the modernist understanding of time being subjective and circular as a counter-reaction to the determinist Newtonian belief in linear, external and objectivised concepts of time.

In Chapter III I will further analyse the extent to which time plays a crucial role in criticising the Victorian modes of biographical and historical writing. This debate will first centre around Woolf's major question of how to adequately portray the "granite" and the "rainbow", the solid fact and the less tangible individuality of a life (Woolf 95). In trying to dismantle the seemingly antagonistic concepts of historicity and fictionality, I will then turn my attention to Woolf's examination of fiction in historiography and her understanding of a cyclical philosophy of history. Finally, I will supplement this analysis by bringing the different strands of interpretation I have mentioned together in a spirit of critical evaluation and create a unified whole.

2. The problematisation of *temps* as a modernist reaction to a linear and objectivised concept of time and its effect on the perception of identity

Signs of the twentieth century's preoccupation with time can be readily discerned in the frequency with which the modern novel develops a dialectic between the Bergsonian concepts of *temps* and *durée*. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is an illuminating illustration of this concern, for it examines the "extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind" (Woolf 95). *Orlando* traces through more than three centuries a protagonist whose life is based upon the life of Vita Sackville West and the careers of various members of the Knole and Sackville family (cf. Goldman 65). In moving so deftly and so rapidly from one age to the following – Orlando is a young man in the reign of Elizabeth I and ends up as a woman of 36 in the present moment, precisely marked at the year of the book's publication, 1928 –, Woolf is able to delineate the subjective qualities of time by carefully examining the inner life of her Tiresias-like protagonist, which frequently draws attention to the ephemeral and the flowing. As German and Kaehele have rightly observed, *Orlando* is permeated with various images of flight and flowing and with descriptions of and references to objects – such as water, birds, candles and feathers – symbolising movement and transience (cf. German and Kaehele 36). When Orlando enjoys a rush of joy and "ecstasy", for instance, he feels that the "birds sang; the torrents rushed" (Woolf 149). Orlando thinks of Sasha as "the spring and green grass and rushing waters" (52), as "the waves of the sea when you look down upon them from a height" (45); she compares him to "a million-candled Christmas tree" (52); when dubious of Sasha's fidelity, Orlando thinks of himself as a great fish "rushed through the waters unwillingly" (51). Birds serve as symbols of Love, Lust and Happiness (cf. Woolf 112/113). Not only on the content level is the subjective sense of time as being fluid and circular foregrounded; Woolf also resorts to the stream of consciousness technique to highlight this fleeting and flowing quality of time.

In a passage describing "the extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind" (95), Woolf further refers to the mortality of animals and plants and, by inference, to the dissolution of man's mind, the vital recorder of human time:

But Time ... 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. (94/95)

It becomes transparent from this passage that the comforting objectivity and regularity of historical and clock time (*temps*) are almost irrelevant in view of the individual's greater dependence upon his subjective sense of time (*durée*). "In its subjective reaction to temporal reality", as German and Kaehele correctly point out, "the mind comprehends time as a continuous flow" (36). According to Woolf, this chaotic, fleeting and impalpable state of mind is so pervasive that she condemns experiences which make consciousness discontinuous. Because "external, linear chronologies have little to do with the inner experience of time which can be complicated, paradoxical, and totally at variance with how things appear on the surface" (Rosenthal 139), Woolf consequently remains sceptical about the biographer's attempt to squeeze any life into a conveniently measurable time frame. Explicitly theorising Orlando's fantastic longevity, she explains:

And indeed, it cannot be denied that the most successful practitioners of the art of life ... somehow contrive to synchronise the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system so that when eleven strikes, all the rest chime in unison, and the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in the past. Of them we can justly say that they live precisely the sixty-eight or seventy-two years allotted to them on the tombstone. Of the rest some we know to be dead though they walk among us; some are not yet born though they go through the forms of life; others are hundreds of years old though they call themselves thirty-six. The true length of a person's life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute. (291)

Since the manner in which people experience the variety of times at work within as well as outside of themselves is crucially related to the way in which they experience their own selves, Dick concludes that "a mere account of years lived does not necessarily add up to the true length of a person's life" (64).

This accentuation of a subjectivised concept of time profoundly affecting human consciousness is inevitably linked with a complexification of identity. Toward the end of the narration, *Orlando's* biographer juxtaposes a theoretical statement about the indeterminacy of temporality with an assertion about an equally mathematically dizzying multitude of selves. Noting that "there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the minds at once" (Woolf 293), the narrator entreats the reader:

how many different people are there not – Heaven help us – all having lodgement at one time or another in the human spirit? Some say two thousand and fifty-two ... these selves of which we are built up, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own ... so that one will only come if it is raining, another in a room with green curtains ... [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. (293-295)

Woolf here already anticipates a fundamental key tenet of postmodernist thought that Lyotard formulated 51 years later in *The Postmodern Condition*. Personality can no longer be considered a coherent, stable, overarching “Grand Narrative”, but must be deconstructed to reveal a series of “mininarratives” (qtd. in Barry 86) which are provisional, contingent and relative, thus corresponding to the myriad of temporal selves Woolf is so eager to explore in *Orlando*. Trying to pull a viable identity together out of the welter of the past is consequently doomed to failure as Orlando is faced with a particularly bewildering array of various temporal selves:

Choosing, then, only those selves we have found room for, Orlando may now have called on the boy who cut the nigger’s head down; the boy who strung it up again; the boy who sat on the hill; the boy who saw the poet; the boy who handed the Queen the bowl of rose water; or she may have called upon the young man who fell in love with Sasha; or upon the Courtier; or upon the Ambassador; or upon the Soldier; or upon the Traveller; or she may have wanted the woman to come to her; the Gipsy; the Fine Lady; the Hermit; the girl in love with life; the Patroness of Letters; (Woolf 295)

A life covering three centuries and a miraculous sexual transformation certainly do not make selection easy. What is she? Is she the young nobleman, the Turkish Ambassador, the gipsy, the wife of Shelmerdine? Musing on her present status and personality, she thinks aloud:

What then? Who then? ... Thirty-six; in a motor car; a woman. Yes, but a million other things as well. A snob am I? The garter in the hall? The leopards? My ancestors? Proud of them? Yes! Greedy, luxurious, vicious? Am I? ... Truthful? I think so. Generous? (296)

Among these disparate selves, Woolf adds, is a Key Self which has the power to amalgamate and control the other selves, though it itself is unresponsive to conscious, willed control. This self is what she describes as “the conscious self, which is the uppermost ... This is what some people call the true self, and it is, they say, compact of all the selves we have it in us to be” (ibid.). Here, Woolf undoubtedly shows an allegiance to the Freudian theory of the conscious self which is reined by dark and hidden impulses from the unconscious, while simultaneously being controlled by the internalised norms and values of the so-called *Über-Ich*. As for the function of this Key Self in Orlando’s life, German and Kaehele suggest: “With the seemingly fortuitous addition of the Key Self, Orlando becomes a ‘real self’... [who] is able to observe reality with greater satisfaction ‘as if her mind had become a fluid that flowed round things and enclosed them completely’” (38).

However, the attempt of reaching this ideal state of inner equilibrium seems almost destined to fail due to the ubiquitous presence of clock time cruelly announcing the present moment. *Orlando* is replete with a consistent negative connotation of

external clock time, the Bergsonian concept of *temps*. When, for example, the sixteenth-century Orlando was stood up by his lover Sasha with whom he wanted to elope at midnight, the present moment hit him with full force, painfully unfolding Sasha's treachery with the loud bang of St Paul's striking midnight: "Suddenly, with an awful and ominous voice, a voice full of horror and alarm which raised every hair of anguish in Orlando's soul, St Paul's struck the first stroke of midnight. Four times more it struck remorselessly" (Woolf 58). As Orlando's disillusionment grows, the anthropomorphic clock becomes increasingly volatile and violent:

With the superstition of a lover, Orlando had made out that it was on the sixth stroke that she would come. But the sixth stroke echoed away, and the seventh came and the eighth, and to his apprehensive mind they seemed notes first heralding and then proclaiming death and disaster. When the twelfth struck he knew that his doom was sealed ... The passionate and feeling heart of Orlando knew the truth. Other clocks struck, jangling one after another. The whole world seemed to ring with the news of her deceit and his derision. (*ibid.*)

This cunning intertwining of clock time and the shock of the present is a recurring leitmotif of Woolf's anti-novel which becomes all the more threatening throughout the narration. Summarising the contrast between the ages Orlando left behind and the one into which s/he is entering, the clock plays a crucial role in determining historical change with a gloomy and remorseless force:

She heard the far-away cry of the night watchman – 'Just twelve o'clock on a frosty morning.' No sooner had the words left his lips than the first stroke of midnight sounded. Orlando then ... noticed a small cloud gathered behind the dome of St Paul's. As the strokes sounded, the cloud increased, and she saw it darken and spread with extraordinary speed ... As the ninth, tenth, and eleventh strokes struck, a huge blackness sprawled over the whole of London. With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was darkness; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun. (215-216)

This looming presence of clock time reaches its climax in the last section when the biographer conveys Orlando's agony over the fact that she has arrived in the present moment:

the clock ticking on the mantelpiece beat like a hammer. And so for some seconds the light went on becoming brighter and brighter, and she saw everything more and more clearly and the clock ticked louder and louder until there was a terrific explosion right in her ear. Orlando leapt as if she had been violently struck on the head. Ten times she was struck. In fact it was ten o'clock in the morning. It was the eleventh of October. It was 1928. It was the present moment. (284)

Woolf continues to explain this "great shock to the nervous system, hearing a clock strike" (292) as follows: "For what more terrifying revelation can there be than that it is the present moment? That we survive the shock at all is only possible because the past shelters us on one side and the future on another" (285). Past and future are where safety lies, protecting us with the "shelter" of an architectural support from the intensity of the present. The present is a "narrow plank" (*ibid.*) that one crosses, and it "fell from

her like drops of scalding water” (286). Unless one belongs to the few who “somehow contrive to synchronise the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system” (291), one is always vulnerable to the “violent” (ibid.) force of the present: “as she stood with her hand on the door of her motor-car, the present again struck her on her head. Eleven times she was violently assaulted” (292). The present is terrifying because it is where all time perpetually conjoins, and with it all possibility – hence Orlando’s fear that “whenever the gulf of time gaped and let a second through some unknown danger might come with it” becomes understandable (306). Part of the disdain for the “narrow plank” (285) of the present also occurs because of Woolf’s sense that it constrains and reduces us. Characterised by its extreme and eternal brevity, the present leaves insufficient room for the multiple and endlessly proliferating turnings of memory that Woolf wants to celebrate because it is only “a shadow without substance or quality of its own, yet has the power to change whatever it adds itself to” (307). McIntire (136) succinctly summarises this perpetual tension as follows: “The present exists as an unstable ground of assault between the unknowable and the knowable, its unravelling is always uncertain, and it represents a frightening domain of immediate experience.” In the last pages, the present literally batters Orlando down: When “some church clock chimed in the valley ... The present showered down upon her head once more” (Woolf 311). Similar to the apocalyptic quality of the ominous voice announcing with increasing frequency “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME” in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (59-61), time in *Orlando* indeed means death: “The present of Orlando ... means the end of the future, since reaching the present equals reaching the end of the story” (McIntire 137). Thus, the novel’s present denotes the death of the novel’s subject.

Yet, despite this destructive force of clock time, Woolf nevertheless emphasises forces in the mind and certain perspectives that can temporarily free the individual from the tyranny of time. In focusing on Orlando’s attempt to resolve the continual tension between time on the clock and time on the mind, she persistently highlights the salvaging and repairing powers of memory and narration. In accordance with Proust’s delineation of the *mémoire involontaire* (cf. Proust 57/58), Woolf equally depicts Orlando’s consciousness as being compounded of sense impressions, recollections and emotions. Both seem to suggest that the mind’s ability to recall the past is a mode of escaping the onrush of the present manner. “Armed with memory, the individual is able to deal with the present moment so that it need not create a ‘violent disruption’ in the

consciousness” (German and Kaehele 38). Consistent with Freud’s insistence on the force of the unconscious and the concomitant questioning of human autonomy, Woolf describes memory as a powerful yet uncertain ally which has its limitations in the individual’s struggle against time because it is so uncontrollable:

Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. Thus, the most ordinary movement in the world, such as sitting down at a table and pulling the inkstand towards one, may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim, hanging and bobbing and dipping and flaunting ... Instead of being a single, downright, bluff piece of work of which no man need feel ashamed, our commonest deeds are set about with a fluttering and flickering of wings, a rising and falling of lights. (75/76)

In this disquisition on capitalised “Memory”, Woolf maintains that “she” is what holds together the randomness of human experience, albeit in unpredictable ways. Even though “Memory is inexplicable”, as Woolf contends (76), “she” is charged with arranging past experience into a discernible symbolic order that the psyche can both carry and understand. German and Kaehele go a step further in interpreting the role of memory as one of securing one’s identity: “Memory, with its associational ties, gives proof that the individual has a self or identity which resists flux” (38), however “capricious” (Woolf 75) it may be. Here Woolf clearly approximates Ricoeur’s insightful thesis of some 50 years later which similarly makes clear that the act of narration – which needless to say requires the capacity to memorise – creates an enduring, coherent sense of identity by providing order and synthesis to the chaos of life’s fragments. This perspective is particularly reinforced by Orlando’s literary achievement of her poem, “The Oak Tree”, offering stability and coherence to her life experience and identity. Reflecting upon this “sea-stained, blood-stained, travel-stained ... manuscript” (226), the nineteenth-century Orlando experiences a moment of revelation in her artistic journey of self-discovery:

She turned back to the first page and read the date, 1586, written in her own boyish hand. She had been working at it for close on three hundred years now. It was time to make an end. Meanwhile 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; ... yet through all these changes she had remained, she reflected fundamentally the same. (ibid.)

Woolf’s portrayal of the act of memorising and narrating as a powerful antagonist to clock time along with her foregrounding of both subjectivised concepts of time and a “‘new’ subject-matter” (Marsh 195) must be regarded as a serious concern with the perception of time shared by many of her contemporary writers. In the context of the artist’s scepticism about the increasing mechanisation and industrialisation of the modern world their preference for subjectivised concepts of time as opposed to clock

time was not a coincidental choice, but a reaction to radical intellectual developments in science (Einstein, Rutherford, Heisenberg), philosophy (Bergson, Nietzsche), psychoanalysis (Freud) and modern linguistics (de Saussure) (cf. Nünning/ Sommer 47; Lewis 22-25; Whitworth 146; Ward Jouve 245) which lead to a profound collapse of objectivity – hence Orlando’s comic reminder that “we are now in the region of ‘perhaps’ and ‘appears’” (Woolf 295). Whitworth particularly stresses the Bergsonian concept of *durée* along with Einstein’s theory of relativity as key influences on Woolf’s works (cf. Whitworth 146-147). Einstein’s main discovery was that standardised measures of time were dependent on the frame of reference. Along with Einstein, Bergson too reconceived time as a perceptual construct that is dependent on the perception of the observer, therefore seeking access to the flux of immediate experience in his studies (cf. Bergson 137). In considering these groundbreaking investigations as a counter-reaction to Newtonian science, Lewis draws the following conclusion: “time no longer appeared to progress forward in a homogeneous fashion, and the theory of relativity seemed to discredit nineteenth-century notions of progress as well as Enlightenment conceptions of time and space” (25). Turning to *Orlando*, Woolf’s anti-novel not only subscribes to the Bergsonian understanding of time being subjective and circular, but also offers a literary equivalent of Einstein’s claim that “every reference body has its own particular time”, which should be represented by “as many clocks as we like” (qtd. in Lewis 165). Especially her telescoping of time counters the determinist Newtonian concept of linearity and calculability in an unusual way.

3. The biographer as historiographer: Criticism of the Victorian conventions of biographical and historical writing

When Woolf first recorded the idea for *Orlando*, she conceived of it as a part of a project that would be “like a grand historical picture, the outlines of all my friends” (qtd. in Goldman 65) which “should be *truthful*; but *fantastic*” (qtd. in Bowlby xvii, my italics), and no statement could more neatly split up into two parts the difficulty biographers and historiographers necessarily face. As with the “fact and fantasy” of the genre of biography, Woolf had set up the difficulty of life writing in her earlier essay “The New Biography” as one of trying to find a *modus scribendi* that might do justice to both the “granite” and the “rainbow”, the solid fact and the less tangible evanescence

of a life (Woolf 95). Next to the biography's disqualification for dealing with these "rainbow"-like aspects of life, memoirs traditionally narrate events, but perpetuate the fallacy that events define a person. "The Victorian biography" in particular, Woolf claims, "was a parti-coloured, hybrid, monstrous birth" (96) due to its failure to give "a truthful transmission of personality" (qtd. in Woolf 95). Contending that alongside "truth in its hardest, most obdurate form", with its "almost mystic power" (95), biography demands the supplement of "personality": "All the draperies and decencies of biography fall to the ground. We can no longer maintain that life consists in actions only or in works. It consists in personality" (96).

This explicit debunking of the ideals of Victorian biography manifests itself in extended parenthetical interjections of Woolf's biographer, offering embedded self-conscious critiques of his aims, methods and limits. Similar to the narrator of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, he persistently interrupts the narrative flow to comment on his own approach, suggesting, for example, that he strives "to fulfil the first duty of the biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth" (63); that he has the right to "lay bare rudely ... curious trait[s]" about his subject (27); that "killing a wasp ... is a fitter subject for novelist or biographer than this mere wool-gathering; this thinking" (255); that "though we must pause not a moment in the narrative we may here hastily note that all his images at this time were simple in the extreme" (36); and he asserts that "riot and confusion of the passions and emotions" are things that "every good biographer detests" (16). Bearing in mind Woolf's life-long criticism of biography's spurious claims to objectivity, these gestures are certainly parodic, implying instead that such objective distancing is yet another impossibility.

Biography, Woolf insists, involves the knowledge of being *subjected to* the demands of one's subject in his most intimate modes of being. The biographer in *Orlando* thus disrupts that traditional paradigm of objective distance from the subject of his study by devoting extensive attention to both the inner world of Orlando and her outer appearance, above all admiring her beauty and cleverness. As McIntire correctly notices, this "enchantment/ enchainment" (125) with his subject becomes especially apparent in the "intense identification and mimetic attachment" to Orlando (131). In describing the way Orlando's "mind worked ... in violent see-saws from life to death, stopping at nothing in between" (Woolf 44), Woolf highlights that the biographer is, in fact, riveted to the "violent see-saws" of his subject's psyche and compelled to "keep

pace” with the vagaries of mood, action and speech to come close to a real portrait: “the biographer must not stop either, but must fly as fast as he can and so keep pace with the unthinking passionate foolish actions and sudden extravagant words in which, it is impossible to deny, Orlando at this time of his life indulged” (ibid.).

Turning to the omnipresence of *Orlando*’s biographer-narrator who is conspicuously before us everywhere, scrutinising and commenting on his sentences even as he composes them, this explicit self-consciousness is in itself already a comic means of further ridiculing the Victorian’s insistence on objectivity. McIntire interprets this metafictional self-reflexivity as follows:

This emphasis on the biographer as a subject of his own rendition again argues for his presence as both extrinsic and intrinsic to the text, proposing that in constructing an object of Otherness every biographer is working at the boundaries of the strange intimacies of historical and mnemonic interpretation (123).

Later in “The New Biography” Woolf expressly alerts us to this necessary imposition of the author’s character on the biography he or she creates:

He [the biographer] is as much the subject of his own irony and observation as they [his characters] are. He lies in wait for his own absurdities as artfully as for theirs. Indeed, by the end of the book we realise that the figure which has been most completely and most subtly displayed is that of the author (99).

Another way of mocking the Victorian’s strife for factual objectivity at the expense of the “rainbow”- like aspects of life is Woolf’s “parody of documentary exactitude” (Bowby xxxi). As if the evidence could ‘speak for itself’, Orlando’s biographer obsessively tries to rely on historical documents whenever possible. But sometimes Woolf admits, when sources are destroyed as in the case of the records dealing with Orlando’s tenure as ambassador to Turkey, other measures must be employed:

Just when we thought to elucidate a secret that has puzzled historians for a hundred years, there was a hole in the manuscript big enough to put your finger through. 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*. (115, my italics)

This “use of the imagination” becomes Woolf’s prime focus when trying to portray a “truthful transmission of personality” (qtd. in Woolf 95) and is explicitly highlighted in her essays on biographical writing. While describing the shift away from what she dismissed as the too selective and reverential modes of the nineteenth-century kind of biography, Woolf singles out Lytton Strachey’s “three famous books, *Eminent Victorians*, *Queen Victoria*, and *Elizabeth and Essex*” (1918-28) in “The Art of Biography” for marking a paradigmatic change in biographic writing (117):

at last it was possible to tell the truth about the dead; and the Victorian age was rich in remarkable figures many of whom had been grossly deformed by the effigies that had been plastered over them. To recreate them, to show them as they really were, was a task that called for gifts analogous to the poet's or the novelist's (118).

In order to render the “truth” of “personality” (95), “to show them as they really were” (118) Woolf emphasises in “The New Biography” that “facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity” (95). In this way, as *Orlando* is asked to be read both (auto) biographically as well as fictionally, it is, as Bowlby rightly recognises, “straightaway a tease to the [Victorian] conventions which ought to be keeping fiction and real lives officially separate” (xix).

But the most consistent form of upsetting these traditional modes of biographical writing is Woolf's turning around the temporal twist. In order to mock the Victorian fallacy that a “life consists in actions only” (Woolf 96) the seemingly important ‘life-defining’ events in *Orlando* such as the marriage with Shelmerdine or the birth of her sons are only mentioned peripherally, sometimes even in brackets. Surprisingly, toward the end of the novel Orlando gives birth to another son without the reader even knowing she has been expecting, and we learn of the event in just two isolated sentences: “It's a very fine boy, M'Lady, said Mrs. Banting, the midwife, putting her first-born child into Orlando's arms. In other words Orlando was safely delivered of a son on Thursday, March the 20th, at three o'clock in the morning” (282). This child would then be a sibling to the eighteenth-century male Orlando's “three sons” whom he fathered with the “gypsy”, Rosina Pepita (161) – and here we only learn about these sons much later after her sexual transformation when “the chief charges against her” were read out (ibid.). In a further instance Orlando finds herself an alien in nineteenth-century culture which insists on a respectable marital state for all its citizens. As she apparently cannot rise above the acute discomfort and creative blockage caused by the absence of a thin gold band on the appropriate finger of her left hand (cf. Woolf 229), she goes on to succumb to this irrepressible urge for a wedding ring, to finally “yield completely and submissively to the spirit of the age” (232) - which, in another reversal of the ‘normal’ temporal sequence, she then proceeds to procure and wear as an item of apparel before a husband conveniently shows up as the proper accessory to go with it (cf. Bowlby xxxvi).

The most fantastic and phantasmatic means of suspending any form of linear chronology is Woolf's blurring of several centuries into a timeless continuum. When it

gradually dawns on Orlando that she has arrived in the present, Woolf explicitly presents a kaleidoscopic vision of the various centuries Orlando had left behind:

It [the sky] was no longer so thick, so watery, so prismatic now that King Edward – see, there he was, stepping out of his neat brougham to go and visit a certain lady opposite – had succeeded Queen Victoria ... But it was now ... in the evening that the change was most remarkable. Look at the lights in the houses! ... There was something definite and distinct about the age, which reminded her of the eighteenth century...- as she was thinking this, the immensely long tunnel in which she seemed to have been travelling for hundreds of years widened; the light poured in; her thoughts became mysteriously tightened. (282-284)

This telescoping of time clearly rejects the Victorian “pyramidal accumulation” (qtd. in Whitworth 154) that consists in a system of order based on ideas of linearity and hierarchy. By featuring a biographical subject who moves effortlessly through a life that lasts hundreds of years Woolf ultimately contends that time, consciousness and identity are “commensurately unknowable and unrepresentable” (McIntire 127) since *writing time* and *writing a life* can each only be stabs at the problem of representation.

Satirical stabs are also directed at the representation of historical writing which, amazingly, many scholars have failed to recognise. Not regarding *Orlando* as an exemplum of the anti-novel, German and Kaehele, speaking for many, simply assume that Woolf “depict[s] the distinctive qualities of four centuries of English history” (35). This naïve observation perfectly concurs with the equally narrow-minded assumption of McIntire who does not look at *Orlando* through the lens of satire, either: “What Woolf gives us ... is a self-consciously imperfect shadow of larger English history” (130).

Wilson, by contrast, corrects these misleading statements by stressing that “Woolf uses the device of saying just what she does not want us to think” (179). Instead of presenting a neat panorama of English history, Woolf displays a profound scepticism about attempts to describe History with a capital H. Wilson, for example, detects in *Orlando* many reductionist elements in the representation of history along with prejudices we have towards certain ages. With respect to Woolf’s large cast of poets and essayists turning up with unfailing regularity in every age, Wilson postulates that *Orlando* is to be considered a “general debunking of the great-men theory of history” (178). Apart from this “rollicking ridicule of the patriarchy” (ibid.), this is another way of caricaturing the portrayal of historical periods by means of a few leading characters of literary and political note set against a general cultural background. So, when Orlando is pouring out tea to Addison and Pope just as the clichéd image would lead us to expect, Woolf discloses our prejudiced one-sided lenses with which we regard certain ages (cf. Woolf 202).

The representation of historical differences is not exempt from her critique, either. In following Orlando through such an extended interval, Woolf is able to tease out some of the assumptions about the nature of historical change and – inseparably – how it can be narrated by the historian. The narrator seems positively to take pleasure in Orlando’s temporal mobility, ending and beginning chapters with loud summaries of the contrasts between the age just gone and the one into which s/he is entering. Here is one example of Chapter V:

Thus, stealthily and imperceptibly, none marking the exact day or hour of the change, the constitution of England was altered and nobody knew it. Everywhere the effects were felt. The hardy country gentleman, who had sat down gladly to a meal of ale and beef in a room designed, perhaps by the brothers Adam, with classic dignity, now felt chilly. Rugs appeared; beards were grown; trousers were fastened tight under the instep. The chill which he felt in his legs the country gentleman soon transferred to his house; furniture was muffled; walls and tables were covered; nothing was left bare. (218)

Bowlby comments upon this specific passage as follows:

Here, too, the narrator is both mocking a certain kind of reduction of cultural history to visual tableaux and also suggesting that these details of ordinary living are precisely the things that make the differences between one time or one culture and another in the way that we imagine them (xxx).

In its broader implications, Bowlby draws attention to the way in which historical narratives do often covertly rely on quite arbitrary temporal and atmospheric markers. Highlighting Woolf’s portrayal of the ambiguity and arbitrariness of periodic markers, she explains how accustomed we are “to seeing the ‘swinging’ sixties, the ‘grey’ recession seventies, and the ‘me-generation’ eighties as three separate periods with distinct ‘climates’ of activity and thought” (xxx). Here, the telescoping of time in *Orlando* again plays an enormous role in undermining this notion and instead seems to reveal Woolf’s interest in presenting a cyclical philosophy of history expounded by the eighteenth-century philosopher Giambattista Vico.

From another angle, the question of how to ‘show’ a given period – Woolf’s “grand historical picture” (qtd. Goldman 65) – is pointed up by the parodic focus on the already mentioned documentary exactitude. A blank space on the page which the reader must think to be “filled to repletion” (Woolf 242), and a footnote explaining that Alexander Pope’s witticisms are omitted from the text because “these sayings are too well known to require repetition, and besides, they are all to be found in his published works” (193) are only some of the numerous instances of this self-mocking spirit. Most memorably, the biographer gives the inventory of what Orlando buys to refurbish her mansion some time in the seventeenth-century: “To seventeen dozen boxes containing each dozen five dozen of Venice glasses ... ‘To one hundred and two mats, each thirty

yards long ...” (105). These instances again tend to illustrate Woolf’s debunking of the Victorians’ claims for objectivity.

In sum, all those aspects should be regarded as symptomatic of a larger concern Woolf is so eager to point up to in *Orlando*, that is the crossing over of narrativity in historicity and historicity in narrativity. According to Bowlby, this debate can be tied back to the late Enlightenment-crisis of historiography: “Woolf’s own perspective derives from the nineteenth century literary interest in the idea of history as a matter of imaginative reconstructions rather than factual record” (xxxii). When Woolf was already halfway through the composition of *Orlando*, she wrote to Clive Bell about the endeavour of writing history, already dissolving the distinction between historiography and fictionality: “Does it strike you that history is one of the most *fantastic* concoctions of the human brain? That it bears the remotest likeness to *truth* seems to me unthinkable ... Ought it not all to be rewritten instantly?” (qtd. in McIntire 132). Here Woolf comes remarkably close to Hayden White’s assumption formulated some 45 years later in *Metahistory*. Highlighting the overlap between historicity and narrativity, White states:

In order to figure “what *really* happened” in the past ... the historian must first *prefigure* as a possible object of knowledge the whole set of events reported in the documents. This prefigurative act is *poetic* inasmuch as it is precognitive and precritical in the economy of the historian’s own consciousness. (30/31)

In *Orlando*, Woolf even goes so far as to escalate this fictive character of historiography into a complete inventedness of events so as to emphasise the constructedness of history. The Great Frost and the 1604 ice-carnival dance on the Thames (cf. Woolf 32/33), as Woolf reports to Sackville West in a letter, were only inventions (cf. McIntire 133). Quite amazingly, though, the British upper class read *Orlando* with a kind of an acute literality, not only interpreting it as a faithful and worthy portrait of themselves, but even (re-) enacting the ice carnival dance five years after the novel was published (cf. *ibid*). These subjective and thus imaginative traces of historiography become especially transparent in the radical subjectivity of *Orlando*’s narration which consistently calls attention to its own status as fiction.

All in all, both biographical and historical writing share a disqualification for capturing an ‘objective’ and ‘authentic’ account of either individual or collective stories. Explicitly making a connection between biography and history, Woolf’s biographer informs us:

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. (184)

Whilst historical writing is already inevitably narrative due to selection and personal convictions, biographical writing, in Woolf's view, should make use of fictionality to portray the evanescence of personality. In both cases, the ultimate "TRUTH!" (Woolf 132) is a mere phantasmagoria.

4. Conclusion

After having outlined the subversive motive of *Orlando*'s telescoping of time as one of excoriating the Victorian conventions of biographical and historical writing under the guise of satire, Woolf's extraordinary scepticism about the biographer's attempt to squeeze any life into a discursive frame measured neatly by diachronic time has become apparent by her mapping a confluence of multiple temporalities *and* multiple identities. For Woolf, the self is fragmented yet fluid, trying to maintain harmony with the unstable external world by perpetually accommodating to inner and outer flux. In a world where the shredding and slicing of clock time is challenged by the artist's foregrounding of an extreme subjectification of time, memory and narration seal a pact in freeing the individual from the dominion of *temps* while further offering coherence to experience and identity. Especially *Orlando*'s merger of various epochs into a timeless continuum is to be regarded as a modernist counter-reaction to the Newtonian notion of external, objectivised time and linear progress in individual and collective stories. While challenging this Enlightenment idea of events as moving toward one great goal, Woolf's biographical experiment with blending fictionality with the residues of the historical past not only adumbrates a dynamic conglomerate of life and fictionality in biographical writing, but also dissolves the boundary between historical writing and fictional phantasy in historiography. In this way *Orlando* self-consciously straddles the "queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow" (Woolf 100), thus urging us to consider again the blurred territories between fictionality, truth, history and biography.

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