

Orlando: Virginia Woolf's Biography of Desire

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“The more I write, the more I shall have to write.”

Laurence Sterne,
*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*ⁱ

“To V. Sackville-West.”

Orlando dedicationⁱⁱ

Readers of Virginia Woolf's many biographies would be hard pressed to find one that leaves out her family of prominent literary importance. Indeed, it appears as if Woolf inherited the nineteenth century literary tradition via the Stephens: her grandfather, Sir James Stephen, authored two volumes of the *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography* and her father Sir Leslie edited the *Dictionary of National Biography* from 1885-1891. However, Woolf challenged and resisted the genre – in “Memoirs of a Novelist,” she writes against “the creaking narrative techniques of Victorian biography – the arbitrary chapter divisions, the coy yet self-effacing appeals to the reader.”ⁱⁱⁱ

But if human character has changed on or about December 1910 as she speculates in “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” how then does the post-1910 biography read? Writing to Henry James in 1921, she holds that “If the old methods are obsolete, it is the business of a writer to discover new ones.”^{iv} This change in consciousness is inextricably linked with a certain anxiety about time, and time indeed punctures *Orlando*, a biography spanning 342 years, two genders, and multiple continents – and yet, even at its conclusion, Orlando doesn't die. Based on a large extent on the life and loves of Vita Sackville-West, *Orlando* functions as a memento of love, desire, and writing. *Orlando* also acts as a purging of sorts for Virginia and the inherited biography. Her “quarrel” 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.”^v Through the biography's many portraits, she writes a “biography of desire” and enacts that which “was not only a political but also an expressly feminist act.”^{vi} Equally shaped by her aesthetic theories, feminist philosophies, social connections, and literary imagination, Virginia Woolf embodies desire in *Orlando*, both a reaction to Walter Benjamin's work on the aura as well as a love-letter to desire itself.

Orlando stems in part from Woolf's epistolary relationship with Jacques Raverat, the noted French painter who wrote to her during the final years of his life. While at Cambridge, Jacques socialized with the likes of Rupert Brooke and Gwen Darwin, the granddaughter of Sir Charles Darwin who eventually married the young student-turned-painter. Living in southern France in 1922, Jacques, now thirty-seven years old and plagued by disseminated sclerosis that rendered him unable to paint, wrote to Virginia; the germ of *Orlando* eventually developed in the letters that followed. Responding to Woolf's “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” he playfully asks, “why did you say that the world suddenly changed in Dec. 1910 – I should have put it some 6 months later.”^{vii} But despite this “criticism,” Jacques and Gwen shared a similar regard toward this shift in human character. And like Virginia, they too believed that this new consciousness demanded a change in aesthetic form. Jacques writes to Woolf in September 1924:

One of the things I find most difficult about writing is that it has to be, essentially, linear. I mean you can only write (or read) one thing at a time; & even memory doesn't alter this fact. Now that's not at all the way the mind works. When you write a word like *Neo Paganism* for instance, it's as if you threw a pebble into a pond. There are splashes in the outer air in every direction, & under the surface waves that follow one another into dark & forgotten corners of my past. You are not only a writer, but a printer & you'll see how difficult it would be to represent this odd phenomenon. One could perhaps, in the middle of a large sheet of paper, write the word Neo Paganism & then radically bits of sentences like this;

Shame at the absurdities of my youth.
But almost impossible to believe that you can have taken them seriously.
My own annoyance in those days because I fell so short of that ideal.
A desire to defend it.
A desire to counterattack.
Etc etc

And all this, you see, simultaneously; though even so it's only what happens on the surface.

Now in painting it's all quite different.^{viii}

Jacques resolves such confinement through painting: "you can see the whole of what you are doing at the same time. And the relations between sky & foreground, feet & hair, nose & navel, are there simultaneous."^{ix} It is no wonder then that his wife Gwen describes *Mrs. Dalloway* as "such a very good composition (in the painting sense) [...] the whole thing is alive and moving; it's like a ballet. That's what you meant, isn't it? All the movements in different directions both in time and space, going on at the same time."^x Woolf perpetuates this sense of movement when introducing the illustrious Vita Sackville-West to Raverat:

Who is there next? Well, only a high aristocrat called Vita Sackville-West, daughter of Lord Sackville, daughter of Knole, wife of Harold Nicholson, & novelist; bur her real claim to consideration is, if I may be so coarse, her legs. Oh they are exquisite – running like slender pillars up into her trunk, which is that of a breathless cuirassier (yet she has 2 children) but all about her is virginal, savage, patrician; & why she writes, which she does with complete competency, & a pen of brass, is a puzzle to me. If I were she, I should merely stride, with 11 elk hounds, behind me, through my ancestral woods. She descends from Dorset, Buckingham, Sir Philip Sidney, & the whole of English history, which she keeps, stretched in coffins, one after another, from 1300 to the present day, under her dining room floor.^{xi}

Woolf links the "whole of English history" with the bodily and indeed sensual Vita, who is all at once "virginal, savage, [and] patrician." This impossible association – between familiar and exotic, innocence and sexuality, the past and the present – engages much of the biography that

followed in which Woolf questions the dubious aura and its subsequent relation to narrative structure. She deconstructs the aura by suggesting that there is no sustainable "unique existence" that cannot be mediated by another artist.



Orlando as a Boy

Figure 1:
Frontispiece – Orlando as a Boy

In *Orlando*, Woolf “undermines the supposed faithfulness of a biography” by asking us to read and sift through the images that are not, in fact, of Orlando in the literal sense.^{xiii} Three of the eight portraits are of Vita herself, though we are instructed time and again that they are of the biography’s subject, evoking what Roland Barthes refers to as “a ‘floating’ chain of signifieds” through photography.^{xiii} Helen Wussow goes as far as to say that “The photographs in *Orlando* have no subject to create. They are bogus signs.”^{xiv} Existing within a state of “unlimited flux,” the portraits move from subject to subject, never fully resting on what they are supposed to represent.

Vita didn’t inherit her family’s estate, Knole. With this in mind, the biography could be read as a reimagining, rewriting, and resistance of primogeniture culture. From the very beginning, we are assaulted by false inheritance: the frontispiece – “Orlando is a Boy” – depicts the Honorable Edward Sackville. Painted by Cornelius Nuie around 1640, the painting belongs to one of the many collections of art housed at Knole. But it is actually a part of a double portrait – the other portrait is of Orlando/Edward’s brother Richard; Richard was the one who actually succeeded his father in inheriting affairs and the estate. Inheritance is by no means secure for the hero or heroine, suggesting that one particular version of history – rooted in male inheritance – relies upon exclusion in order to survive. Along the same lines, the portrait in chapter two of the Archduchess Harriet – painted by Marcus Gheeraerts in the seventeenth century – also belongs to the Knole estate. And in a certain light, the inclusion of the portrait within the text restores a part

of the estate to Vita. *Orlando* engages and restores Virginia and Vita’s families as well as their inheritances – biography and the Knole estate. Rejecting the nineteenth-century biography, Woolf moves away from the literal and into the speculative: “the only exciting life is the imaginary one.”^{xv}

Along the same lines, the opening chapters reject a patriarchal and male-centric British identity. The biography opens with the hero “in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters [...] Orlando’s father, or perhaps his grandfather, had struck it from the shoulders of a vast Pagan who had started up under the moon in the barbarian fields of Africa.” Perhaps an overdetermined scene tinged with castration anxiety, this beheading also functions as a critique of gender and empire.^{xvi}

Empire is

clearly steeped in a particular masculinity for Woolf, and so her hero literally kills such a notion. Even his name reinforces this sense of fluctuation. Having both an “or” and an “and” in the name, Orlando recalls Vita’s epic poem “The Land” and arguably exists as its embodied reincarnation. But of course the name Orlando – as one of



The Archduchess Harriet

Figure 1: *The Archduchess Harriet*



Orlando as Ambassador

Figure 2: *Orlando as Ambassador*

the novel's many "intra-, inter-, and extratextual references" – also refers to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* from 1532 and the exiled prince in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.^{xvii} The name is a sort of mechanical reproduction in and of itself, stripping away the aura of its original, authentic work and appropriating it for a new incarnation.

The ensuing and literally trashy aesthetic is thus linked with the male canon. In early modern England, Orlando glimpses Shakespeare and Jonson's poetry "scribbled down on the backs of washing bills held to the heads of printer's devils at the street door. Thus Hamlet went to press; thus Lear; thus Othello. No wonder, as Greene said, that these plays show the faults they do." Yet despite the faulty printings, the "great lines of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, [and] Milton" come to resonate and run through "the cathedral tower which was her mind." Of course, readers of Woolf would recognize this "tower mind" as a revision of sorts for the "whole hall, dome, whatever one calls it" from *Jacob's Room*, published in 1922. Such a rewriting evokes an androgyny necessary to unite the mind. If the male mind spawns only a fault-filled trashy aesthetic, the unified mind transcends history. The portrait of chapter four – "Orlando as Ambassador" – coyly perpetuates this triumph of the engendered mind. As a portrait of Lionel Sackville, it sings the praises of female artistry. Painted by the female painter Rossalba Carriera, its subject was notorious for his distrust of the imagination. "Neither an ambassador, a poet, nor a patron of art or letters," Vita writes of his likewise (in)famous response: "I have not genius sufficient for works of *mere imagination*."^{xviii} The final portrait to appear before Orlando becomes a woman, "Ambassador" and its subject's aversion to the speculative mind are refuted; clearly, his hatred of "mere imagination" holds no sway in Woolf's biography.

Moving from here coupling of patriarchal culture and artistic death, we see Woolf embrace desire through embodied writing. When Orlando sees Sasha – the first love object of the text – he "beheld, coming from the pavilion of the Muscovite Embassy, a figure, which, whether boy's or woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with the highest curiosity."¹ The figure unleashes a flood of associational thought in Orlando's head: "Images, metaphors, of the most extreme and extravagant twined and twisted in his mind. He called her a melon, a pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald, and a fox in the snow all in the space of three seconds; he did not know whether he had heard her, tasted her, seen her, or all three together." Conjuring such vivid language, Orlando's synesthesia-like gaze of the love object roots him firmly in the object world. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio explains that in order to achieve a conscious state, there must be an exchange between an organism and an object, thus leading to change, or what he refers to as "the feeling of knowing." He argues that after such an exchange, we construct "an account of what happens within the organism when the organism interacts with an object, be it actually perceived or recalled, be it with body boundaries (e.g., pain) or outside of them (e.g., a landscape)."^{xix} Such an account is "a simple narrative without words." No wonder, then, that Orlando's registering of Sasha moves from detection of the object – the ambiguously gendered "figure" – to this attempt to unsuccessfully locate such an object in the world of linguistic relativity. Discovering that the figure transcends language, he catches himself

plunging and splashing among a thousand images which had gone as stale as the women who inspired them – what was she like. Snow, cream, marble, cherries, alabaster, golden wire? None of these. She was like a fox, or an olive tree; like the waves of the sea when you look down upon them from a height; like an emerald; like the sun on a green hill

¹ Vita in fact loved to wear trousers and dress like a man in public.

which is yet clouded – like nothing he had seen or known in England. Ransack the language as he might, words failed him. He wanted another language, and another tongue. English was too frank, too candid, too honeyed a speech for Sasha. For in all she said, however open she seemed and voluptuous, there was something hidden; in all she did, however daring, there was something concealed. So the green flame seems hidden in the emerald, or the sun prisoned in a hill.

Moving from metaphor to simile, Orlando learns that he can only *liken* Sasha to objects of the object world because she defies relational language. But metaphorical language itself insists upon Leonard Shlain's depiction of the "*holistic, simultaneous, synthetic, and concrete*" female visual mind – Orlando attempts to approximate an object by way of other objects rather than distinguish a phenomena based upon its own idiosyncratic attributes.

After moving to the fertile aesthetic of embodied writing, the female Orlando soon realizes that, as for Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, "Everything, in fact, was something else." Beginning to write her *magnum opus* "The Oak Tree" (a poem that will take centuries to complete) she links writing and desire, ultimately dedicating the piece to Sasha, the mysterious and androgynous figure that earlier enticed Orlando. The portrait of Sasha – "The Russian Princess as a Child" – testifies to the fecundity of juvenilia and womanhood. Commissioned exclusively for the book, Vanessa Bell's photograph features Virginia's niece Angelica pose as something like a member of a romanticized Romanov family. In this photograph fusing together past and present, Angelica enacts Sasha just as Vita embodies Orlando. The fantasy of memory extends beyond the text itself, and so image and word perform history. Writing even conjures Sasha: "Orlando, dipping his pen in the ink, saw the mocking face of the lost Princess." Writing and visuality are one and the same for both writers – Virginia and Orlando – and so it is that "we write, not with the fingers, but with the whole person. The nerve which controls the pen winds itself about every fibre of our being, threads the heart, pierces the liver." The visual nature of writing transforms the word into its own aura-filled art object, and so the biography sutures together its own aura through a collage of materials. In one of the metabiographer's many asides,



The Russian Princess as a Child

Figure 3:
The Russian Princess as a Child

we are told that "it must be remembered that when bright colours like blue and yellow mix themselves in our thoughts, some of it rubs off on our words." It appears that different combinations of colors and words result in a boundless aesthetic and narrative vision (which in this case encompasses 342 years). But this aesthetic has political implications as well. As Lacan argues, you speak what you lack and so conjure through the symbolic order a vision of what exactly it is that you desire. But so much as the "problem" of female authorship is concerned, speech acts for Woolf are a deliberately political move. To write is to give voice to a tangible presence in the symbolic order, anticipating a response that marks you with an identity.^{xx} Hence affirming the authority of the now-feminized and visual word, we cannot read lightly Woolf's seemingly insignificant remark to Vita upon writing *Orlando*: "I'll make you."^{xxi}

 NOTES:

- ⁱ Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. New York, Modern Library: 2004. 225.
- ⁱⁱ Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando: A Biography*. New York: Harcourt, 2006. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. New York: Harvest, 2005. 193.
- ^{iv} Roe, Sue. "Introduction." *Jacob's Room*. New York: Penguin, 1992. XI.
- ^v Wussow, Helen. "Virginia Woolf and the Problematic Nature of the Photographic Image." *Twentieth Century Literature*. 40.1 (1994): 1-14. 3-4.
- ^{vi} Sproles, Karyn Z. *Desiring Women: The Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. 87.
- ^{vii} Pryor 96-7.
- ^{viii} Pryor 102-4.
- ^{ix} Pryor 104.
- ^x Pryor 174.
- ^{xi} Pryor 131.
- ^{xii} Wussow 2.
- ^{xiii} Wussow 3.
- ^{xiv} Wussow 4.
- ^{xv} Briggs 207.
- ^{xvi} Sproles 90.
- ^{xvii} Sproles 106.
- ^{xviii} Quoted in annotations to *Orlando* 255.
- ^{xix} Damasio, Antonio. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. New York: Harcourt, 1999. 168.

^{xx} Sproles 88-9.

^{xxi} Woolf, Virginia. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf. Volume Three: 1923-1928*. Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanna Trautmann. New York: Harvest, 1977. 214.