



HAL
open science

Biographical Truth as Represented in Virginia Woolf's Orlando: A Biography

Maryam Thirriard

► **To cite this version:**

Maryam Thirriard. Biographical Truth as Represented in Virginia Woolf's Orlando: A Biography. Joanny Moulin; Nguyen Phuong Ngoc; Yannick Gouchan. La vérité d'une vie., Honoré Champion, 2019. hal-02534643

HAL Id: hal-02534643

<https://hal.science/hal-02534643>

Submitted on 27 Apr 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

La Vérité d'une vie

Études sur la véridiction
en biographie

Textes réunis par Joanny Moulin,
Nguyễn Phương Ngọc et Yannick Gouchan



HONORÉ CHAMPION
PARIS

CHAPITRE XVIII

BIOGRAPHICAL TRUTH AS REPRESENTED IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO*: *A BIOGRAPHY*

The purpose of this article is to define and expound on the truth to be found in the biographical representations of Woolf's fantastical text, *Orlando*, and also to provide a framework for an assessment of that truth.

Biography has long been acknowledged to be a literary genre in the English-speaking world, as attested in reference sources such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* or the *Encyclopedia Britannica*¹. Biography's aim is to give an account of the life (hi)story of a genuine subject and, in that respect, it is also a form of historiography. This hybridity elicits the complexity of a double and overlapping framework involved in biographical representation: the framework concerned with the writing process and the framework concerned with the interpretation process.

The question of biographical truth in *Orlando* belongs to a broader spectrum of investigation which deals with the modes of representation in biographical writing used by a specific group of writers who, in the 1920s and 1930s, developed a new form of modernist biography, called "The New Biography" by Virginia Woolf in her essay of 1927. Lytton Strachey, Harold Nicolson and André Maurois were Woolf's *new biographers* and she brought them together in what she defined as a "new school of biographies".²

How is it possible to consider that there is any biographical truth in *Orlando*, which narrates the life story of an Elizabethan courtier that exceeds three hundred years? The first question to ask is: what does *Orlando* represent? At the time of its publishing, it was no mystery for the tuned-in reader that Orlando stood for Woolf's friend and lover at the

¹ According to the *OED*, "Biography is considered a literary genre" and in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, biography is defined as a "literary form".

² Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", *Granite and Rainbow*, New York, Harcourt & Brace, 1958, p. 149-155, p. 152.

time, the writer Vita Sackville-West; but, in which way can that particular mode of representation be defined?

In Woolf's vision of biography, only the techniques of literary fiction had the required creativity to grasp and convey truth about a subject. *Orlando* is a direct application of Woolf's theories in "the New Biography"; these two texts were contemporary in their writing and were published respectively in 1928 and 1927. Once Woolf had set her mind on writing the biography of a feminine subject, as her journal records,³ she soon chose Vita as a subject and wrote to her: "suppose Orlando turns out to be about Vita; and it's all about you and the lure of your mind [...] Shall you mind?"; to which Vita responded: "if ever I was thrilled and terrified it is at the prospect of being projected into the shape of Orlando"⁴. On October 5, 1926, Virginia noted in her diary "And instantly the usual exciting devices enter my mind: a biography beginning in the year 1500 and continuing in the present day, called Orlando: Vita, only with a change about from one sex to another". To a certain extent, the character of Orlando can be considered an extended metaphor, constructed to emphasise the vividness in Woolf's image of Vita Sackville West. Woolf's theories preceded—and possibly contributed to—a conviction which developed within the humanities during the twentieth century, eventually taking on the name of *linguistic turn*, that, in our quest for truthfulness in representation, literariness is ineluctable. This has been extensively expounded upon in the field the philosophy of history by historiographers such Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur who have demonstrated the literary nature of historiographical formulation. French historian and prize-winning novelist Ivan Jablonka's more recent contribution, *L'Histoire est une littérature contemporaine*, takes up the same thread and goes a step further in defining the historian's hermeneutical act as being inherently literary. For the New Biography this literariness is not a burden for the biographer; on the contrary, for them literature became the starting point. Virginia Woolf and André Maurois theorised this in their respective texts "The New Biography" and *Aspects of Biography* (1929). The *new biographers* were convinced that literariness was the best means to convey truth because it is precisely the literary processing of a fact that creates its historical meaning.

³ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume 3: 1925-1930*. San Diego-New York, Harcourt Brace and Company, 1981, p. 131.

⁴ Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell Leaska, eds. *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf*, San Francisco, Cleis Press, 1984, p. 238.

In fine, in which manner can we relevantly discuss truthfulness in such an unconventional biographical text as *Orlando*? How are we to perceive the distinctions or connections between aspects of fiction and biography? Ivan Jablonka, argues in favour of considering historical writing as a literary act, securely bridging the activities of the writer of history and of the writer of fiction, and opening up a passage for the historian to explore as a method of investigation. However, historian and philosopher Frank Ankersmit reverses the perspective: although he acknowledges that both the writing of history and the writing of novels share much common ground, he places himself initially in the perspective of historical narratives and discusses the assessment of their truth value; he then suggests to apply these conclusions to the literary theory concerned with representation in the novel. His claim is essentially that historical truth lies in representation, which he points out to be a central theme for both the writing of historical texts and novels. In other words, the philosophy of history can provide a framework for understanding truth in representation. This paper highlights the way in which both these perspectives can be brought together to contribute to reveal and assess biographical truth, in addition to historiographical truth, in *Orlando*, and, more precisely, how far *Orlando* reads as a genuine biography of Vita Sackville-West.

Woolf had a life time of experimentation with historiographical writing, exploring the inherent narrativity of historical texts⁵. *Orlando* is a constant questioning of the text's capacity to convey truth, as can be seen in the biographer-narrator's assertion that 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"⁶. This reflects the modernist belief that positivistic history had failed to convey the past and that the "amorphous mass" characteristic of Victorian biography in Woolf's essay "The New Biography", failed to convey any sense of life⁷. Woolf grasped that novels, on the other hand, had succeeded to do so. This is what she is referring to in her later essay "The Art of Biography", in which she refuses to consider Biography as an art. Many critics have read this later essay as Woolf's acknowledgement of the failure of biography as an art,

⁵ Angeliki Spiropoulou, *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History: Constellations with Walter Benjamin*, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 48.

⁶ V. Woolf, *Orlando*, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

⁷ V. Woolf, *Orlando*, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

although an alternative reading would bring to the fore that it meant biography had failed *up to then*, for lack of sufficient literary style or imagination. In Woolf's earlier essay "The New Biography", Harold Nicolson is presented as having come near to attaining this ideal with *Some People*, and one of his main tactics was the subversion of the biographer's discourse while offering, in parallel, the art of the novelist, in which truth is achieved through effective metaphor. Likewise, in *Orlando*, which is contemporary with *Some People*, fictionalisation was a strategy that enabled Woolf to gain that truthfulness, unattainable by merely listing bare facts. In *Metahistory*, Hayden White claims that this is what historians do anyway: they organise—or *emplot*—historical data into a literary narrative. White developed the idea of the "narrational performativity" of a text and his structuralist approach allowed him to observe how prominent historians of the nineteenth century built their historical narratives on the mode of the main literary genres. He sums up his concept again in *The Content of the Form*:

When the reader recognizes the story being told in a historical narrative as a specific kind of story—for example, as an epic, romance, tragedy, comedy, or farce—he can be said to have comprehended the meaning produced by the discourse. This comprehension is nothing other than the recognition of the form of the narrative. The production of meaning in this case can be regarded as a performance, because any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories [...], it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning.⁸

The stylisation and the fantasising of Orlando's epic exaggerates this phenomenon. The biographer's meta-discourse functions as a constant reminder of the biographical nature of the account, with a historiographical, metafictional overtone⁹, and the biographer repeatedly reiterating the impossibility of her task to render truth. This raises the question of what it was Woolf hoped to achieve in writing Vita's life in the form of a fantasy and why her choice to resort to literary fiction was the most effective in doing so.

⁸ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 44.

⁹ In reference to the term coined by Linda Huchon in her 1984 essay, «Historiographic Metafiction Parody and the Intertextuality of History» and used to characterise subversive narrative strategies which target the historiographical construct.

Orlando's metamorphosis from man to woman takes on the "draperies" of a Greek tragedy:

Would that we might here take the pen and write Finis to our work! Would that we might spare the reader what is to come and say to him in so many words, Orlando died and was buried. But here, alas, Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer, cry No! Putting their silver trumpets to their lips they demand in one blast, Truth!¹⁰

The result produced is farcical: a bewildered biographer who ends up with a subverted biographical quest; but this also highlights the fact that the biographer is engaged in the process of finding the truth, even when she doubts of attaining success. Irony is precisely one of the narrative overtones White identified in *Metahistory* as characterising an epistemological questioning, as well as a self-questioning of the historian's¹¹.

In *L'Histoire est une littérature contemporaine*, Ivan Jablonka points to the innovations brought about by the eighteenth-century novel, which strikes him as being capable of evoking individual experience, in opposition to history texts, which only capable of delivering a broad picture:

L'Histoire n'offre donc qu'une image tronquée du monde, indifférente à l'expérience commune. La fiction romanesque, elle, fondée sur le vraisemblable et l'identification, devient la vérité de la littérature. Ses thèmes sont les mouvements du cœur, la vie intérieure, les événements psychologiques, les aspirations de l'individu face aux contraintes sociales, l'exceptionnalité douloureuse. La vraie historia magistra vitae, c'est le roman.¹²

Most importantly, Jablonka introduces the concept of "fiction de méthode" or "method fiction", used as a means of historical investigation, the literary act of writing being part of the author's hermeneutic quest; that is to say, it is also a means of historical investigation:

tous les historiens ont rappelé à quel point l'imagination était nécessaire au chercheur: elle sert à trouver des sources, à construire des théories, à faire preuve d'empathie en se mettant à la place d'autrui [...]. Constitutives du

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*, London, Vintage, 2004, p. 89.

¹¹ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014, p. 193.

¹² Ivan Jablonka, *L'Histoire est une littérature contemporaine*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2014, e-book, l. 707.

raisonnement, les fictions de méthode sont à la fois plus fictionnelles, plus conceptuelles et plus indispensables que l'imagination.¹³

According to him, historians need to resort to fiction because imagination is essential in the research process: imagination is used to find sources, to build theories and to empathise with the historian's subjects. This leads Jablonka to consider the use of metaphor in investigative writing as enabling cognition insofar as the interrelating of two distant elements can turn out to be the best way to gain understanding: "La métaphore met en relation, analogiquement, des éléments qui n'ont pas de rapport entre eux [...]. La métaphore [...], en tant que paradigme, [...] a aussi une dimension cognitive [...]. Une bonne métaphore, comme une traduction, fait instantanément comprendre". Likewise, in Woolf's view, previous to reception, the vividness of metaphor allows the writer to convey her own experience of reality. Orlando's poetical quest is ultimately to grasp the truth of our reality through literature. He realises that it is virtually impossible to describe or to convey anything without resorting to metaphor at some point in his discourse: "Another metaphor by Jupiter," exclaims Orlando in his attempt to "say simply in so many words what love is".¹⁴ He experiments further:

So he tried saying the grass is green and the sky is blue [...]. "The sky is blue," he said, "the grass is green." Looking up, he saw that, on the contrary, the sky is like the veils which a thousand Madonnas have let fall from their hair; and the grass fleets and darkens like a flight of girls fleeing from the embraces of hairy satyrs from enchanted woods. "Upon my word," he said [...], "I don't see that one's more true than the other. Both are utterly false."¹⁵

Woolf considered metaphor as the most effective form of representation in digging out the truth about Vita's character, introducing fictionalised adventures in which Vita's personality would be conveyed as it had been experienced by Woolf herself. A factual chronicle would not have produced any more than an empty shell: in Woolf's view, we are made "so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite,"¹⁶ and fantasy allowed Woolf to express that. The ingenuity resides in the book having several levels of reading, ranging from the public level, accessible to the

¹³ *Ibid.*, l. 3283.

¹⁴ V. Woolf, *Orlando*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

common reader, to the very intimate level, which only these two women could have experienced. As Vita Sackville-West's biographer, Victoria Glendinning, writes, "There are references that anyone who knew Vita well would recognise, and others—like the 'porpoise in a fishmonger's shop'—that were private between Vita and Virginia."¹⁷ Nigel Nicolson, Vita Sackville's son, famously called *Orlando* "the longest and most charming love letter in the history of literature"¹⁸; this is part of the meaning produced by Vita's life *emplotted*¹⁹ in the form of a fanaticised epic, in which the hero is engaged in a quest for truth through poetry.

In fact, Glendinning describes Vita's "fascination with projections of her masculine aspect"²⁰, which may explain the reason why Woolf chose a masculine character to personify Vita in the beginning of the narrative. However, through Orlando's change of sex, through *narrative performance*, Woolf foregrounds Vita's outgrowing the young tomboy she had been in her youth, and celebrates the full-fledged woman Woolf wanted to bring highlight. Woolf was fascinated by the intricacies of Vita's personality, and the special relation Vita maintained with her family history and heritage. Vita was a historical experience in her own right. Watching her walk through the estate during her visit to Knole, Woolf wrote in her diary: "All the centuries seemed lit up ... a crowd of people stood behind, not dead at all; & so we reach the days of Elisabeth [to whom the Sackvilles had been related] quite easily"²¹. That historical experience is what made Woolf want to write her life. This life had to be explored and understood, and a novelised biography was the only form that allowed Woolf to investigate and experiment with the various facets of Vita's intricate character. This aspect also accounts for the historical background of the narrative. It is no coincidence that Orlando is revealed as being a woman in the eighteenth century. Up to then, Orlando can only be brought into existence in the form of a man. According to Woolf's account in *A Room of One's Own*, it is during the eighteenth century that women appeared for the first time on the literary stage, and subsequently in life-writing. In the passages leading up to the concept of Shakespeare's sister in the essay, Woolf notes that "in the time of Elizabeth [...] it is a

¹⁷ Victoria Glendinning, *Vita, The Life of Vita Sackville-West*, London, Penguin, 1984, p. 203.

¹⁸ Nigel Nicolson, ed. *Vita and Harold: The Letters of Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson 1910-1962*, London, Phoenix, 1993, p. 9.

¹⁹ See Hayden White, *Metahistory*, p. 4 et *passim*.

²⁰ V. Glendinning, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

²¹ V. Woolf, *The Diary, op. cit.*, p. 125.

perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet”²². She dwells in poems, plays and novels, but is absent in fact:

The moment, however, that one tries this method with the Elizabethan woman, one branch of [...] illumination fails; one is held up by the scarcity of facts. One knows nothing detailed, nothing perfectly true and substantial about her. History scarcely mentions her [...] what I find deplorable [...] is that nothing is known about women before the eighteenth century. I have no model in my mind to turn about this way and that. Here am I asking why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age”²³.

By resorting to a technique similar to Jablonka’s “fiction de méthode”, Woolf creates the fictional character of “Shakespeare’s sister” to be able to pose *what if* questions. The story of Shakespeare’s sister is based on the historical facts Woolf was able to collect on the period, and the fictional life story Woolf produces enables a better understanding of what the life of an intellectual woman wanting to write would have been like in Shakespeare’s time. Orlando’s change of sex symbolises that turning point in literary history which took place in the eighteenth century, and the making of woman in literary history.

The fictionalisation of Vita’s life in *Orlando* is intended to be a defamiliarization of the subject, which is used as a method of biographical investigation of those “rainbow” aspects of personality that would have remained silent in a conventional biography. However, this hermeneutical act is only one of the ways truth can be considered in Woolf’s text. A second one regards less the writer’s and more the reader’s perspective. *Orlando* reads just as well as a standard fictional novel. For those seeking Vita Sackville-West in *Orlando*, there arises the question of the localisation of representation and the assessment of that representation.

Frank Ankersmit’s conception of representational truth, as developed in *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historiographical Representation*, provides the original consideration that the reflection on historiographical representation can actually provide innovative tools for the analysis of novels. According to Ankersmit, the historical text and the text of the novel are inherently similar in nature, in so far as they both “single out one or more aspects of our social and private world and that we can mean-

²² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, London, Vintage, 2001, p. 34.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

ingly discuss their representational truth [...]. Both give us aspects of the world that can be said to be representationally true or not”²⁴.

Ankersmit acknowledges the narrativistic character of historiography. However, unlike Jablonka, he does not consider it to belong to the realm of literature. While Ricoeur and Carr placed *time* at the centre of the historiographical narrative, Ankersmit gives preponderance to *the historian*, or in our case *the biographer*. This was also Woolf’s choice, and the biographer’s presence is strongly felt in the narrative, by way of an omniscient meta-discourse on the writing of biography. Another aspect developed by Ankersmit is the priority of representation over interpretation in historiography; the act of interpretation is necessarily linked to the representation of the object, and its “aesthetics”:

You cannot even begin to understand a text’s or a painting’s meaning (i.e., have an interpretation of it) as long as you have no idea of, or deliberately refrain from asking yourself, what the text or painting might be about (i.e., what it represents). Aesthetics (representation) is thus logically prior to hermeneutics (interpretation).²⁵

Representation is an aestheticizing act, and its mechanisms function identically in history, literature and the visual arts. Acknowledging this does not imply to renounce to the truth value of historical texts. Ankersmit says:

The historical text is no less prototypical an example of representation than the work of art, in that it seeks to make present (again) an absent past—and in doing so, compels us to turn to aesthetics to explain how it can succeed in this goal. But who, on the other hand, would deny that there exists such a thing as historical knowledge and historical truth—in whatever way exactly we decide to understand these notions? Thus historical writing (...) achieve[s] aesthetic truth.²⁶

Also, aesthetic justification is independent from scientific rationality, but in any case, the search for truth is independent from both: it is a philosophical quest. Woolf envisions truth as evanescent, multifarious, ungraspable—“the biographer [...] must toil through endless labyrinths”²⁷—, and the novel is able to represent precisely that tension. In Ankersmit’s terms,

²⁴ Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2012, p. 120.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁷ V. Woolf, «The New Biography», *op. cit.*, p. 151.

“the search for the aesthetic truth of the work of art is like entering a philosophical labyrinth”²⁸.

Ankersmit resorts to the evaluation of truth in philosophy of logic to assess the value of truth in narrative representation, and concludes that a representation of an object cannot be equated with the object itself; otherwise, all representations of a same subject, in portraiture, for instance, would be identical, which is not the case. This leads Ankersmit to consider that a representation can only be that of an aspect of any represented object. In other words, only specific aspects of a whole truth relating to the represented is contained in a specific representation²⁹. In Ankersmit’s definition, representation is not a “two-place but a three-place operator connecting (1) a represented reality, (2) a representation, and (3) a representation’s presented. The temptation of equating (1) and (3) must at all times be avoided”. In other words, Ankersmit calls “presenteds” the aspects of (the) thing(s) that a representation represents and not these things in themselves: “if we are looking for a representational analogue to propositional truth, we should focus on the relationship between a representation and its presented rather than on that between the representation and what it represents”³⁰. Accepting the same grounds for the discussion of representational truth in *Orlando* would allow the text to be considered as a collection of various representations of aspects relating to Vita Sackville-West scattered throughout the narrative. Like the portraits of Vita –in paintings such as William Strang’s *Lady with a Red Hat*, in photographs, and in biographies such as Glendinning’s– the various representations of her in *Orlando* can also be said to contain specific “*presenteds*” of Vita Sackville-West, distanced or *defamiliarized* in various degrees. The paratextual elements, however, make sure we do not lose sight of the represented in question, that is to say Vita, thanks to various embedded photographs, specially taken for the novel. Virginia Woolf accompanied Vita to the studio for the shooting session that produced the photograph entitled “Orlando in Turkish robes”; the Woolfs went to visit to take the picture of “Orlando at the present day”. Pictures of Vita herself represent Orlando the woman, whilst the portrait of one of her ancestors, which still hangs in Knole House to this day, represents Orlando the man, marking the shift in identity made possible by time.

²⁸ F. Ankersmit, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Furthermore, Ankersmit talks of the “degrees of existence”³¹, which separate the represented from the representation itself, and which, in the case of *Orlando*, can be paralleled with the *degrees of metaphor*. Whether it is applied to the conventional biographies of Vita, to the family history Vita wrote of the Sackvilles, or to Woolf’s *Orlando*, the concept of “presenteds” allows us to assess the degree of truth contained in these representations. In *Orlando*, the object Vita is diluted and dispersed into various zones of the text, engendering various degrees of representativeness. There is no precise image of Vita at the end of the narrative, but, just as one must acknowledge that “saline solution is salty”³² though no salt can be seen, Vita’s presence is perceived throughout the text. One cannot take the whole narrative to be a representation of Vita, which complies well with Ankermit’s claim that the assessment of representative truth should be limited to a “one-to-one relationship between the true statement and what it is true of”³³. No truth can be assessed beyond that. The representation merely contains “presenteds” or aspects of the subject. This is precisely the aim of biography in Woolf’s view, which Edmund Gosse, a precursor of the New Biography, called “the faithful portrait of a soul in its adventures through life”³⁴. In the case of *Orlando*, Woolf introduced fictionalised adventures against which Vita’s personality could emerge. The scattering of evocative representations of Vita throughout the narrative expresses the same idea as Ankersmit that any representation of a subject can only attain a certain degree of truthfulness, and that there exists an infinity of truthful representations of a same subject. In *Orlando*, the biographer comments: “a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand”³⁵. Woolf’s biography of Vita ties in with the following statement by Ankersmit:

A represented can be represented by an infinity of representations, and being a representation of this represented can therefore never be said to be unique of any of them. This is a property they all share. What makes a representation unique is the set of sentences about the past contained by it [...].³⁶

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

³² F. Ankersmit, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

³⁴ Edmund Gosse, ‘Biography’. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed., vol. 3, New York, The Encyclopaedia Britannica Company, 1910, p. 952-954, p. 953.

³⁵ V. Woolf, *Orlando*, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

³⁶ F. Ankersmit, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

Finally, *Orlando* is to be considered a territory for Woolf's biographical investigations of Vita Sackville-West and, at the same time, offers a set of representations of certain aspects of her life and personality. The answer to the question whether, on the one hand, Woolf's exploration of her subject enabled her to grasp who Vita was as well as the deployment of her life, and whether, on the other hand, the representation of the aspects of her subject was truthful, lies in the reception of the text itself by those who knew Vita, whether directly or indirectly. Knole House, Vita's poetry, her tumultuous love affair with Violet Trefusis, her bouts of travesty, Lord Lascelles's courtship, her travels to the Orient, Vita's passion for gypsies, her finding a soulmate in Harold and their family life at Barn House with their sons: all these biographical elements are transposed in the text and expounded upon at length. Vita's husband, Harold Nicolson, wrote to her that *Orlando* was "a book in which you and Knole are identified for ever, a book which will perpetuate that identity into years when both you and I are dead"³⁷. In the closing pages of the text, *Orlando* calls out to herself. All the "*presenteds*" scattered across the narrative seem to whirl into one vivid, condensed portraiture of Vita's personality. The whirl gives way to reconciliation, as when a conclusion has been reached after much toiling: "And it is at this moment, when she had ceased to call 'Orlando'" [...], that the *Orlando* whom she had called came of its own accord"³⁸. In this way, Woolf asserts the truthfulness of her biographical representation of Vita Sackville-West.

Maryam THIRRIARD
Aix Marseille Université, LERMA,
Aix-en-Provence, France

³⁷ Quoted in V. Glendinning, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

³⁸ V. Woolf, *Orlando*, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

Qui manquerait une porte ? Ainsi parlait Aristote de la vérité pour dire qu'elle est immanquable, alors que paradoxalement il est impossible de l'atteindre absolument. Ces études ont en commun de partir pragmatiquement du constat que le principal obstacle à une théorie de la biographie comme genre littéraire distinct est le préjugé moderne que tout est fiction, ou à tout le moins que toute écriture en relève nécessairement. Sitôt cette vérité énoncée, on voit bien que c'est une évidence et que pourtant elle est fausse. Ce paradoxe, qui est aussi celui du menteur, ouvre une brèche où s'engouffre comme un courant d'air la possibilité d'un regain de l'expérience esthétique littéraire. En effet, la biographie nous interpelle autrement que la fiction parce qu'elle est vérité, parce qu'elle est volonté de dire vrai. En cela, elle est comme la vie une bataille toujours perdue d'avance, mais où se livrent parfois de beaux combats.