

ANNALISA FEDERICI

## “TRUTH! TRUTH! TRUTH!”

*Image and Text, Fact and Fiction in Virginia Woolf’s Orlando*

**ABSTRACT:** The use of photographic “evidence” was of particular interest to Virginia Woolf and it is well known that she included photographs in her real (though unconventional), as well as fictional biographies *Roger Fry*, *Orlando* and *Flush*. The use of such pictures, however, serves to problematise the reality of the photographic or biographical subject/object, the relationship between fact and fiction, and therefore the biographical genre itself. This essay focuses on *Orlando* (1928), a text through which Woolf wanted to “revolutionise biography in a night,” and where she undermined the supposed faithfulness of the form towards its subject by presenting false photographic evidence. In this mock biography both image and text are fakes, thus altering the purported adherence to facts which is a prerogative of the genre and highlighting the self-referentiality of both the photographic subject and the text. The combination of words and pictures determines the collapse of denotation and knowledge: concepts of “reality” and “meaning” fall apart, and a new idea of “truth” begins to evolve. Woolf’s creative construct of her subject through words and pictures shows that the photographic image is never neutral, thus reminding us of Susan Sontag’s claim that “although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are.”

**KEYWORDS:** Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, Biography, Photography, Truth vs. Fiction.

In recent times, considerable critical attention has been devoted to exploring the multiple relationships between Virginia Woolf and photography. As several studies have shown,<sup>1</sup> Woolf was thoroughly familiar with, and deeply interested in what she herself described—in an introductory essay to the retrospective collection *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men and Fair Women* by her great-aunt and famous photographer Julia Margaret Cameron—as a “new born art” (Woolf 1926, 6).<sup>2</sup> Beyond the mere biographical evidence that she frequently dealt with the issue

<sup>1</sup> There is an extensive bibliography on the subject. See, for example, Gillespie 1993; Wussow 1994; Caughie 2000; Humm 2002, 2006, 2010, 2012. Special issues of journals devoted to the theme of Woolf and photography include *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* 74 (2008), ed. by T. Stearns (2008) and, more recently, *Études Britanniques Contemporaines* 53 (2017), ed. by A. Cassigneul (2017). For more general theories of photography, also in relation to twentieth-century literature, see Sontag 1977; Barthes 1981; Hansom 2002; Cunningham, Fisher, and Mays 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The tone of this piece is sometimes ironic, especially as regards Cameron’s allegorical and idealised photographic arrangements, showing that Woolf’s interest in photography faded when the new art could be compared to what she termed contemporary “materialist” fiction in being merely representational and superficial. Natasha Aleksyuk aptly defines Woolf’s introductory essay, characterised by a combination of the fantastic and the real in narrating events in her great-aunt’s life, as “mock-biography” – a label usually employed by critics to refer to *Orlando* – and

of photography in her diaries, letters and essays, that she exchanged pictures with acquaintances and regularly preserved memories of her family and friends in photo albums, what is far more relevant to the purpose of this essay is that Woolf often employed photographic terms and techniques in her works. Moreover, the use of photographic "evidence" was of particular interest to the author in her own experiments with the varying relationships between fiction and reality, and it is well known that she included photographs in her real (though unconventional) biography *Roger Fry* (1940), as well as in her fictional ones *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933).<sup>3</sup> As Helen Wussow has pointed out in a seminal essay, in these works the use of pictures "serves to call into question their factuality and the overall stability of the photographic subject/object" (1994, 2), the relationship between fact and fiction, and therefore the biographical genre itself with its supposed adherence to real events in people's lives. "These simultaneous commitments to photography and biography," as Floriane Reviron-Piégay has more recently suggested, "are far from coincidental and show that photography was never far from her preoccupations with biographical representation. [...] indeed, photography claimed to give the truth of the character which is precisely what Woolf was after in her biographical works" (2017).

*Flush*, for instance, shares with *Orlando* the lighthearted tone of a divertissement, as well as the subversive character of the author's attempt to parody the tradition of Victorian biography with its focus on male, eminent and respectable protagonists. Although the title and subtitle—*A Biography*—prefigure the narration of the life of a dog (an expectation also corroborated in the first Hogarth edition by the frontispiece picture of Woolf's spaniel Pinka), an attentive reading reveals not only a "mock-ponderous application of the conventions of human biography to a dog" (Saunders 2010, 442) and a "reversal of biographical andro-centrism" (Aleksiuk 2000, 140), but also the fact that the book is actually an account of the famous love story of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning told from the point of view of her pet, a narrative strategy which, in Woolf's view, would undoubtedly relieve the female protagonist from undeserved obscurity. The first edition also contained nine additional illustrations interwoven through the text, including four original drawings by Vanessa Bell, a lithograph of Flush's

---

claims that "by juxtaposing 'Julia Margaret Cameron' with Cameron's photographs Woolf practices the ironic techniques that she will later put to use in *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933)" (2000, 126).

<sup>3</sup> Anna Snaith contends that "with *Roger Fry* we see Woolf straining against the restrictions of the genre, longing to mix accuracy with imagination" (2000, 97). In her introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition, Rachel Bowlby defines *Orlando* as "not exactly a fake biography, of a purely fictitious subject" (1992, xix), alluding to the fact that it was inspired by a real person (Vita Sackville-West), while Elizabeth Cooley employs the term "quasi-biographical novel" (1990, 71) to refer to the purposely misleading use of the subtitle *A Biography* in a fictional work, which is – as the reader immediately recognises – clearly a spoof. Angeliki Spiropoulou at first considers the book as "one of the novels by Woolf which at first sight could be called 'historical'," then labels it "a mock biography" and "a hybrid construct that subversively blurs the boundaries between historiography and fiction" (2010, 75-76).

birthplace, a drawing of Elizabeth Barrett as well as one of Robert Browning, and two photographed paintings of the characters "Miss Mitford" and "Mrs. Browning," both reproduced—as the captions have it—by permission of the National Portrait Gallery. As for *Roger Fry*, Woolf's only formal biography, the book shares with *Orlando* a use of pictures that is closely related to the pivotal issue of capturing the reality of character—whether fictional or not—that she frequently dealt with in her diaries and letters during its weary gestation. Elizabeth Cooley finds an analogy between the two texts in the fact that both show Woolf's concern "not with creating fictional characters but with discovering and 'recreating' real personalities" (1990, 71), those of two intimate friends. Although the results of such concern are quite dissimilar, I believe that in *Roger Fry*, as in *Orlando*, the use of photographs is non-mimetic and emphasises the elusiveness of the central character. As Wussow aptly remarks, "of the eighteen plates Woolf includes in Fry's biography, only seven are images of Fry himself. The others are of rooms or houses that he inhabited or reproductions of his paintings. It is as if Woolf feels that no portrait of Fry can be painted, either by words or images" (1994, 7). We might therefore argue that, by introducing actual photographs into some of her books alongside writing, Woolf set up a deliberate dialectic between verbal and visual, and engaged in a long-standing discussion of the interconnections between truth and fantasy, image and text, ultimately to reveal the fictionality of both.

The present essay aims to analyse the author's use of photography in terms of narrative technique. It will focus, in particular, on *Orlando: A Biography*, a work through which Woolf admittedly wanted to "revolutionise biography in a night" (Nicolson and Trautmann 1977, 429) and where she undermined the supposed faithfulness of the form towards its subject by presenting false photographic evidence. In this mock biography both image and text are fakes, thus altering the purported adherence to facts which is a prerogative of the genre, and highlighting the self-referentiality of both the text and the photographic subject. The combination of words and pictures determines the collapse of denotation and knowledge on a double level, both visual and verbal. In Wussow's words, "when text and image are brought together in *Orlando*, concepts of meaning disintegrate and new definitions of truth begin to evolve" (1994, 3). At a close analysis, the book "reveals the oscillation and vacillation in the photograph between the signifier (the iconic message) and the infinitely deferred signified" (4). The breach between language (both verbal and visual) and reality is such that in this work "the photographic mirror is cracked. The subject cannot be identified, and the viewer of the photographs included in the text is left without any reference around which to center the self" (*ibid.*). Woolf's use of false photographic evidence in this book thus seems to be in line with her own equivocal, sometimes even hostile, reactions to cameras,<sup>4</sup> as well as her not wholly unambiguous conception of the "new born

---

<sup>4</sup> While we know for sure from her numerous photo-albums (recently digitised by the Harvard Library and available at [https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:17948758\\$1i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:17948758$1i)) that Woolf

art." As Diane Gillespie aptly remarks, although she employed such definition, "Virginia Woolf usually ranked photographs, in spite of their relative newness, with the traditional representational or narrative paintings her artist friends scorned" (1993, 113). When photographic documentation meant faithful but sterile adherence to objective facts and truth, as it happened with realist fiction, the new medium received the same disparaging treatment as the "materialism" of H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and James Galsworthy—that Woolf famously ridiculed in her essay "Modern Fiction" (1919)—or as the Victorian tradition of life-writing. Conversely, in her view, narrative techniques reminiscent of photography risk becoming artificial and pretentious. To borrow Gillespie's words again, "'photographic' to Woolf, then, frequently meant superficial, representational, whether in paintings or in novels" (1993, 115). Similarly, Timothy Mackin maintains that "Woolf often dismisses photography, and in particular the idea of 'the snapshot,' as superficial and 'obvious' [...], a form that for all its supposed realism fails to capture anything essential about its subject [...], an indictment of a shallow realism that presents its subjects only in incoherent fragments" (2010, 117). Therefore, we may interpret the author's effort to renew fiction through narrative experimentalism as matched by her own attempt to refashion the biographical genre by having recourse, both in words and in pictures, to what she calls "creative fact" (Woolf 1966a, 228), a term which—as Ira Bruce Nadel reminds us—represents "not the impurity of fact but a near oxymoron recognizing the confusion, complexity and disorder of our lives and the determination not to make a biographical life a falsely ordered world" (1984, 205).

While scholars have mainly discussed Woolf's penchant for photography on the one hand and biographical experiments on the other in a largely separate way, it is my contention here that the author questioned the strict adherence to facts of both traditional biography and realist fiction in parallel with, and by means of, her own challenging the widespread idea that only photographs, among different artforms, can represent reality in a truly objective and accurate manner. In the specific case of *Orlando* with its apparatus of subtitle, marked chapters, preface, acknowledgements, illustrations and index, where the pretence of accuracy reveals nothing but the fictionality of biographical material, Woolf's use of pictures is obviously "playful and ironic as she satirizes their function along with the affectations of traditional biographers" (Gillespie 1993, 136). The composite of verbal and visual is an essential aspect of the book, which contains three photographs of her intimate acquaintance Vita Sackville-West—upon whose ancestry and life it is whimsically based—in the guise of Orlando, as well as four photographed paintings of Vita's ancestors, and a picture of Woolf's niece, Angelica Bell, costumed as the Russian princess. As Max Saunders aptly points

---

was amused by both taking and being taken pictures together with her family and friends in relaxed and informal contexts, during her lifetime she only accepted, and not without hesitation or embarrassment, the possibility of being portrayed by three professional photographers: George Charles Beresford, Man Ray and Gisèle Freund.

out about the interplay between words and images in the book, "Woolf saw how photography, and the play between the paintings and the photographs, could lend itself to her purposes. [...] The photographs pull the text's fantasy into the real; the text pulls the photographs' reality into fantasy" (2010, 479). To put it differently, the pictures are inserted in the text of the novel to prove the existence of its protagonist and other characters, while they clearly point to the fictionality of both the narrative and the photographic subject. Woolf's creative construct of her subject through words and pictures shows that the photographic image is never neutral, thus reminding us of Susan Sontag's claim that "although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are" (1977, 6-7).

To quote Saunders again, "of all modernist engagements with life-writing, Virginia Woolf's is the most visible, and her work represents the most sustained and diverse exploration of the relation between fiction and auto/biography" (2010, 438). As daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, the founding editor of the monumental *Dictionary of National Biography*, and as inheritor of a family tradition of biographical writing stretching back several generations, Woolf "was critically engaged all her life in the problem of writing lives and, in particular, the problem of writing women's lives" (Anderson 2001, 92). The author, however, did not conceive of life-writing merely as a legacy she received from her family connections. Quite the contrary, she felt the strong need to question the linear, fact-based style of Victorian biography and redefine the genre, as her critical essays on the subject—"The New Biography" (1927), "The Art of Biography" (1939)—and the biographies she wrote clearly demonstrate. "The New Biography" was occasioned by a review of Harold Nicolson's *Some People* (1927), which Woolf praised for its method of writing about subjects "as though they were at once real and imaginary" (1966b, 232). In this essay, the author acknowledges the existence of "those truths which transmit personality" (229) and believes that "a little fiction mixed with fact can be made to transmit personality very effectively" (233). In other words, the biographer is not to disregard facts completely, but to present them in a creative fashion: "in order that the light of personality may shine through, facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity" (229). It seems more than coincidental, therefore, that on 20 September 1927 Woolf noted down in her diary the idea of a project that would be "like a grand historical picture, the outlines of all my friends. [...] It might be a most amusing book. The question is how to do it. Vita should be Orlando, a young nobleman. There should be Lytton. & it should be truthful; but fantastic" (Olivier Bell and McNeillie 1982, 156-157). The new book was envisioned as "a biography beginning in the year 1500 & continuing to the present day, called Orlando: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another" (161). In announcing her bold attempt, Woolf clearly positioned herself at the heart of the modernist reinvention of life-writing parodying and mocking the traditional biographical genre, and she decided to do so by merging fact and fiction

in what Max Saunders compellingly illustrates as "auto/biografiction," a label that Woolf herself seems to have foreshadowed in defining Nicolson's *Some People* as a "mixture of biography and autobiography, of fact and fiction" (1966b, 235). *Orlando*, Saunders notes, "combines the telling of a biographical story with a recurrent unease with biographical conventions" (2010, 444), first and foremost the necessity of sticking to true facts and solid evidence. To quote a revealing example, Chapter II opens with a discussion of the primary role of the biographer as a conveyor of facts and pursuer of plain truth from birth to death of the protagonist. On closer reading, however, such task is actually the object of mockery, exactly as in her diary Woolf would deride the "appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner" (Olivier Bell and McNeillie 1982, 209). The tone is evidently parodic:

The biographer is now faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over. Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; [...] on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads. But now we come to an episode which lies right across our path, so that there is no ignoring it. Yet it is dark, mysterious, and undocumented; so that there is no explaining it. [...] Our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may. (Woolf 1992, 63).

Such sense of unease and uncertainty led Woolf to envision a different kind of biography which would bring together fiction's attention to the intangible personality and the inner life of the character with the truthfulness of historical facts, or which could somehow create, as she famously wrote, "that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow" (Woolf 1966b, 235). Unsurprisingly, therefore, at the beginning of Chapter III Orlando's biographer ironically laments the lack of documents and true facts to rely upon; however, speculation, supposition and imagination may come to his aid:

It is, indeed, highly unfortunate, and much to be regretted that at this stage of Orlando's career, when he played a most important part in the public life of his country, we have least information to go upon. [...] the revolution which broke out during his period of office, and the fire which followed, have so damaged or destroyed all those papers from which any trustworthy record could be drawn, that what we can give is lamentably incomplete. [...] We have done our best to piece out a meagre summary from the charred fragments that remain; but often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to use the imagination. (Woolf 1992, 115).

It is by now a well-established view that the book plays with the conventions of both biographical and historical writing, as well as with their adherence to facts, by exceeding the fundamental biographical categories of lifespan (the protagonist living for nearly 400 years) and gender (Orlando turning spontaneously into a woman midway in the book). Angeliki Spiropoulou, for instance, convincingly

argues that "in technical terms, *Orlando* can be read as a parody and pastiche of tropes of historical representation, historical events and literary passages that render the 'spirit of the age.' This fictional history explodes the conventions of standard bio/historiographical discourses and brings into relief those historical conditions which are traditionally overlooked" (2010, 76). The narrative voice—always intruding with the solemn tone of the historian of his own time as well as of other times, and interrupting the narrative with metanarrative comments on the method of life-writing—satirises the evolution of literary history and of the biographical style throughout the centuries. It is mainly for this reason that Ira Bruce Nadel refers to *Orlando* as "metabiography" (1984, 141), claiming that the book "not only contains a theory of biography but shows that theory at work," holding the unique position of "being at once criticism and fiction" (140). Similarly, Harvena Richter maintains that it is "a raffish portrait of [...] Vita Sackville-West" and at the same time "a casebook on how to write" biography (1986, 61). In particular, the narrator parodies the tradition of Victorian life-writing and the monumental work which represents "the apex of the Victorian belief in, and commitment to, fact" (Nadel 1984, 53) by affirming, for instance, that "the true length of a person's life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute" (Woolf 1992, 291). In Chapter I, for example, no sooner has the biographer introduced the main character—in a manner not devoid of contradictions: "for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it" (13)—than he displays metanarrative self-consciousness—"directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore" (15). Furthermore, he satirises the Victorian practice of recording the lives of great men: "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. From deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach whatever seat it may be that is the height of their desire" (14). Ultimately, Woolf's mockery of the biographer's pursuit of truth reaches its climax precisely when the most absurd event and turning point of the whole book—Orlando's change of sex—is narrated:

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! And again they cry Truth! and sounding yet a third time in concert they peal forth, The Truth and nothing but the Truth! (129).

The trumpeters, ranging themselves side by side in order, blow one terrific blast:—  
"THE TRUTH!"  
at which Orlando woke.

He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess—he was a woman. (132).

It seems evident that everything in the text (even such historical events as the Great Frost or the advent of the Victorian age) is presented as a playful exaggeration. Furthermore, in line with the author's view that any biography worthy of the name should give us "the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders" (Woolf 1966a, 228), *Orlando* shows how the limitations of the genre can be overcome by the creative writer. It is particularly revealing that, in this mock biography, Woolf chose to merge fact and fiction on a double plane, that is not only on a verbal level, but also on a visual one. The contamination of biographical truth with the realm of fantasy parallels the twofold nature of the illustrations as both real pictures of real people and fakes, thus reminding us of Susan Sontag's claim that photographs are "both objective record and personal testimony" (2003, 23), simultaneously recording and interpreting reality.

The idea of a fictional biography—a book that is both a biography (as the tongue-in-cheek subtitle indicates) of Vita Sackville-West while at the same time clearly a novel—seems to have allowed Woolf to break the hegemony of the text of the novel itself by introducing photographs which function integrally in the work as a whole, being pictures of real people in the guise of fictional characters, placed at appropriate positions throughout the text. Exactly as Maggie Humm has noted about *Three Guineas*, the illustrated feminist-pacifist pamphlet that Woolf published in 1938,<sup>5</sup> *Orlando* can be seen as one of those books which use photographs in conjunction with words, in order to produce what W.J.T. Mitchell names "image/texts:" "composite, synthetic works" that act as "a site of dialectical tension, slippage, and transformation" (1994, 89; 106). Such tension, or slippage, is doubled precisely by the ambiguous nature of the pictures contained in the portrait gallery of illustrations, alternating between photographs of actual portraits at Knole, the Sackville-West stately home in Kent ("Orlando as a Boy," "The Archduchess Harriet," "Orlando as Ambassador," "Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire," as the images are captioned), and photographs of real people—Angelica Bell, Vita Sackville-West—dressed up and posing in order to appear as someone else ("The Russian Princess as a Child," "Orlando on her return to England," "Orlando about the year 1840," "Orlando at the present time"). The photographed paintings place the photographic/biographical subject at a further remove from reality for the main reason that they are not unmediated renditions of flesh-and-blood people just captured by the camera eye; therefore, there is no substantial evidence that they actually correspond to the characters referred to in the captions. In particular, "Orlando as a Boy" matches the text's description of

---

<sup>5</sup> In this book, "a prose picture of the indissoluble link between the physical violence of fascism and patriarchal tyranny to women and children in the private home" (Humm 2003, 648), the five published photographs ("A General," "Heralds," "A University Procession," "A Judge" and "An Archbishop"), strategically distributed throughout the text, "are copies of some of the newspaper photographs that Woolf collected together with press cuttings, quotations, and letters in three scrapbooks dating from the early 1930s" (*ibid.*). As Wussow suggests, these pictures "reveal how an image can be manipulated to serve a rhetorical purpose" (1994, 2), that is the harsh condemnation of totalitarian regimes and of female oppression in a masculine patriarchal world.

Orlando's attire—his "crimson breeches, lace collar, waistcoat of taffeta, and shoes with rosettes on them as big as double dahlias" (Woolf 1992, 20)—but not such physical traits as his red cheeks, almond teeth, dark hair, small ears, "eyes like drenched violets [...] and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome" (15). Here, it is obviously Woolf who took inspiration from the painting to describe Orlando, and not the painting which replicates and bears witness to the text. It seems remarkable, therefore, that the author willingly created a sort of friction between words and pictures. The same tension applies to the actual photographs, producing a crisis of faith. Since readers can more or less easily identify the real photographic subjects as Angelica Bell and Vita Sackville-West, they inevitably tend to both mistrust the captions singling them out as Sasha and Orlando, and judge the pictures as fakes, as perhaps suggested by the exaggeratedly artificial quality of a photograph such as "The Russian Princess as a Child," for instance. Furthermore, in "Orlando about the year 1840," the floral gypsy blouse, plaid kilt-like skirt and velvet Renaissance-style hat worn by the subject do not match the fashion of the time the picture supposedly dates back to. Perhaps the only elements of reality shown by these images are the pearls hanging around Orlando/Vita's neck in "Orlando on her return to England" (a favourite jewel of both the fictional character and the real person who inspired it), as well as the setting of "Orlando at the present time," showing Vita with her dogs in a real-life moment that Woolf captured and made part of a work of fiction. As scholars have variously pointed out, the visual material stands in a complex and problematic relationship to the literary text and, at the same time, is also questioned as an objective conveyor of true facts exactly as the mock biography is. According to Wussow, for instance, "although the captions that accompany the photographs appear to identify or anchor the iconic message, they only serve to confuse it. [...] Woolf's quarrel in *Orlando* is not only with the form of biography and the illusion of factual evidence but also with a culture that expects a subject to be visually revealed and clearly defined. Throughout *Orlando* Woolf rejects the concept of effortless recognition of the (photographic) subject and, therefore, the self" (1994, 3-4). Similarly, Spiropoulou maintains that "by providing us with pictures of the fictional heroes and, inversely, by modelling her fiction on a 'real' person, namely her lover Vita Sackville-West, Woolf confounds the codes of distinction between story and history. She attempts to confer a credibility on the existence of these fictional characters while simultaneously she 'derealizes' historically existing persons" (2010, 76-77). It seems evident, therefore, that the photographs play with the blurred boundary between fiction and reality that the text itself tries to undermine by means of language and (meta)narrative technique. Most of the portraits in this gallery are—or at least are said to be—of a single character (Orlando), though they are actually pictures of different people (real or imaginary, contemporaries or ancestors) pretending to be whom they evidently are not. All these stratifications point to, and are a *mise en abyme* of, the book's central technique of superimposing a fictional identity over a real one (Orlando over Vita). According to Max Saunders, this is mainly the reason why the portrait gallery "stands as an emblem

of the whole book, which could be described as a series of portraits of Orlandos from different periods;" therefore, "insofar as it runs these different avatars into a single figure, it is better described as a composite portrait. [...] *Orlando* is a composite of snapshots taken through history" (2010, 473). To put it a different way, the fictionality of the photographs doubles the fictionality of the biography's subject matter and narrative voice: "*Orlando* presents imaginary portraiture through imaginary authorship" (477). Woolf was fully aware of the dual nature of both photographic and biographic realities, and the fact that Orlando is both a fictional character and a historical one (that is, Vita) seems to justify the technique of inserting imaginary portraits alongside real people.

It is also particularly noteworthy that the pictures appearing in *Orlando* show the same playful juxtaposition of fact and fiction, the same mixture of artefact and reality pervading the allegorical portraits of Julia Margaret Cameron, whose photographic style and artistic conception strongly influenced Woolf's visual aesthetics—at least more than she was willing to admit. In a compelling study, Marion Dell (2015) suggests that both Woolf's narrative technique and her practice of domestic photography bear the mark of her great-aunt's art. In *Orlando*, the author adapts Cameron's frequent use of real people to pose as fictional characters, as well as her practice to give sitters imaginary identities by employing fictional or historical captions. For instance, Woolf's choice to have her niece Angelica Bell dressed up as Princess Sasha and photographed in disguise may have been inspired by her great-aunt urging family members and friends into costumes to make them pose as characters from the Bible, English poetry or Greek mythology. In doing so, Woolf clearly demonstrates that, despite her somewhat scornful treatment of Cameron's typically Victorian sentimental vein, the work of her artistic forebear turns out to be instrumental when it comes to investigating the complex relationship between reality and illusion on a both visual and verbal level in her fictional biographies. A number of studies of *Orlando* and *Flush* suggest that the images they contain are parodies of Cameron's work.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not this might be the case, it seems manifest that, as with Cameron's idealised pictures, the photographs in *Orlando* show that the camera lens may reproduce the subject truthfully, but may also betray its inner nature; in other words, photography can give birth to the simulacrum of an identity as well as to a fake. Needless to say, readers of the book immediately recognise that the photographic subject at the same time *is* and *is not* Orlando, Vita, Sasha, Angelica, and so on. They might even wonder whether it is the caption or the photo which holds the truth, considering that both are in positions of authority, though contradicting each other. As Wussow remarks, "Woolf asks the reader to [...] accept the photograph as evidence of Orlando's existence. [...] The reader may wish to comply with Woolf's captions and read the photographs as representing Orlando. There remains, however, a disconcerting sensation that Woolf's text trifles with the evidence and the reader. In *Orlando* both image and text are jokes and the best joke of all is on the reader"

<sup>6</sup> See on this point Flesher 1997; Schaffer 1994; Wussow 1994, 1997.

(1994, 3). The biographer, for instance, plays with the idea of superposed identities in a passage in which the text is made to describe the pictures it includes, directing the reader's attention to the ambiguity that characterises both:

So, having now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando, which is to be found if the reader will look at plate 5, even in her face. If we compare the picture of Orlando as a man with that of Orlando as a woman we shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the same person, there are certain changes. [...] Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same. (Woolf 1992, 180).

Such statement is partially, and voluntarily, misleading: Orlando as a man and Orlando as a woman are not in the least "one and the same person," the former being an ancient member of the Sackville family portrayed at Knole and the latter being Vita recently photographed. Therefore, the narrative voice directs the reader towards false photographic evidence, actually preventing any possibility of proving such sameness by means of a comparison between the two pictures. While on the one hand this affirmation of identity is utterly preposterous, on the other hand the biographer's assertion that "a certain change was visible" undoubtedly holds true. However, by a willing suspension of disbelief, the reader may as well decide to trust the captions and accept the idea that all the different pictures represent Orlando, or that the different Orlandos coincide. This superposition of identities is clearly reminiscent of Cameron's pictures, which, as Natasha Aleksjuk remarks, "challenge the idea that all 19<sup>th</sup>-century portrait photography refers naïvely to a stable biographical subject" (2000, 125-126). Moreover, it adds to a further level of ambiguity that is inherent in the photographic medium, namely the coexistence of the purely mimetic nature of the photograph with the possibility of creating illusory images: as Sontag suggests, "photographs are, of course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem [...] unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus, they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real" (1977, 43). Such view of photography seems to be in line with Maggie Humm's claim that the medium was "a tool which Woolf and Bell used, not simply as a documentary device but as a means of crossing the border between the visual and the unconscious" (2002, ix). Bearing in mind Cameron's belief that pictures "are not unmediated pieces of reality but are rather vehicles for blending the real with the fantastic or ideal" (Aleksjuk 2000, 126), the elusive quality of her portrait photography can be said to have paved the way for Woolf's "desire to release biography from the realm of the purely factual" (*ibid.*) on a both verbal and visual level.

To conclude, in *Orlando* Woolf uses a combination of historical/biographical facts, exaggeratedly fantastic fiction and photographic representation to cross the boundary between imagination and reality. Besides parodying the realism of conventional biography through deliberate distortions of the categories of time, space and gender in her narrative, Woolf disrupts such narrative through photographs which purport to ground the text in reality while simultaneously

turning that reality upside down, thus proving—as she wrote about Nicolson’s *Some People* in “The New Biography”—“that one can use many of the devices of fiction in dealing with real life [...] trying to mix the truth of real life and the truth of fiction” (1966b, 233-234).

## REFERENCES

- ALEKSIUK, N. 2000. "A Thousand Angles': Photographic Irony in the Work of Julia Margaret Cameron and Virginia Woolf". *Mosaic* 33: 125-142.
- ANDERSON, L. 2001. *Autobiography*. London-New York: Routledge.
- BARTHES, R. 1981. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. by R. Howard. New York: Hill and Wang.
- BOWLBY, R. 1992. Introduction to *Orlando: A Biography*, by V. Woolf, XII-XLVII. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- CASSIGNEUL, A. (ed.). 2017. *Études Britanniques Contemporaines 53 Virginia Woolf: Becoming Photographic*. Accessed December 16, 2018. doi:10.4000/ebc.3973.
- CAUGHIE, P. (ed.). 2000. *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. New York: Garland.
- COOLEY, E. 1990. "Revolutionizing Biography: *Orlando*, Roger Fry, and the Tradition". *South Atlantic Review* 55: 71-83.
- CUNNINGHAM, D., FISHER, A., MAYS, S. (eds.). 2005. *Photography and Literature in the Twentieth Century*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- DELL, M. 2015. *Virginia Woolf's Influential Forebears: Julia Margaret Cameron, Anny Thackeray Ritchie and Julia Prinsep Stephen*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- FLESHER, E. 1997. "Picturing the Truth in Fiction: Re-visionary Biography and the Illustrative Portraits for *Orlando*". In *Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, ed. by D. Gillespie and L. Hankins, 39-47. New York: Pace University Press.
- GILLESPIE, D. 1993. "'Her Kodak Pointed at His Head': Virginia Woolf and Photography". In *The Multiple Muses of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by D. Gillespie, 113-147. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- HANSOM, P. 2002. *Literary Modernism and Photography*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- HUMM, M. 2002. *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography and Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- . 2003. "Memory, Photography, and Modernism: The 'dead bodies and ruined houses' of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*". *Signs* 28.2: 645-663.
- . 2006. *Snapshots of Bloomsbury: The Private Lives of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- . (ed.). 2010. *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- . 2012. "Cinema and Photography". In *Virginia Woolf in Context*, ed. by B. Randall and J. Goldman, 291-301. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MACKIN, T. 2010. "Private Worlds, Public Minds: Woolf, Russell and Photographic Vision". *Journal of Modern Literature* 33.3: 112-130.
- MITCHELL, W.J.T. 1994. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- NADEL, I.B. 1984. *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*. London: Macmillan.
- NICOLSON, N., TRAUTMANN, J. (eds.). 1977. *A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. III. London: The Hogarth Press.
- OLIVIER BELL, A., McNEILLIE, A. (eds.). 1982. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. III. London: Penguin.
- REVIRON-PIÉGAY, F. 2017. "Virginia Woolf's 'raids across boundaries': Biography vs Photography". *Études Britanniques Contemporaines* 53. Accessed December 16, 2018. doi:10.4000/ebc.3973.
- RICHTER, H. 1986. "The Biographer as Novelist". In *Essaying Biography: A Celebration for Leon Edel*, ed. by G. Fromm, 59-71. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

- SAUNDERS, M. 2010. *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SCHAFFER, T. 1994. "Posing Orlando". *Genders* 19: 26-63.
- SNAITH, A. 2000. "'My Poor Private Voice': Virginia Woolf and Auto/Biography". In *Representing Lives: Women and Auto/biography*, ed. by A. Donnell and P. Polkey, 96-104. London: Macmillan.
- SONTAG, S. 1977. *On Photography*. London: St. Martin's Press.
- . 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- SPIROPOULOU, A. 2010. *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History: Constellations with Walter Benjamin*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- STEARNS, T. (ed.). 2008. *Virginia Woolf Miscellany 74: Woolf and Photography*. Accessed December 16, 2018. <https://virginiawoolfmiscellany.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/vwm74fall2008.pdf>.
- WOOLF, V. 1926. "Julia Margaret Cameron". In *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men and Fair Women*, intr. by R. Fry and V. Woolf. London: The Hogarth Press.
- . 1966a. "The Art of Biography". In *Virginia Woolf: Collected Essays*, vol. IV, ed. by L. Woolf, 221-228. London: Chatto & Windus.
- . 1966b. "The New Biography". In *Virginia Woolf: Collected Essays*, vol. IV, ed. by L. Woolf, 229-235. London: Chatto & Windus.
- . 1992. *Orlando: A Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- WUSSOW, H. 1994. "Virginia Woolf and the Problematic Nature of the Photographic Image". *Twentieth Century Literature* 40: 1-14.
- . 1997. "Travesties of Excellence: Julia Margaret Cameron, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, and the Photographic Image". In *Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, ed. by D. Gillespie and L. Hankins, 48-56. New York: Pace University Press.