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Revolutionizing Biography:
Orlando, Roger Fry, and the Tradition

ELIZABETH COOLEY

In her celebrated essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Virginia Woolf writes, “I believe that all novels . . . deal with character, and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel . . . has been evolved. To express character, I have said; but you will at once reflect that the very widest interpretation can be put upon those words” (CE 1: 324). Several paragraphs later she adds, “There is nothing that people differ about more than the reality of characters” (CE 1: 325). Understanding the “reality of characters” and expressing this reality in words are two problems that troubled and fascinated Woolf throughout her life. In her novels, essays and biographical writing, as well as in her letters and diaries, we find evidence of the frustration she felt in trying to capture and combine the “granite and rainbow,” the solid facts and the intangible personality, of both real people and fictitious characters.¹

In her only formal biography, Roger Fry: A Biography, and in her quasi-biographical novel, Orlando, this question of capturing the “reality” of Roger Fry and of Vita Sackville-West becomes even more significant. In both works Woolf was concerned not with creating fictional characters but with discovering and “recreating” real personalities.² Although the products of this concern are very different, the central motivation for writing these works was essentially the same; Woolf wanted to capture the granite and rainbow of two intimate friends. Furthermore, in doing so she hoped not only to recreate character but to “revolutionise” biography. As Ruth Hoberman points out, this biographical revolution became part of what Woolf called “the great Victorian fight . . . of the daughters against the fathers” (Three Guineas 64).³
In *Orlando* she succeeded by dressing her biographical portrait in the vestiges of fiction. She employed humor, satire, and invention and defied temporal and biological truths in order to express the "reality" of Vita Sackville-West. In her life of Roger Fry, however, she failed to emancipate biography from the shackles of tradition. For various reasons, she was unable to deny her literary heritage and push biographical writing beyond its traditional boundaries.

These boundaries had been defined carefully and tediously by the biographical patriarchy of the late nineteenth century. Among Woolf's literary fathers was her literal father, Leslie Stephen, who in 1882 (the year Virginia was born) undertook the task of editing *The Dictionary of National Biography*. Woolf recalled the effect of her father's editorship on her childhood: "the DNB crushed [Adrian's] life out before he was born. It gave me a twist of the head too. I shouldn't have been so clever, but I should have been more stable, without that contribution to the history of England" (*Diary 3 Dec. 1923*). Her ambivalence toward her father's "contribution" is evident in this diary entry; moreover, while she mocked the DNB and its biographers in *Orlando* and other works, she inherited her father's personal set and referred to it frequently for her own essays (Rosenbaum 52).

Stephen understood the duty of the biographer to be that of presenting "the greatest possible amount of information in a thoroughly business-like form." The writer of the *Dictionary* must be "historical, not conversational or discursive . . . he must put what he has to say in a pithy and condensed form" (850). Stephen's heir to the *Dictionary*, Sir Sidney Lee, and his other literary sons and brothers, such as Sir Edward Cook and Edmund Gosse, had much to say concerning both what the biographer must write about and how he must write it. Woolf frequently alludes directly to her biographical fathers in her reaction against their rules.

In his *Principles of Biography*, Lee discusses the "truthful transmission of personality" and states that "character which does not translate itself into exploit is for the biographer a mere phantom" (9). Woolf quotes Lee's first criterion in the opening lines of "The New Biography" and declares that "no single sentence could more neatly split up into two parts the whole problem of biography as it presents itself to us today" (*CE* 4: 229).

For Gosse, the subject of a biography should have "possessed qualities, moved in conditions, assumed characteristics so unlike those of other men as to justify his being raised from their ranks" (206). In her brief biographical essay, "Edmund Gosse," Woolf finds some "merit" in Gosse's *Father and Son* but also speculates, "how much
better Gosse would have been as a writer...if only he had given free reign to his impulses...if only he had pushed his curiosity further" (CE 4: 83). Instead, he was "kept by his respect for decorum, by his decency and his timidity dipping and ducking, fingering and faltering upon the surface" (84).

One would hardly choose the adjectives "business-like," "pithy," or "condensed" to describe the style of Woolf's first biographical endeavor, Orlando. She herself described it as an exaggerated "escapade" that was only half serious. Furthermore, the subject, Orlando's life, does not fulfill all the biographical requirements. Although, during his first three centuries, Orlando lives a life full of "exploits" and is "so unlike other men" (emphasis added) as to justify his being raised from their ranks (especially since he becomes she), her life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is relatively unexceptional. Woolf, of course, clearly realizes these biographical "problems" and allows Orlando's biographer to worry that his subject will indeed be no better than "a corpse" or, to use Lee's term, "a mere phantom."

Orlando's biographer's concern ironically foreshadows the actual problems Woolf encountered when writing her biography of Roger Fry. The fictitious biographer of the earlier book seems to parody the actual biographer of the later as Woolf voices her doubts about succeeding in her endeavor. Although she had little doubt that Roger Fry was a worthy subject for biography, she did question her ability to "truthfully transmit his personality" by simply recording his "exploits" in a "thoroughly business-like form." Furthermore, some of these exploits, especially his sexual ones with her sister, Woolf felt she could not record at all. In writing Roger Fry, she discovered that she had inherited not only her father's set of the DNB but also the problems he and his contemporaries had faced: how to write a factual, readable, and discrete biography of a person she had known and admired. Without the "ironic" and "novelistic" freedom she had enjoyed in Orlando, she was compelled to answer seriously some of the questions she had raised playfully in the earlier book. Stripped of Orlando's narrative persona, in Roger Fry Woolf herself becomes the biographer-narrator; when the ironic mask is removed, she becomes just as exasperated with the problems of biography as Orlando's biographer had been a decade earlier.

In the early stages of writing Orlando, Woolf described the book as "an escapade" that would be "half laughing, half serious: with great splashes of exaggeration" (Diary 20 Dec. 1927). Certainly Woolf laughs throughout much of the book, yet she is serious in her attempt to capture the reality of Vita Sackville-West and, as she
Elizabeth Cooley wrote in a letter to Vita, in her desire to “revolutionise biography in a night” (Letters 9 Oct. 1927). Of course “in a night” is itself an exaggeration, and yet Woolf was seriously determined to explore and express the “granite and rainbow” of Vita’s character.

Woolf’s notion of revolutionizing biography was by no means original. Perry Meisel notes that “what Woolf called ‘the new biography’ . . . may be viewed as a derivation of the Paterian portrait” and views Orlando as “the consummate Paterian portrait” (44-45). Along with nineteenth-century experimentalists like Pater, Woolf had several contemporary influences. Lytton Strachey, who felt “the art of biography [had] fallen on evil times,” had already revolted against the “fathers” and “grandfathers” of biography and their “two fat volumes” with which they “commemorate the dead” (vi). He did so first with his Eminent Victorians (1918), then with Queen Victoria (1921), and finally with Elizabeth and Essex, published the same year as Orlando (1928). Woolf’s essay “The Art of Biography,” written a decade later, critically examines Strachey’s method and finds only the first of his books successful. In 1927, Harold Nicolson also rebelled against the conventions of biography by publishing Some People, which Woolf reviewed in “The New Biography.”

Both “The New Biography” and “The Art of Biography” express very definite ideas concerning what the biographer can and can not convey about his or her subject. The two essays express the same paradoxical thesis: successful biography must both capture the personality and retain factual integrity even though, generally, “fact and fiction refuse to mix.” Yet, this thesis is qualified in the earlier essay (i.e., “The New Biography”). Here Woolf acknowledges the existence of “those truths which transmit personality” (CE 4: 229) and believes that “a little fiction mixed with fact can be made to transmit personality very effectively” (CE 4: 233). Because she was struggling with the biography of Roger Fry when she wrote “The Art of Biography,” Woolf is more absolute in her criteria for good biography and writes that if fact and fiction “touch they destroy each other” (CE 4: 225-26). In “The New Biography,” however, Woolf writes that, although the biographer has to face one primary difficulty, namely that “[t]ruth of fact and truth of fiction” are incompatible, “he is now more than ever urged to combine them” (CE 4: 234). And as Harold Nicolson reveals, the biographer can combine them, but only very carefully. In order for “the light of personality [to] shine through, facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity” (CE 4: 229).
Although Orlando is subtitled A Biography, implying the representation of fact, it is, of course, a novel, fiction. While Woolf conceals her own personal relations with her subject, factual aspects of Vita Sackville-West’s heritage and personality are quite accurately portrayed in the heritage and personality of Orlando. In her diary, Woolf echoes “The New Biography,” writing that “the balance between truth & fantasy must be careful. [Orlando] is based on Vita, Violet Trefusis, Lord Lascelles, Knole &c.” (Diary 22 Oct. 1927). In a letter to Vita written a week earlier, she asks for factual information: “The whole thing has to be gone into thoroughly” (Letters 13 Oct. 1927). Despite this apparent need for factual accuracy (which was possibly a result of curiosity rather than artistic necessity), Woolf wanted to go beyond facts, beyond the “granite” of Vita’s personality. In her attempt to “untwine and twist again some very odd, incongruous strands” in Vita, Woolf hoped to capture the “shimmer of reality which sometimes attaches to [her] people, as the lustre on an oyster shell” (Letters 9 Oct. 1927). It is more than coincidental that the “lustre” Woolf mentions is often multicolored and iridescent, like a rainbow, shifting with the shifting light.

As in her earlier novel, Jacob’s Room, Woolf uses an intrusive narrator to reveal the frustrations and limitations of expressing character. Although neither this narrator nor the narrator of Orlando is a direct representative for Woolf, both reflect her general doubt that language can ever capture the reality of characters. The narrator of Jacob’s Room addresses the inability of language to express personality with an almost regretful but resigned cynicism. Her frustration is evident in her cautious hesitations, her careful qualifications, and her repeated warning, “It is no use trying to sum people up” (31, 154). The narrator-biographer of Orlando would ultimately agree, and yet he takes an almost cavalier delight in his limitations. Rather than regret that he can say no more about his subject than facts allow, he simply accepts his dilemma; by expounding the limits of biography and submitting to its gods, “Truth,” “Candour,” and “Honesty,” he excuses himself from any attempt to pursue the inexpressible (134). Woolf’s satire of her literary fathers is nowhere more clearly expressed than here.

It is significant that the biographer of Orlando, like most Victorian biographers, is male. Early in the novel he proclaims, “Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet” (14-15). Here Woolf satirizes not only the biographical conventions of her literary fathers, but the social conven-
tions as well. It is clearly the responsibility of the female to bear the
great man and of the male to record his life.

Despite examples like this that place the biographer within the
Victorian tradition, there is an essential contradiction in Orlando's
biographer. While he superficially follows the traditional rules of
biography, while he disparages poets and novelists for trying to
express more than they can know, he blatantly defies his own rules
and attempts to express the “reality of character” despite himself.
When advocating the dry, factual life that the biographer presents
over any attempt to describe personality or thought, he seems to
protest too much. Rather like Swift’s hack in the satirical Tale of the
Tub, he contradicts himself and practices the very forms of writing he
disparages. Woolf “rejects the overpowering narrative authority with
which the novelistic biographers tell their stories and probe their
subjects’ minds” by “satirizing the entire enterprise” (Hoberman
144). Her literary spoof, though not as bitter as Swift’s, is just as
effective. More importantly, however, it goes beyond satire to reveal
the paradoxical limits of language and the biographer’s insistence
upon trying to cross these limits and express the “reality of charac-
ters.” Thus, Orlando becomes what Ira Nadel calls “metabiography”
and holds the “unique position” of being “at once criticism and
fiction” (140). It is not only “a raffish portrait of . . . Vita Sackville-
West” but also “a casebook on how to write” biography (Richter 61).

Early in Orlando, the biographer, echoing those eminent biogra-
phers before him, defines his “first duty, . . . which is to plod,
without looking to right or to left, in the indelible footprints of truth;
. . . on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and
write finis on the tombstone above our heads. . . . Our simple duty is
to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make
of them what he may” (65).

Following this simple but strict criterion, Orlando’s biographer
diligently deciphers scorched and torn documents preserved from
the time of Orlando’s career as Ambassador to Turkey. He scrupu-
ulously records verbatim the diary of Lieutenant John Brigge and a
letter from Miss Penelope Hartopp—including the holes. Yet, at-
ttempting to stay on “the firm, if rather narrow, ground of ascer-
tained truth,” he must confess that “no one has ever known exactly
what took place later that night” when Orlando had changed into a
woman (131). Where “ascertained truth” fails, the biographer admits,
despite his own good intentions to remain factual, that “often it
has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to make use of
the imagination” (119). Surely making use of the imagination vio-
lates "the first duty of the biographer," and this violation reflects inconsistencies in our narrator-biographer; the biographer can clearly recite the first duty of biography, but he also can not resist breaking it. He casually notes that he may "ignore" a thousand "disagreeables" in his subject, which "is the aim of every good biographer" (15), or, on the other hand, "lay bare rudely, as a biographer may, a curious trait" (28).

Furthermore, when the biographer is confronted with "matters on which [he] can [not] profitably enlarge," matters of love and other emotions, he depends upon the reader to make up "from bare hints dropped here and there the whole boundary and circumference of a living person" (73). Since he must avoid "that riot and confusion of the passions and emotions which every good biographer detests" (16), he writes only for readers who "can hear in what we only whisper a living voice; can see, often when we say nothing about it, exactly what he looked like, and know without a word to guide them precisely what he thought and felt" (73). Needless to say, the task is impossible and the ideal reader, nonexistent. Woolf exaggerates her own desire to express fully the reality of character by giving her biographer perfect faith that this desire can be fulfilled. She satirizes her own skepticism by inverting it and at the same time satirizes that inversion, a belief that character can be expressed, by exaggerating it.

The biographer's defiance of his first duty goes beyond manipulating the facts, however. Like Lee, he initially insists that "exploits," preferably either in warfare or love, are the stuff biography is made of, and that, if "the subject of one's biography will neither love nor kill, but will only think and imagine, we may conclude that he or she is no better than a corpse [or phantom] and so leave her" (269). Yet, here again, he contradicts himself. By the end of the novel the biographer ironically reverses his attitude about what constitutes a proper biography and, more importantly, about what constitutes a "self" as well.

Having stated only pages before that life "is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer" and that "[t]hought and life are as the poles asunder" (267), he enters into Orlando's thoughts as she drives back to her estate. Quite uncharacteristically, the biographer deserts his post as objective recorder of actions and facts and becomes almost metaphysical in his speculations: "For if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not—Heaven help us—all having lodgment at one time or another in the human spirit?" (308). Not only
does the biographer accept the existence of these indescribable selves, he also admits that Orlando had "far more [selves] 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."

As the biographer continues to analyze the many selves, the analysis parodies psychoanalysis in a rudimentary way: "[S]he was, to hear her talk, changing her selves as quickly as she drove—there was a new one at every corner—as happens when, for some unaccountable reason, the conscious self, which is the uppermost, and has the power to desire, wishes to be nothing but one self. 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 . . ." (310). Then the biographer draws back into his original role as recorder of facts and undercuts his more metaphysical or psychological analysis: "Orlando was certainly seeking this self as the reader can judge from overhearing her talk as she drove (and if it is rambling talk, disconnected, trivial, dull, and sometimes unintelligible, it is the reader's fault for listening to a lady talking to herself; we only copy her words as she spoke them, adding in brackets which self in our opinion is speaking, but in this we may well be wrong)." Again contradicting himself, the biographer breaks the traditional rules. Rather than recording "life," "the only fit subject for the novelist or biographer," he records "thought"—and not simply rational thought but the subtle machinations of the psychological "self."

Eight years after she finished Orlando, Woolf began work on her life of Roger Fry. While the ironic tensions between what Orlando's biographer claims to do and what he actually does, both technically and contextually, do not directly replicate the paradox of Woolf's own attempt and perceived failure to express the reality of Fry's character, they do reflect it. In writing her only formal biography, Woolf was again faced with the problem of how to convey both the facts and the less tangible impressions that compose an individual's personality. Here, however, she found herself burdened with the same concerns that those eminent biographers before her faced. As she moved out of the realm of fiction and presented the life of a real person, not a quasi-fictitious character, she relinquished her persona and with it the humor, parody, and wild contradictions of Orlando.10 Writing factual biography was a serious undertaking, and she felt she could never "make a life out of Six Cardboard boxes full of tailor bills love letters and old picture postcards" (Letters 3 May 1938). She found herself in the position of every good biographer who, in Leon
Edel's words, "is called upon to impose logic and coherence upon the heterogeneous mass of facts he has assembled, recognizing that in the life he is pursuing they seemed quite arbitrary and, on occasion, illogical" (45). In a letter to Vita Sackville-West dated 3 May 1938, she wrote, "My God, how does one write Biography? Tell me. I'm fairly distracted with Fry papers. How can one deal with facts—so many and so many and so many? Or ought one, as I incline, to be purely fictitious. And what is a life? And what was Roger? And if one cant say, what's the good of trying?" (Letters). It is interesting to note how closely she echoes very seriously the concerns that the biographer voices quite flippantly in Orlando.

In addition to doubts about the feasibility of writing biography at all, Woolf faced other problems. Many of Fry's family members and friends were still alive and were close friends of Woolf. Thus, as with Victorian commemorative biography, where "the closer the family tie the more securely the curtain of discretion was likely to be drawn" (Shelston 51), she had the added burden of balancing truth with consideration for those about whom she wrote. "How does one square the relatives? How does one euphemise 20 different mistresses?" she wrote to Ethel Smyth (Letters 27 Jan. 1937), and to Mary Llewelyn Davies, "How can one write the truth about friends whose families are alive? And Roger was the most scornful of untruths of any man" (Letters 18 Sept. 1937).

Vanessa Bell, who had had an affair with Fry, presented a particular problem for her sister: "I'm flummoxed entirely how to deal with your own letters," she wrote to Vanessa on 8 October 1938, "how am I to write this book? What am I to say about you? . . . As it is I'm compromising; and its a muddle; and unreadable; and will have to be used, like the letter, to wipe off a gooses rump. But Roger himself is so magnificent, I'm so in love with him; and see dimly such a masterpiece that cant be painted, that on I go" (Letters). Woolf found herself not only walking in the shadow of her literary fathers but also, reluctantly, in their shoes. Ultimately she felt she must try to represent the life and personality of Fry both factually and decorously. 11

Woolf's fascination with trying to verbally "paint" this "magnificent" man compelled her finally to finish the biography. And yet, as her diary attests, she rarely enjoyed the task. She wrote of being "strung into a ball with Roger" and of having her "head screwed up over Roger" (Diary 28 Aug. 1938; 6 Oct. 1938). She often described working on the biography as "a grind," and "drudgery" and wrote of "innumerable doubts of [herself] as a biographer; of the possibility of
Elizabeth Cooley

doing it at all" (Diary 11 Mar. 1939). In the course of writing the life, Woolf lost that enthusiasm which Robert Gittings describes as "the highest necessity of a biographer" (16). Even so, her desire to do Fry justice in a biography, her sense of responsibility to his family, and her fascination with the man himself compelled her to persevere.

Without the freedom provided by invention and humor, Woolf patterned her biography on the tradition before her. Her book is chronological and, for the most part, deals with facts. She rarely speculates about Fry's thoughts and feelings, but, rather like Orlando's biographer in chapter 3, spends an inordinate amount of time and space quoting directly from Fry's letters and reported conversations. She records snatches of conversations that "might serve for the skeleton of many such talks, and to give the skeleton flesh and blood—so far as flesh and blood can be given without voices, without laughter, without Roger Fry himself" (270-71). As if to compensate for her inability to create "flesh and blood," five pages of sheer quotation follow.

Toward the end of the biography, she becomes more concerned with her inability truly to express the personality of Roger Fry and, much like the biographer in the final chapter of Orlando, writes vaguely of "impressions" and "qualities": "He left too upon the minds of those who knew him a very rich, complex and definite impression . . . . [W]e can perhaps single out a few of the qualities that gave it shape" (294). In other passages she once again echoes Orlando's biographer and writes of the "many lives" that Fry "lived simultaneously" (200, 213). Quoting Fry's own words she writes,

But how describe the pure delight "of watching a flower unfold its immense cup of red"? Those who knew him best will attempt no summing up of that sensation. They can only say that Roger Fry had a peculiar quality of reality that made him a person of infinite importance in their lives and add his own words, "Any attempt I might make to explain this would probably land me in the depths of mysticism. On the edge of that gulf I stop." (297)

Woolf ultimately refrains from attempting to explain Fry and his contradictions. Like Orlando's biographer she generally chooses to leave out "a thousand disagreeables" about him. She dismisses them all in a sentence: "Also he was 'cross, fussy, stingy, pernickity and other things.' Perhaps psycho-analysis might help; or perhaps hu-
man nature in general and his own in particular was too irrational, too instinctive, either to be analysed or to be cured" (291).

Both *Orlando* and *Roger Fry* reflect Woolf's skepticism about the ability of traditional biography to express the reality of character. *Orlando* reflects this skepticism through successful parody and satire of the Victorian biographer as well as through essentially serious speculation about the self and how it can be known. With *Orlando*, Woolf could blatantly break with conventions of style, form, and subject in such a way as to "revolutionise biography" by essentially making it fiction. *Roger Fry*, on the other hand, reflects Woolf's skepticism not through success but through a peculiar double failure. Faced with the task of writing serious biography, Woolf remained within those biographical boundaries delineated by her literary fathers. Factual accuracy and discretion dictated the kind of biography she felt she had to write, yet this kind of biography went against everything she believed about understanding and conveying personality. Woolf failed to produce the Victorian's "two fat volumes," but she also failed to allow her invention and intuition free play. Her criticism of Edmund Gosse might apply equally well to herself: we can only speculate how much better *Roger Fry* would have been had she given free reign to her literary impulses and pushed her curiosity farther.

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NOTES

'Woolf uses the phrase "granite and rainbow" in *Orlando* (77) and in "The New Biography." She writes, "[I]f we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one . . ." (CE 4: 229).

In "The Art of Biography," Woolf praises Lytton Strachey for "recreating" his historical characters and showing "them as they really were," a task "that call[s] for gifts analogous to the poet's or the novelist's" (CE 4: 223).

In chapter 5 of *Modernizing Lives*, Hoberman examines *Orlando* and *Flush* as successful feminist "jokes" played on the biographical tradition. In these works Woolf addresses the question of "how to revise biography so that it could include women as subjects and reflect women's differing perceptions" without simply following the traditional pattern or being too eccentric (142).

These terms are used by William Epstein (299). Drawing on James Clifford's *From Puzzles to Portraits*, Epstein systematically diagrams types of biography in his article. He finds that Orlando not only challenges the genre but also "ironically challenges the discursive project of biographical recognition itself" (299).
Meisel points out that it is important to distinguish Pater's portraiture, which emphasizes "the contemplation of character," from traditional Victorian biography. He devotes a good number of pages to the literary (and moral) schism between Pater and Leslie Stephen.

James Hafley suggests that Some People was Woolf's "immediate inspiration" for Orlando (197), and Howard Harper points out that "The New Biography" "illuminates the method of Orlando as well" (166).

Nicolson also detected a dichotomy between fact and fiction in biography. In The Development of English Biography, published just after Some People, he writes, "the scientific interest in biography is hostile to and will in the end prove destructive to the literary interest. . . . The more biography becomes a branch of science, the less will it become a branch of literature" (154-55).

Some confusion about Orlando's genre did, in fact, hinder early sales. On 22 September 1928, Woolf wrote that shopkeepers said "it is inevitable. No one wants biography. But it is a novel, says Miss Ritchie. But it is called a biography on the title page, they say. It will have to go on the biography shelf. I doubt therefore that we shall do more than cover expenses—a high price to pay for the fun of calling it a biography" (Diary 27 Oct. 1928). Actually, the novel made record sales.

For a brief but detailed examination of the personal relationship between Vita and Virginia, see Love. For an examination of the biographical parallels between Orlando and Vita Sackville-West, see Howard Harper's chapter on Orlando in Between Language and Silence, which draws on Sackville-West's Knole and the Sackvilles and Nigel Nicolson's Portrait of a Marriage.

Thomas S. W. Lewis, in an article on Woolf's "biographies," notes that "Orlando and Flush succeed because Woolf exercised her freedom as a novelist. While writing the life of an actual human being, she learned that her imagination was tethered to facts" (321). Although Lewis clearly implies that the biography fails (voicing the opinions of other critics as well), Richter finds it "curious" that it had been "downgraded by the critics" (63). She finds that the biography "has the pace of a novel," "story," "symbolism," and "an adroit handling of relationships" (63-64).

S. P. Rosenbaum compares Roger Fry: A Biography with Leslie Stephen's biographies of Henry Fawcett and Fitzjames Stephen. He finds all "lucidly written and organized" but suffering from "reticence." However, he writes, what the daughter "felt as a necessary constraint" the father "experienced more as a comforting decency" (50-51).

Michael Rosenthal comments on this tendency to record page after page of letters in one of the few critical commentaries on Roger Fry: A Biography found in his book, Virginia Woolf.

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