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## Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, Harold Nicolson and the Aesthetics of the Subject in the New Biography

*Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, Harold Nicolson et l'esthétique du sujet dans la nouvelle biographie*

MARYAM THIRRIARD

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### Résumés

English Français

The New Biography emerged in the 1920s and 1930s under the impulse of Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicolson. Although their appreciation of each other varied, these writers read and influenced each other's work; they formulated similar conceptualisations of biography, giving strength to Woolf's idea of a 'new school of biographies' (Woolf 1927, 475). In recent years, researchers such as Max Saunders and Laura Marcus have asserted the importance of the New Biography in understanding and reassessing the status of auto/biographical forms in modernist texts. This paper seeks to show that the New Biography developed a specific aesthetics of the biographical subject, contributing to the politics of the modernist self in the early twentieth century. I argue that this aesthetics is mainly motivated by the centrality of personality and the necessarily subjective perception of that personality. In these narratives, personality is the main plot device, driving the story forward, and providing a rationale for the life trajectory. It is a common practice to define the modernist self in terms of its de-centredness and its fragmented nature, and this clarifies why the New Biographers sought to find techniques that create oblique and blurred visualisations of their subjects. Visuality, in this paper, concerns perspective and the biographer's staging of the performance of perception, as mirrored in the eyes of secondary subjects, and in those of the biographer him/herself. Anchoring my study to the theories of historian and philosopher Frank Ankersmit on the assessment of truth in historical representations, I argue that this mirror effect is used by the New Biographers to highlight the constructedness of all visions of the subject. This subsequently subverts the reliability of the narrative, but also accounts for the artistic dimension of the biography, and intensifies the complex interconnections between literature and historiography.



La nouvelle biographie s'est développée dans les années 1920 et 1930 sous la plume de Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey et Harold Nicolson. Ces auteurs se connaissaient, partageaient les mêmes principes et se sont influencés dans leur pratique de la biographie. Ceci m'amène à reprendre l'idée de « nouvelle école » que Woolf développe dans son essai « The New Biography » et à considérer que Woolf, Strachey et Nicolson appartiennent à une association distincte de biographes. L'objet de cette étude est de révéler la politique du sujet développée par les nouveaux biographes et de mieux comprendre la contribution de la nouvelle biographie à l'élaboration d'une esthétique du sujet moderniste. Cette esthétique est dominée par deux aspects ; premièrement, la représentation de la personnalité, l'élément central dans les récits de la nouvelle biographie, et deuxièmement par la mise en évidence dans le récit de la subjectivité du biographe. Cet article cherche à déterminer les méthodes utilisées par les nouveaux biographes pour créer cette dynamique du sujet biographique, notamment l'effet de la perspective oblique ainsi que la représentation de la subjectivité du biographe dans la narration. Il en résulte une esthétique unique du sujet moderniste, ainsi qu'une contribution pertinente au débat toujours d'actualité autour de la nature et de la valeur de la représentation dans les récits historiques.

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## ***Entrées d'index***

**Mots-clés :** nouvelle biographie, biographie moderniste, sujet moderniste, modernisme, biographie littérature britannique du xxe siècle, relation entre la représentation littéraire et représentation historiographique, Virginia Woolf, Harold Nicolson, Lytton Strachey

**Keywords:** new biography, modernist biography, the modernist subject, modernism, biography, twentieth-century British literature, the relation between literary and historiographical representation, Virginia Woolf, Harold Nicolson, Lytton Strachey

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## ***Texte intégral***

- 1 In recent years, critics have highlighted that the presence of the auto/biographical in modernist texts has largely been underestimated and have contributed to revealing the intricate auto/biographical constructions woven in the literature of the modernist period.<sup>1</sup>
- 2 The New Biography is a specific form of biography which emerged in the 1920s and 1930s under the impulse of Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, and Harold Nicolson. Although their appreciation of each other varied, these writers read and influenced each other's work; they formulated similar conceptualisations of biography, giving strength to Woolf's idea of a 'new school of biographies' (Woolf 1927, 475). This leads me to consider them as forming a consistent grouping of biographers and I shall use the term New Biography to refer to their praxis. The importance of Harold Nicolson in this particular threesome has generally been underestimated and Nicolson's valuable contribution to modernist biography has often been overlooked.
- 3 This paper studies the New Biography's significant contribution to defining the modernist self and the specific aesthetics it developed, reflecting the questions the modernists were tackling at the time. They staged their writing in a way that echoed their discussion on the nature of history writing. The main axis around which this self evolves is personality, made clear by the role it plays in New Biography narratives. I argue that in New Biography narratives personality is emplotted, that is, it is made into a major plot device, moving the narrative forward and providing a rationale for the life trajectory.
- 4 The New Biography has mostly been studied from a literary perspective, but the historiographical perspective also offers unique insights. Although the New Biographers did not share the common belief that history belonged to the empiricist sciences, also called hard sciences, their concern with biography reflects their broader interest in the writing of history. Their questionings precede the vivid epistemological debates of the twentieth century around the nature of historical writing, the value of truth in historical texts, the issue of subjectivity in historical writing as well as the assessment of historical truth. Frank Ankersmit, to whose work I have anchored my study, tackles the same questions the New Biographers raised, among which are the prevalence of personality and the ineluctable subjectivity of the historian in the resultant representation. His



findings give support to my main argument that personality and the subjective perception of personality weld together to create the specific aesthetics of the New Biography. This was an avant-garde contribution to the debate on the nature and the mechanics of representation in historical writing, eventually leading, amongst other developments, to the linguistic turn in the humanities.

5 Woolf, Nicolson and Strachey were much concerned with the writing of history. Lytton Strachey, for instance, uses the terms 'history' and 'historian' in his preface to *Eminent Victorians* (Strachey 1918, 5). Woolf's 'The New Biography' and its reference to a range of historians is in itself a historiography of the genre. The education Woolf received in history from her father, Leslie Stephen, first editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, left a deep imprint on her. As for Strachey and Nicolson, they both read history at university and Strachey initially wanted to become an academic. All three authors adopted a historical stance when it came to analysing the techniques of writing in biography.<sup>2</sup> Their aim was to achieve a goal shared by all historians: to give a truthful account of an individual's personal history, but they innovated by resorting to the techniques of literary fiction.

6 The debate about the literary dimension of historical texts in the twentieth century led to the linguistic turn in its last decades. The same questions about history and textuality seem to emerge time after time, which shows that the discussions the New Biographers were involved in are still relevant. In *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, historian and philosopher Frank Ankersmit acknowledges that both the writing of history and the writing of novels share common ground. He claims that historical truth lies in representation, which he points out to be a central theme for both the writing of historical texts and novels, and argues that the philosophy of history can provide a framework for understanding truth in textual representations. Ankersmit's work on the nature and value of historical representation moves the debate between historiographers forward by offering a synthesis that goes beyond the deconstructivist-empiricist divide that has defined the debate on history in recent decades. Ankersmit does not adhere to the theories of the linguistic turn, and he rejects the idea that literary theory can help build a theory of history. This is certainly a breaking point between Ankersmit's approach and Hayden White's: while White endorses both the linguistic turn and literary theory, Ankersmit does neither. However, he does consider literature as possibly facilitating the understanding of historical texts (Ankersmit 2001, 21).

7 Historical truth is as fundamental for Ankersmit as it was for the New Biographers. Truth is the historian's aim, but the limits of language make it a difficult endeavour (Ankersmit 2001, 36). Like Ankersmit, the New Biographers were aware of the constructedness of historical narratives, an aspect the linguistic turn highlights by emphasising the subjectivity of language (Ankersmit 2001, 33–36). Ankersmit thinks that selection is necessary in order to isolate the truths that are most helpful in understanding a period (2001, 38), a point also defended by Woolf in 'The New Biography' when she remarks: 'Victorian biographies are laden with truth; but always we rummage among them with a sense of prodigious waste' (Woolf 1927, 475).

8 Ankersmit makes a valuable distinction between description and representation when he considers various accounts of the Renaissance and points out that determining which historical account offers the best way to define the period 'cannot be decided by having recourse to truth prerequisites. For in a way, they are all true . . . the truth criterion is . . . unhelpful here' (Ankersmit 2001, 39). The most important element to consider is 'what definition of the Renaissance is most successful in meaningfully interrelating as many aspects of the period in question' (Ankersmit 2001, 39). Ankersmit makes the following distinction between description and representation: description, he writes, establishes a subject-predicate relation whereas, in representation, the subject and the predicate are one and same, and they are also enunciated at the same time (Ankersmit 2001, 39). In other words, in representation, reference and predication go together. Also, description 'refers to' reality whereas representation 'is about' it (Ankersmit 2001, 41). Given Ankersmit's reluctance to use



literary criticism as an epistemological tool, he takes his reader by surprise when he refers to Woolf, of all authors, to explicate his idea of representation: ‘as Woolf so aptly summarized the nature of artistic representation: “Art is not a copy of the world, one damn thing is enough”’ (Ankersmit 2001, 81). Ankersmit’s formulation is that ‘representation is paradoxical, in that it combines a resistance to difference with a love for it’ (Ankersmit 2001, 81).

9 In biography, facts are predicates, truths made of ‘granite’, in Woolf’s words (Woolf 1927, 473). However, representation is made of a combination of selected facts. In Ankersmit’s view, while description gives us truth, representation gives us scope, relevant to a certain context. His main argument is that accuracy does not necessarily produce the best representation, and the laying bare of the truth is not enough to enable understanding. He offers a formulation of a belief that the New Biographers shared in their time: representation enables more understanding than mere exposure of truth does. In Nicolson’s words, ‘There must be result for the reader, an active and not merely a passive adjustment of sympathy; there must result for him an acquisition not of facts only but of experience; there must retain for him a definite mental impression’ (Nicolson 1928, 13). Representation gives effectiveness to historical texts: as Ankersmit words it, ‘we do not judge portraits (exclusively) on the basis of their photographic accuracy. A good portrait should, before all, give us the personality of the person represented’ (Ankersmit 2001, 43). Likewise, representation of personality is also believed to be a necessity to achieve truthfulness in the New Biography. The New Biographers expressed that creed through theoretical formulation, as in Woolf’s ‘The New Biography’ when she writes ‘Truth being thus efficacious and supreme, we can only explain the fact that Sir Sydney’s life of Shakespeare is dull, and that his life of Edward the seventh is unreadable, by supposing that though both are stuffed with truth, he failed to choose those truths which transmit personality’ (Woolf 1927, 473). The most obvious successful illustration of this is without doubt Woolf’s *Orlando*, a fantasised biography of her intimate friend, Vita Sackville-West.<sup>3</sup> If we follow Ankersmit’s distinction between description and representation, in *Orlando*, Sackville-West’s biography is more of a representation than it is a description in that and it succeeds in delivering the most vivid portrait of Sackville-West’s personality, although this portrait is embedded in a fictionalised narrative.

10 Personality is the focal point of the aesthetics developed by the New Biographers. The New Biographers gave much attention to the way it was emplotted. Its pre-eminence is such that it is endowed with the prominent narrative function of plot device, and produces a unique aesthetics.

11 Ricœur coined the expression ‘*mise en intrigue*’. In *Temps et récit I*, he expounds on emplotment as being the process that brings historical elements together in a certain way to build a narrative structure, with its own logic, and enabling the historian to give his/her interpretation.<sup>4</sup> This concept provides insight into the mode of representation evolving around personality in New Biography narratives. More, at the centre of the emplotment process, personality takes on the function of plot device, driving the life forward. Personality being a central element to this study, the term needs at least to be framed. This paper does not aim at defining the ontological nature of personality, nor at advancing any current philosophical debate; instead, it seeks to understand what personality meant to the New Biographers, according to their writings on the subject, in the 1920s and 1930s. Weiner argues that the turn of the century, and more specifically the 1920s, saw ‘the culmination on a mass scale of public interest in personal, introspective accounts of private experiences’ and, as personality research soared, personality became a central concept in academic and professional fields (Weiner 180). This can help assess the importance of personality modernist problematics, and the attempt by modernists to reintegrate the experience of personality through art (Lewis 8).

Ankersmit explains that in portraiture a good representation is one that represents personality. He illustrates his point with a reference to a portrait of Titian, whom ‘[w]e admire . . . because it so strikingly presents us with the emperor’s personality and his





state of mind after the immense political struggle that had consumed all his energy and vitality' (Ankersmit 2001, 84). Ankersmit explains that personality is what makes the representation compelling, although the features presented to us are 'elusive' and 'impossible to accurately define' (Ankersmit 2001, 84). Portraiture is a major component in biography, even more than in history as the object of study is a person. Woolf argues that life 'dwells in the personality rather than the act' (Woolf 1927, 478), a core creed of the New Biography. It is from personality that everything else proceeds.

- 13 The following question regarding the art of narrative arises: how is personality to structure a narrative when it is impalpable compared to hard granite, solid facts? A possible answer comes from Woolf again, when she writes, concerning personality, that 'the biographer's imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist's art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life' (Woolf 1927, 478). Hoberman picks up on these remarks by Woolf and infers that 'Once personality is seen as something not entirely manifest in action, it becomes an artifact [*sic*], something *made* as opposed to enacted, and in that sense, too, it is fiction' (Hoberman 7). However, a plausible, alternative view is that the New Biographers sought the true personality of their subjects and sought to be truthful in their representation of that personality. To do so, they chose to resort to the *techniques* and effectiveness of fiction literature, without renouncing truthfulness, although they resorted, in various ways, to their imagination and their autonomy as artists. This allowed the welding of fact and personality, in accordance with the aim that Woolf calls for in 'The New Biography':

'The aim of biography', said Sir Sydney Lee, . . . is the truthful transmission of personality', and no single sentence could more neatly split up into two parts the whole problem of biography as it presents itself to us today. 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 as one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one. (Woolf 1927, 473)

- 14 In that sense, personality is not fiction, even if it is challenging to deal with impalpable material compared to hard facts. Hoberman considers the New Biographers to have dismissed action, pointing to their rejection of action as character-revealing (Hoberman 104). However, although the New Biographers believed that noble or extraordinary deeds cannot explain a life, contrary to what Sydney Lee advocates in his *Principles of Biography* (Lee 7), they gave much importance to anecdotes and the ability of anecdote to reveal personality. In Woolf's words, '[the New Biographers] maintain that the man himself, the pith and essence of his character, shows itself to the observant eye in the tone of a voice, the turn of a head, some little phrase or anecdote picked up in passing' (Woolf 1927, 476). Anecdotes reveal personality in selective traits. Hence, Woolf's eye remains closely focused on her subject and its immediate surroundings, as if it were a post-impressionist portrait. In Hirsh's terms, 'the implied desideratum for portraiture—to "get" character, not just likeness—echoes Woolf's idea of life-writing' (Hirsh 207). Hirsh considers Woolf's narrative techniques relating to spatial form to be quite similar to those used in post-impressionist portrait painting, in homage to Fry (Hirsh 209).

- 15 Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* illustrates well the way personality traits can become the basis of narrative structure. Strachey's text has mainly been considered for its debunking and desacralizing of four Victorian icons: Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr Arnold and General Gordon. Although this was unquestionably Strachey's main goal, close reading of the portraits reveals a subtler stance; not only did Strachey deride his subjects, but he also praised them significantly. Floriane Reviron has aptly pointed out this paradox in her article 'Eminent Victorians: Outrageous Strachey? The Indecent Exposure of Victorian Characters and Mores':

One should bear in mind that outrage is ambivalent, both aiming at desecrating, insulting and shocking, as a consequence of which it also rehabilitates and restores its target's sacredness and aura. Strachey's biographies are an irreverent



homage, a paradoxical and oxymoronic enterprise and this bears direct consequences on the characterisation of his eminent Victorians. (5)

16 Heavily inspired by Freud's works, Strachey conceives the self to be multifarious and entangled in opposing psychological and emotional currents. Strachey sought to identify the mechanisms of his subjects' psyche and recurrently commences his biographies by highlighting the inner conflict created by opposing forces dwelling in his subjects. He believes that, within an individual, a complex internal alchemy can occur, producing an extraordinary figure. This may explain why Strachey focused on the lives of eminent figures, rather than obscure lives, and why he delves into the eccentricities of those great achievers. In Strachey's portrait of Manning, the Cardinal saves English Catholicism, he is a social justice fighter as much as an educator, but, at the same time, he is abrupt, ambitious and self-indulgent. He only becomes the 'prince of the church' by eliminating his rivals ruthlessly. In his biography, Strachey points to the pivot in the Cardinal's life: 'the psychological problems suggested by his inner history' (Strachey 1918, 9). The mystery that Strachey sets out to elucidate is the following: how did a conservative Catholic, who seemed to embody the essence of ancient times, become such an eminent figure of British society in the nineteenth century? He wishes to understand something which is in itself a contradiction of nineteenth-century history and tries to do so by analysing Manning's inner life and psychological flaws.

17 In his overview of the Cardinal's life, Strachey is struck by 'the persistent strength of his innate characteristics' (Strachey 1918, 10). He relates Manning's commitment to charity work, social projects, and the poor, demonstrates how conscientious he is and shows how much he achieves. But at the same time, he also has the 'despotic zeal of a born administrator' (Strachey 1918, 83), ruthless when seeking to harm a rival, anti-modernist, anti-rational, anti-humanist, and anti-Semitic. Strachey is careful to render the whole complexity of his multifaceted subject. The conversion of Manning to Catholicism is central for, at that point in the narrative, there occurs a change in tone and in perspective. This pivotal decision is shown to be driven by a dark force lurking within:

Such was the outward seeming of the Archdeacon's life; but the inward reality was different. The more active, the more fortunate, the more full of happy promise his existence became, the more persistently was his secret imagination haunted by a dreadful vision—the lake that burneth for ever with the brimstone of fire. The temptation of the Evil One are many, Manning knew; and he knew also that, for him at least, the most subtle and terrible of all temptations was the temptation of worldly success . . . The great question is: Is God enough for you *now*? (Strachey 1918, 36)

18 The trope of the lake that burneth is a repetition from the beginning of the essay, when Manning, as a child, is described as being haunted by the Apocalypse (Strachey 1918, 11). We now discover that the self-indulgent Archdeacon despises himself for his public success, feels guilty, and wonders if public success has not overcome his need for God. In a Freudian reading, this may be a form of patricide, when, on having grown up, the father is no longer needed.

19 The trope of the internal, conflicting forces runs through the whole of Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*. For instance, in 'Florence Nightingale', Strachey sees inner conflicting currents at the root of the power of the nurse's will, she is said to have been inhabited by a 'demon' (Strachey 1918, 99). Those conflicting forces within did not curb the image of the goodness achieved and Strachey emphasises the latter sufficiently to create a recurrent laudatory tone. He points out the resilience in her personality, as 'she struggled and worked and planned' (Strachey 1918, 99), and remarks that '[a] weaker spirit would have been overwhelmed by the load of such distresses—would have yielded or snapped. But this extraordinary woman held firm, and fought her way to victory' (Strachey 1918, 99). Strachey notes that Nightingale had 'amazing persistency', 'possessed the energy' (Strachey 1918, 99), 'she managed' and 'she succeeded' (Strachey 1918, 100). Not only does the biography pay tribute to her work as a nurse, it also



praises her as a reformer of hospitals, of the army and of society. Her driving force, however, came from the most unexpected of origins. Strachey reveals:

she moved under the stress of an impetus which finds no place in the popular imagination. A Demon possessed her. Now demons, whatever else they may be, are full of interest. And so it happens that in the real Miss Nightingale there was more that was interesting than in the legendary one; there was also less that was agreeable. (Strachey 1918, 97)

20 Hence, the biography starts in the same manner as in ‘Cardinal Manning’. The dark forces are shown to account for the terrific result which led the woman to be idealised. Although irony pervades the text, here, Strachey is sincere: ‘she was heroic’ (Strachey 1918, 111). Strachey sets out to study the ‘stuff’ her heroism is made of, that is the interior fire of passion which animated the lady with the lamp, subverting the Carlylean notion of the Victorian hero who deserved to be worshipped, but also suggesting a renewed, although amused, appreciation of the subject.

21 In Harold Nicolson’s life of Byron, one wonders why Nicolson chose Trelawny<sup>5</sup>—whom he considers to be ‘a liar and a cad’ (Nicolson 1924, 87)—as a major source. One explanation is that Trelawny gave the most vivid description of Byron’s personality and made clear its impact on the course of events during Byron’s journey to revolutionary Greece.

22 Trelawny’s accounts often stand out as going against the general mood of devotion surrounding Byron, and Nicolson uses Trelawny to introduce a subtle amount of subversion into his own narrative. This is the case with Trelawny’s account of Byron’s outbreak of wrath during a visit to a monastery; Nicolson quotes him:

Byron had not spoken a word from the time we entered the monkery; I thought he was resolved to set us an example of proper behaviour. No one was more surprised than I was, when suddenly he burst into a paroxysm of rage, and vented his ire in a torrent of Italian execrations on the holy Abbot and all his brotherhood . . . ‘will no one release me from the presence of these pestilential idiots? They drive me mad’ [...]. (Nicolson 1924, 117)

23 Trelawny, taken up by Nicolson, carefully noted down all the episodes in which Byron had misbehaved. His remark about Byron setting an example of good behaviour followed by this outrageous outburst creates burlesque in Nicolson’s narrative. Since the beginning of the biography, Trelawny is depicted as being weary of Byron’s spoilt character. In a previous chapter, Trelawny relates the ridiculous aspect of the uniforms Byron had designed especially for the expedition:

For himself, . . . and for Trelawny (he counted on Trelawny) he designed two helmets of Homeric proportions, and on the lines of that which, in the sixth book of the Iliad, had so dismayed the infant Astyanax . . . Byron was delighted . . . but Trelawny, when he arrived, refused vehemently to put his on . . . they were all put back in their pink cardboard boxes . . . (Nicolson 1924, 74)

24 Clearly, Trelawny saw that Byron was not a military leader; instead, he was educated in the imagined battles of *The Illiad*, as opposed to Trelawny, a man from the field. Trelawny eventually grows tired of Byron’s procrastination and decides to leave him and to go on alone; he ‘cynically deserted’ Byron are Nicolson’s terms (Nicolson 1924, 248). The reader easily understands that a man of action, such as Trelawny, could not remain with Byron, a man subdued to a personality that keeps him from action; above all, he was a poet. Virginia Woolf also explores the personality of a poet: Orlando.

25 At the end of Virginia Woolf’s biography *Orlando*, the narrator pauses to ask him/herself whether ‘the granite’ and ‘the rainbow’ have been reconciled:

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 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 Traveller; or she may have wanted the woman to come to her; the Gipsy;





26 The style of this brief recollection of Orlando's life echoes that in *The Dictionary of National Biography*. A parallel can be drawn with the pseudo 'index' in which the milestones for Orlando's life are also set (Woolf 1928, 218). But this series of events tells us nothing about what kind of a person Orlando is. No matter how extraordinary this life may seem, the subject remains a mystery. We know what Orlando has done but we do not know who he/she really is, as opposed to the following portrait, which provides the reader with an impressive sketch of Orlando's personality—or should we say Vita's, given the way she is exposed so explicitly? Young tomboyish Vita was 'the boy who sat on the hill'; 'the young man who fell in love with Sasha' recalls Vita's cross-dressing in France where she had run away with her lover, Violet Trefusis, and where she had become 'Julian'. Later, Vita learned to accept herself as a woman and let her femininity blossom; she was fascinated by gypsies but kept to her aristocratic style. However, it is only when the biographer casts the rainbow colours of her personality that the subject can be grasped:

A snob am I? The garter in the hall? The leopards? My ancestors? Proud of them? Yes! Greedy, luxurious, vicious? Am I? . . . Don't care a damn if I am. Truthful? I think so. Generous? Oh, but that don't count (here a new self came in). Lying in bed of a morning listening to the pigeons on fine linen; silver dishes; wine; maids; footmen. Spoilt? Perhaps . . . Facile, glib, romantic . . . Trees, she said . . . I love trees . . . Fame! (She laughed.) Fame! Seven editions. A prize. Photographs in the evening papers . . . (Woolf 1928, 203)

27 Each trait of character is tied to a particular fact. The feat Vita sought to achieve with *The Land*, to bring fame to the name of the Sackvilles makes the translation from Orlando to Sackville-West complete. The drifting away from Orlando towards Vita is marked by the introduction of new elements—'greedy, luxurious, vicious'. 'Never mind', Woolf once wrote to Vita, 'I enjoyed your abuse very much'; or later: '[c]huck me as often as you like and don't give a moment's thought' (DeSalvo and Leaska 14). This is Vita: proud of her lineage, in love with her garden; in love with the Romantics, but not sentimental; cruel to her friends, conceited with literary fame. Not only do we have the facts but, in this second portrayal, we also have the rainbow of personality. The subject comes alive and the facts take on a vivid meaning.

28 Personality enables us to grasp the subject; however, that perception is intentionally represented in the New Biography as being subjective.

29 The construction of indirect and oblique perspectives of the subject was one of the New Biographers' methods to stage subjectiveness in their writings, much as a camera revolving around a subject on a central axis, deliberately playing with the focus and revealing unexpectedly other actors, other subjects or even the biographer him/herself, each with their own perception of the subject.

30 In Strachey's narrative of Queen Victoria, the monarch serves as a string upon which hang the portraits of eminent figures of the nineteenth century, also visible in the list of chapter titles—'Childhood', 'Lord Melbourne', 'Marriage', 'Lord Palmerston', 'Last years of Prince consort', etc. The queen is reduced to a trope which frames the narrative, and is progressively relegated to a secondary role, as was her political influence. One particular secondary subject, Albert, overshadows the queen. As the narrative moves on, the importance of Albert increases and he eventually takes a leading part with the Universal Exhibition, and with the political role he played in the reconciliation between the royal court and the Conservative government, led by Palmerston. The Prince Consort is portrayed from his youth to his death, making the story of his life a biography within the biography. Queen Victoria becomes the instigator of a *real* biography within the biography. As can be expected, it turns out to be a biography in the purest Victorian tradition: a widow biography, glorifying a disparaged husband, written in the purest style of hagiographic hero-worship (Strachey 1921, 165). Strachey comments:



Victoria, disappointed and chagrined, bore a grudge against her people for their refusal, in spite of all her efforts, to rate her husband at his true worth. She did not understand that the picture of an embodied perfection is distasteful to the majority of mankind. (Strachey 1921, 166)

31 Ironically, it is the Queen's contribution that entails Albert being lost to the public forever, even though Strachey makes it clear that a good biography could have made all the difference as 'in truth Albert was a far more interesting personage than the public dreamed . . . so full of energy and stress and torment, so mysterious and so unhappy, and so fallible and so human' (Strachey 1921, 166). So Strachey sets the story straight, and he does so by delivering a biography of Prince Albert within the Queen's. The effect upon the major subject is detrimental: Strachey's narrative has made her shallow, reflecting the author's opinion of the Queen.

32 Woolf's essay 'The New Biography' is a review of Nicolson's *Some People*, in which she writes 'it is thus, [Nicolson] would seem to say, in the mirrors of our friends, that we chiefly live.' (Strachey 1921, 477). Nicolson's technique of hanging up mirrors became obvious for Woolf in *Some People*, but she had already picked up on the effect of obliqueness and even deformity in Nicolson's *Byron*, some years earlier. Back in 1924, Virginia Woolf had written to Strachey to share what she thought was negative criticism of Nicolson's *Byron*: 'Claire and Trelawny and so on and so on—I conceive them like a cave at some Earl Court's exhibition—a grotto I mean lined with distorting mirrors & plastered with oyster shells. Do not trouble to unwind the metaphor' (Woolf and Strachey 1956, 149). Woolf did not know what to think of it herself. But the metaphor slowly unwound itself in Woolf's mind as she most probably felt more and more compelled by the effect Nicolson had created. This seems to have matured when she finally asked Nicolson if the Hogarth Press could publish his book. The opening of *Byron* portrays not the poet but Lady Blessington writing in her diary about the excitement she feels at the prospect of meeting the bard. The following day, there is a stark change in tone: 'I have seen Lord Byron: and am disappointed' (Nicolson 1924, 4). The iconic image has been shattered by the real personage: not so tall, too thin, effeminate, a nose far too big for his face and, more to it, lame (Nicolson 1924, 6). Gradually, Byron becomes tender and generous to her eyes. But the new portrait is, in turn, immediately contradicted in the text by the sketch delivered by Byron's friend, Hobhouse, the 'most intimate and the most truthful of all Byron's friends' (Nicolson 1924, 16) who 'knew that his friend was irresponsible and kind; that he was humorous and childish; that he was infinitely muddle-headed and unspeakably perverse' (Nicolson 1924, 17). The various mirrors relate the complexity of the subject, blurring and distorting (in Woolf's words) the reader's vision. Thus, Leigh Hunt, the Shelleys, Stanhope, Trelawny provide their testimonies and personal experience of the poet, producing a sense of instability of the subject. Nicolson's mirroring technique provides a modernist representation of the biographical subject.

33 Ankersmit defines subjectivity as 'the historian [distorting] the past itself by projecting something on it that is alien to it' (Ankersmit 2001, 75). In more general terms, Ankersmit sees subjectivity as the historian's 'presence in his own writings' (Ankersmit 2001, 74). The New Biographers' staging of their own presence in their narratives exacerbates the subjective edge of the text. They often explicate their historicizing experience. This is the case in Strachey's 'General Gordon', in which the biographer intrudes when he delivers his state of mind—'[o]ne is baffled' (Strachey 1918, 214)—or is confused, as in: '[i]t is curious that Gordon himself never understood the part that Gladstone was playing in his destiny' (Strachey 1918, 217). The use of the present tense signals the biographer's historicising experience: 'so that the signs of his living passion are still visible to the inquirer of to-day on those thin sheets of mediocre paper and in the torrent of the ink' (Strachey 1918, 232); the reader can picture the biographer going through those very papers.

In *Byron*, Nicolson refers much to Trelawny's memoirs; at the same time, he startles his reader by calling Trelawny, quite early in the narrative, 'a liar and a cad' (Nicolson 1924, 87), explaining the grudge Trelawny had held against Byron throughout his life.



Nicolson's outburst against Trelawny is subversive in that it becomes difficult for the reader to trust such a biased and unreliable source. Nicolson signifies to the reader that the biography is 'tied', a term Woolf uses to signify that the biographer is reliant on witnesses and other sources that are not necessarily of his/her choosing (Woolf 1927, 181). Nicolson's intervention is personal, vivid and emotional even, revealing the presence of the artist, pointing to the essential question of the space the biographer occupies in his own narrative and the meaning to be drawn from such blatant intrusions into the narrative.

35 Nicolson takes his method a step further in *Some People*. This time, the reader is given access to a gallery of portraits solely through the mirror the author holds up for us. However, as Woolf discovered, by the end of the narrative, we realise that each of Nicolson's subjects have also been holding up their own mirrors, enabling us to assemble one last portrait, that of the biographer himself. Nicolson's subjects are milestones, or at least refer to important periods of his life, revealing that an important purpose of the biography is autobiographical. Accordingly, the first chapter of Nicolson's book gives the account of Nicolson's governess, Miss Plimsoll, which plunges us into Nicolson's early childhood. J. D. Marstock leads us to Nicolson's school years, Lambert Orme gives us a glimpse of Oxford and so on. As Woolf rightly observes, 'by the end of the book we realize that the figure which has been the most completely and most subtly displayed is that of the author' (Woolf 1927, 477).

36 Where does Woolf stand in the narrative of *Orlando*? We sense the strong presence of the puppeteer behind the biographer. The author reveals the life of her main subject, Vita Sackville-West, and exposes herself in doing so. *Orlando* relates to 'autobiografiction', a practice Stephen Reynolds recognised as early as 1906, showing the writer's awareness of the inter-fusing of autobiography and fiction (Saunders 167). When Virginia Woolf invites herself into her own narrative; she enters a process of *subjectivation*, in the Foucauldian sense of the word, defined as the moment when the subject objectivises him/herself in a truthful discourse: '[Subjectivation] ensures that I myself can hold this true discourse, it ensures that I myself become the subject of enunciation of true discourse' (Foucault 333). Foucault defines this process as part of an ascetic act, which, however, marks a difference with *Orlando* where Virginia Woolf's playfulness jeopardises any pledge to trustworthiness, intentionally creating a faltering subject, modernist by nature.

37 The New Biographers, Woolf, Strachey and Nicolson, developed a common practice of biography which placed personality at the heart of their narratives. This led them to devise methods of emplotment, making personality a powerful narrative device. They also sought to reveal the subjectiveness of the biographer to their reader. They did so by stressing obliqueness of vision, and ingeniously representing themselves in their biographies. This resulted in an aesthetics of the subject that can be considered specific to the New Biography, while responding to the broader modernist quest for new and more meaningful forms of representation. In doing so, the New Biographers also contributed to the philosophy of history, by tackling the issue of representation in relation to truth, a question that has yet to be settled by historiographers. Ankersmit has made a significant contribution by suggesting the means by which the value of truth can be gauged in historical representations, even in fictionalised representations.

38 Harold Nicolson was the most prolific of the three New Biographers; he wrote eleven full-length biographies, several of which became reference texts. His contribution to the aesthetics of the subject deserves more attention.

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## Notes

1 See in particular Max SAUNDERS's *Self Impression* and Laura MARCUS's *Dreams of Modernity*.

2 This explains why Woolf claims biography to be a craft rather than an art in 'The Art of Biography' (1939).

3 Vita Sackville-West was Harold Nicolson's wife.

4 WHITE also uses the term 'emplotment' to describe the process of narrative creation in historical texts. However, his narrower perspective links emplotment to modes, there being four: satire, comedy, tragedy, and romanticism. He sustains that eminent historians from the 19th century resorted to these genres as a means of explanation through representation (WHITE 143).

5 Edward John Trelawny was a friend of Byron. He accompanied Byron on his expedition to Greece, and his record of Byron has been considered a valuable source.




## Pour citer cet article

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