Archiving the Unarchivable: The Role of Archives in the Biographical Writing of Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey

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Abstract
By drawing on theories on the archive and on (auto)biography (Bacon, Derrida, Foucault, Woolf's "The Art of Biography"), my paper addresses the biographers' engagement with both "real archives" (where to scrupulously detect and select the most relevant events of a life), and with "psychological archives", i.e. those concerning the person whose biography is being written, ranging from the books in their shelves to their most intimate thoughts "archived" in their diaries and letters. The selection of the archival material proves crucial for the nature of biography and shed further light on the very concept of the archive, conceived in its etymological meaning (as Derrida demonstrated). Both Woolf and Strachey argue they had to deal not only with the "real" but also with the mental archives of their subjects in order to credibly depict their psychologies. Their biographies are thus revealed as an attempt at un-archiving and re-archiving what is impossible to archive, namely a person's mind.
Keywords: Bacon, Derrida, biography, modernism, Foucault.

Brief Lives[1]

In the last two decades of the seventeenth century, the English antiquarian and biographer John Aubrey wrote *Brief Lives*, a series of biographical sketches in which he concisely (and ironically) depicted a number of his contemporaries within the limited space of a single page, often condensing their lives into a single emblematic vignette or anecdote. Aubrey was one of the models for Lytton Strachey, who, in his numerous theorizations of the biographical genre, praised the

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brevity of Aubrey's lives as one of the two main examples of "good biography". Strachey exalted this kind of biography, the concise yet illuminating account capable of encompassing the whole life of a person; however, he also praised the extensive and meticulous reconstruction of a life (as in James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*), which demands a scrupulous critical process of working through the archives, researching documents, letters and diaries.

Not entirely coincidentally, perhaps, John Aubrey was also one of the first champions of the importance of documentary preservation. He contributed to the establishment of archives as institutions, while developing what Elizabeth Yale calls "a historical consciousness in Stuart England" (Yale 2009: 3). In their opposition to the common habit of destroying manuscripts (and inspired by philosopher Francis Bacon), naturalists such as Aubrey valued all documents as a matter of principle, "view[ing] their papers not as the by-product of producing printed knowledge, but as the fundamental stuff of knowledge, repositories of facts and observations for future generations of naturalists" (Yale 2009: 3).

Thus, we might say that one of the first issues relating to the archive and to an "archival culture" is the correlation of two necessities: that of preserving the past – of recording a personal and collective memory – and that of looking to the future creation of knowledge (which the archives of the past can develop).

Another key element in Aubrey's naturalistic view, which directly informs Strachey's and Woolf's biographies, is his attitude towards the "potential usefulness of *every* piece of paper, even seemingly inconsequential slips and scraps" (Yale 2009: 12).[2] As Yale argues, "the fragmentary nature of these materials was not a deficiency" for Aubrey (Yale 2009: 13). In fact, he followed the definition of antiquities provided by Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning,* which described the knowledge present in such papers as "spars from a shipwreck":

> *Antiquities,* or remnants of histories, are (as was said) like the *spars of a shipwreck*; when, though the memory of things be decayed and almost lost, yet *acute and industrious persons*, by a *certain persevering and scrupulous diligence*, contrive out of genealogies, annals, titles, monuments, coins,

[2] Emphasis is mine throughout the essay.

proper names and styles, etymologies of words, proverbs, traditions, archives and instruments as well public as private, fragments of histories scattered about in books not historical, – contrive, I say, from all these things or some of them, *to recover somewhat from the deluge of time*: a work laborious indeed, but agreeable to men, and joined with a kind of reverence. […] In these kinds of Imperfect History *I think no deficiency is to be assigned; for they are things, as it were, imperfectly* compounded, and therefore any deficiency in them is but their nature. (Bacon 2011: 303)

The definition by Bacon can be thought of in relation to the method of the biographer, or better of the artist/biographer, which I intend to investigate here in the light of Woolf's and Strachey's engagements with the genre. Similarly to Aubrey, Bacon highlights the archivist's attempt at precision, their scrupulous diligence and accuracy in the role of "recovering somewhat from the deluge of time".

Ambivalent Archives

If, after Aubrey and Bacon, we can take the fragmentary nature of archival papers as an essential aspect of the archive itself, then the role of the biographer is to reconstruct a *unity* from those fragmented items and to do so in a creative or – as Bacon had it – an "acute" way. Such an "industrious" effort was meant to serve future generations of naturalists in order "to *further that knowledge* through [the papers'] circulation" (Yale 2009: 23). In a similar fashion, Michel Foucault's view on the archive also serves to highlight its significance as an instrument for furthering knowledge, a point he makes in relation to his wider notion of "discourse":

I mean by archive the set (*l'ensemble*) of discourses actually pronounced; and this set of discourses is envisaged *not only as a set of events which would have taken place once and for all* and which would remain in abeyance, in the limbo or purgatory of history, but also as a set that continues to function, *to be transformed through history*, and to provide the possibility of appearing in other discourses. (Foucault 1996: 49)

The potential transformation of the discourses provided by archives, alongside the notion of facts as malleable entities that may change in the course of time to the point of becoming something else, are issues of paramount importance when thinking of the archive in relation

to biographical discourse. In his "Preface" to *Eminent Victorians* (a work depicting the lives of four major figures of the time: Florence Nightingale, Cardinal Manning, General Gordon, and Dr Thomas Arnold), Strachey writes: "human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past. They have a value which is independent of any natural processes, which is eternal and must be felt for its own sake" (Strachey 2003: 5). In "The Art of Biography", Virginia Woolf similarly remarks that the "archived" facts of a life are not always the same as the facts of science but, on the contrary, "are subject to changes of opinion; opinions change as the times change" (Woolf 1993: 147). Nevertheless, she also praises the precision advocated by Strachey (via Aubrey and Bacon) for enabling the "recreation" of lives: the construction of real characters able to live and breathe on the page in much a stronger manner than they did in the flesh (see Woolf 1993: 146). In order to do so, the biographer, according to Strachey, must be acute and creative not only in the act of writing but also in the very act of using the archives: the biographer must master the archive in order to properly "un-archive" all the significant facts and impressions pertaining to a life. Nonetheless, Strachey wrote that the huge amount of documents available during the Victorian Age was so overwhelming that the biographer or historian could only "row out" over this vast "ocean material":

> The historian will row out over that *great ocean material* and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen from those far depths, to be examined with careful curiosity. (Strachey 2003: 5)

The activities can be tiresome; the biographer can become inundated by facts. When writing Florence Nightingale's biography for *Eminent Victorians*, for instance, Strachey wrote: "I am submerged by Nightingale, which has turned out a fearful task" (Strachey, Letter to Henry Lamb, 13 June 1915; Holroyd 2005: 319). Woolf felt the same ambivalence in her biographical practices. After Strachey's death and after her novel *Orlando*, in which biography is subjected to a witty critique, Virginia Woolf engaged in writing a more traditional biography of painter and critic Roger Fry. Evidence from her diaries and letters proves that the work of digging into the innumerable available documents soon turned into something of a nightmare:

As it happens that I am sick of writing Roger's life, perhaps I will spend two or three hours making a sketch; What about all the letters? How can one cut loose from facts, when they are there, *contradicting my theories*; Oh the appalling grind of getting back to Roger! How can I concentrate upon minute facts in letters? It's all too minute and tied down – documented […] I think I will go on doggedly till I meet him myself – 1909 – and then attempt *something more fictitious*. (Woolf 1976: 64)

In the light of Strachey's ideas on the archive, such self-questioning by Woolf reveals the ambivalences that inform the very concept of the archive and that mirror much recent theory about it. Ultimately, as this article intends to suggest, such dichotomies unravel the oscillating and often mutually enriching ambivalence between fiction and biography ("attempt something more fictitious"), between biography and autobiography ("contradicting *my* theories") and between the novelist/artist and the biographer/historian.

Indeed, at a theoretical level, the notion of the archive is frequently read through this lens of "ambivalence", with many modern interpretations focusing simultaneously on its "seductive charms" and "destructive powers" (Ferguson 2008). As for the more "positive" views, the archive is seen as an alluring place due to its abundance, a place of copious material about a person or a subject that literally overwhelms the scholar or, as in our case, the biographer. However, while the archive is a place of ecstasy, theoretically able to provide all the information required, its boundless nature may also be, as in the case of Virginia Woolf and Strachey, a source of anxiety about research that may never be fully achieved[3]. In 1995, Jacques

[3] In a letter to Mrs R. C. Trevelyan in 1940, Woolf wrote: "It was delightful of you to write about my life of Roger. You have found out exactly what I was trying to do when you compare it to a piece of music. Its [sic] odd, for I am not regularly musical, but I always think of my books as music before I write them. And especially with the life of Roger – *there was such a mass of details that the only way I could hold it together was by abstracting them into themes*. I did try to state them in the first chapter, and then to bring in developments and variations, and then to make them all heard together and end by bringing back the first of them in the last chapter […] *I was often crushed under the myriad details. It wasn't only the difficulty of making quotations fit* – so many things had to be muted, or only hinted. And there is always a certain constraint, which one doesn't feel in fiction, a sense of other people looking over one's shoulder" (Letter to Mrs R. C. Trevelyan, 4 September 1940; Woolf 1975: 425).

Derrida envisaged such a dichotomy in *Archive Fever*. He starts his argument by underlining the twofold etymological meaning of the word itself: "archive" derives from the Greek "Arkhé" which is both the "commencement" and the "commandment", namely both the place of the *ontological origin* and a *nomological principle*, a principle according to which authority and order are exercised:

> We will not commence with the commencement, if I have your consent, nor even with the archive. But rather with the word "archive" and with the archive of so familiar a word. Arkhé, as you know, names at once the commencement and the commandment. We have here, apparently, two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, where things commence (physical, historical or ontological principle), but also the principle according to the law, where command, authority, social order are exercised, the place from which order is given (nomological principle). (Derrida 1995: 9)

Consequently, Derrida defines the word "archive" in the light of the Greek word "arkheion", namely a house, an address, or the residence of an Archon, a magistrate who represented the law (Steedman 2001: 1159). In order to follow Derrida's deconstruction, then, it is important to note that the archive can stand as both the "origin" *and* a place of memory, while working at the same time to impose a certain legal code: the whole concept of archive entails the possibility of manipulation (the Archons, after all, both preserved official documents and interpreted them). The work of preservation and interpretation therefore goes hand in hand; and it is in this light that we may consider the function of the archive for the biographer, the importance of their selective interpretation of the vast corpus of documents and papers available on a given subject. Derrida's emphasis on topo-nomology (place and law) is also meaningful in the light of my analysis: while defining the double meaning of the concept of archive, Derrida emphasizes the activity of the "gathering together [of] signs" and defines it as a wish "to coordinate a single corpus, *in a system or a synchrony* in which *all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration*" (Derrida 1995: 10). Such a synchronic system is apparently at odds with the diachronic organization of a life, and in this sense – as we noted with Woolf – it may well be a cause of frustration for the biographer.

Modernist Biographies and the Archive

For modernists such as Woolf and Strachey, the role of the writer of biography is firstly that of constructing the whole life of the subject through the innumerable archival fragments, and then to disentangle from that mass another, far more selective narrative structure that they impose on the mass of documents, in order to credibly convey the very life they aim to recreate. Such an operation entails various and variable degrees of interpretation and is thus to be considered as largely arbitrary, as Virginia Woolf clearly expressed in relation to Lytton Strachey in her essay "The Art of Biography". Although, in contrast to the "free" novelist, the biographer is "tied" by facts (Woolf 1993: 145), and although she finally refuses to call a biography a work of art *tout court*, Woolf admits the possibility for biographers to exercise their freedom (precisely via their selective and interpretative abilities). Ultimately, such a possibility becomes a genuine necessity for the "good biographer", as she noted about Strachey's achievements and as she herself practiced in the composition of *Roger Fry*. During the Victorian Age, Woolf argues, biographies were but a series of "wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey, that were carried in funeral procession through the street – effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin" (Woolf 1993: 145). Towards the end of the century, on the contrary, "there was a change" and "the biographer won a measure of freedom" (Woolf 1993: 145). She was speaking about her friend Strachey who, in *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria,* credibly and "artistically" depicted the lives of the Queen and four major figures of the age. Though meticulous in researching all documents in order "to lay bare the facts of some cases, as I understand them, dispassionately, impartially", Strachey managed to maintain what he called the biographer's "freedom of spirit" (Strachey 2003: 4, 5). According to Woolf, he was able to tell the "truth" about those figures, to recreate a vivid and living portrait of them, in a manner very similar to the novelist's construction of immortal characters, or to the painter's process of grasping the very essence of the portrayed subject:

> For at last it was possible to tell the truth about the dead; and the Victorian Age was rich in remarkable figures many of whom had been grossly deformed by the effigies that had been plastered upon them. *To recreate*

them, to show them as they really were, was a task that called for *gifts analogous to the poet's or the novelist's*, yet did not ask that inventive power in which he found himself lacking. (Woolf 1993: 146)

The issue Woolf is concerned with, here and throughout the essay, is the relationship between art and biography – in other words, the question of whether or not we may call a biography a work of art:

Could not biography produce something of the intensity of poetry, something of the excitement of drama, and yet keep also the peculiar virtue that belongs to fact – its suggestive reality, its own proper creativeness? (Woolf 1993: 146)

While she praises *Queen Victoria* for being original and well-written[4], she also proclaims the failure of Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex*, because, given the lack of documents, it was far too inventive and not enough tied to facts. Unlike the case of Queen Victoria, in which many different kinds of documents were available (for example, at the Royal Windsor Archive and the Ducal Archive at Coburg), Strachey's depiction of Elizabeth I was, for Woolf, too fictitious, and it was not as "poetic" as Shakespeare's Falstaff or Cleopatra. Nevertheless, it is worth underlining all the positive aspects that Woolf isolates about the possibilities of the modern biographer,

[4] Besides her comments in the essay above, Woolf also wrote to Strachey: "Well, I feel I must write to you either in your own style or in Victoria's. There is no escaping you after reading the book. Indeed, *it's quite magnificent, better as a whole, I should say, than the other*. I've seldom enjoyed anything more. *I suppose the chief marvel is the way you spin the story perfectly straightforwardly, never a line slack, and yet contrive those wonderful little portraits, one after another, each exactly in its place, illuminating, without interruption or fuss or for a moment stopping, it seems, to go on talking simply* [...]. You seem to have reduced it to the last possible ounce, and yet to have kept all the meat and bone and guts. The great moments seem to me really moving. And the Queen herself comes out somehow surprising, solid and angular, and touching, though not exactly sympathetic. Amazing woman! My only criticism is that occasionally I think one is a little conscious of being entertained. It's a little too luxurious reading – I mean, one is willing perhaps to take more pains than you allow. I couldn't bear to sacrifice any of the amusements but now and again perhaps, when the space is so limited, the jokes are a little on the surface […]. One of the things I thought particularly magnificent and original was the description of the possessions. *It was so massive, and summed it all up, and opened up, I thought, infinite vistas of new forms*" (Letter to Lytton Strachey, 17 April 1921; Woolf 1975: 465).

firstly because it sheds light on her (very different) biographies (*Orlando, Flush* and *Roger Fry*) and, secondly, because it helps us understand the role and influence of the archive in the biographer's interlinked processes of selection and interpretation.

As will be demonstrated by Woolf herself in *Roger Fry*, the most striking feature of the expanding modern archive was its reflection of the manifold nature of human existence, its own seemingly ineffable and unfathomable character:

> Since we live in an age when a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters, and diaries, at every character from every angle, he must be prepared to admit *contradictory versions of the same face*. *Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking-glasses at odd corners*. And from all this *diversity* it will bring out, not a riot of confusion, but a *richer unity*. (Woolf 1993: 150)

The ambivalence Woolf underlines here reflects the typically modernist epistemological notions of fragmentariness *versus* wholeness, diversity *versus* unity, marginality *versus* centrality, particular *versus* general. These oppositions, which in Woolf are to be approached rather as a dialectics of intersectionality than as a succession of binaries, brings us back to Derrida's arguments, which, in their turn, are able to open up new ways to understand Woolf's poetics. Drawing on Freud's psychoanalytic theories, which themselves considered the mind and the unconscious as a set of archived information, Derrida argues that the archive operates as a force of simultaneous passion and pain. According to him, we live through an archive "fever" – that is, we are driven by a burning desire to search the archive in order to reach some "originating" inscription or moment. At the same time, however, he notes that archives are open and never-ending and that, the more we scrutinize them, the more they come to efface themselves, to un-archive their very epistemological basis by tending towards forgetfulness rather than memory. As Ferguson notes, archives may have relatively clear centres – a person, an event, a problem – but no clear boundaries; instead they offer innumerable connections (see Ferguson 2009). Derrida places this tension at the heart of the archive: "But where does the outside commence? This question is the question of archive" (Derrida 1995: 12). Because of this very

question, there is always a kind of "governing voice in the archive or central point of view" (Derrida 1995: 12). Archives are places both of "hypermnesia", due to their apparently inexhaustible contents, and of what Derrida calls "hypomnesia", i.e. impaired memory: "They are built according to a process of construction and one of exclusion, every act of codification is also an act of selection. Every act of memory is also an act of forgetting" (Derrida 2002: 54). As for the archive of a life, the mass of details available is always at odds with the possibility of recovering the whole of the life itself, especially when the archive relates to the kind of psychological life that modern biographers have often sought to recreate. As Carolyn Steedman states, "you will never finish, there will be something left unread, unnoted, untranscribed" (Steedman 2001: 1161). In this context, Derrida argues that "the concept of the archive shelters in itself, of course, this memory of the name Arkhé. It's sheltered by and from this memory, which comes down to saying also that it forgets it" (Derrida 1995: 9). He then elucidates the dialectics of inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness:

> As the death drive is also, according to the words Freud himself most stressed, an aggression and a destruction drive, it incites not only forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory, as mnemé or anamnesis, but also the radical effacement of that which can never be reduced to mnemé or to anamnesis, and of which I would like to speak tonight, that is the archive, consignment, the documentary or *monumental apparatus as hypomnema, mnemotechnical supplement or representative, auxiliary or memorandum*. Because the archive, if this word or this figure can be stabilized so as to take on a signification, is neither memory nor anamnesis as spontaneous experience, alive and internal experience. There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition and without a certain exteriority. *There's no archive without outside*. Allow me to stress this Greek distinction between mnemé or anamnesis on the one hand, and hypomnema on the other, a distinction which has occupied me at length elsewhere. The archive is hypomnetic. (Derrida 1995: 14)

The word "hypomnema" means "remainder", "note", "public record", "means of remembrance" but also "division" and "section", and thus refers both to the written nature of something which helps us to remember, and to the fragmentary nature of that same documentary trace. Meanwhile, the fragmentariness of

the biographical archive bears a striking similarity to the essential fragmentariness of life invoked by modernist writers, a parallel that we can see at work in Woolf's *Roger Fry* – where, as with her fiction, Woolf wanted to deal with her subject's consciousness, rather than convey a list of events[5]. In a manner reminiscent of Freud's work on the unconscious (as Derrida himself suggests), the biographer wants to make the past live again in the archive, and to let the different voices of their subject emerge simultaneously. This involves not only a "process", as Derrida puts it, but also an ecstatic moment, which we may call an epiphanic moment or, in Woolf's terms, a "moment of being":

> [...] a moment and not a process, [which] does not belong to the laborious deciphering of the archive. It is the nearly *ecstatic instant* Freud dreams of, when the very success of the dig must sign the effacement of the archivist: *the origin then speaks by itself*. The *arkhe* appears in the nude, without archive. (Derrida 1995: 58)

In order to attempt to achieve this, the biographer must also realize that, as Derrida argues, "the structure of the archive is *spectral*. It is spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent 'in the flesh', neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met" (Derrida 1995: 54). Any figures we encounter in the archive are thus open to interpretation, and the role of the biographer is to select and to create a past that is *also* necessarily

[5] About *Eminent Victorians*, Woolf wrote to Strachey: "I thought him [*General Gordon*, the subject of the second chapter of Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*] masterly – indeed, it's amazing how from all these complications you contrive to reel off such a straight and dashing story, *and how you weave in every scrap – my God what scraps!* – of interest to be had, like (you must pardon me one metaphor) a snake insinuating himself through innumerable golden rings (do snakes? I hope so). I don't see how the skill could be carried further. My only criticism, which I ought to hesitate to give until a second reading, is that I am not sure whether the character of Gordon altogether 'convinces'. I felt a little difficulty in bridging the gulfs, *but I rather think this is inevitable from the method, which flashes light and dark this side and that – and then the crowd of facts to be found room for* – and so perhaps one can't get that shifting and muddling which produces atmosphere. I daresay, I'm really putting in a claim for the novel form; and it doesn't read very lucidly. The writing I thought more than usually unadorned, and surely the most flawless example of the master's style in its maturity" (Letter to Lytton Strachey, 28 December 1917; Woolf 1975: 204).

the biographer's own past – as mediated, for example, by their own selections and perspective. What emerges, then, is a notion of the biographical self that is equally as fragmented and heterogeneous as its subject, made up of memories and of events which it would be impossible to fully remember or reconstruct[6].

Similarly to the archive, the human mind, conceived in modernist terms, prevents the formulation and recollection of an all-encompassing life-memory or consciousness, as it contains gaps that sometimes cannot be filled. While we occasionally and temporarily fill these gaps, thanks to various elements such as outer stimuli, perceptions, memoranda and so forth, in biography it is the biographer that must fill them and make their "spectral" subjects speak, with all of the contradictions and subtle ambivalences that are typical of any human mind. The biographer must therefore draw on both "real archives", in order to scrupulously detect and select the most significant events in a person's life, and on "psychological and mnemonic archives", namely the general archives of information concerning the subject of the biography, ranging from the set of books on their shelves to the intimate emotions and feelings recorded in diaries and letters.

Both Woolf and Strachey suggest, albeit in different ways, how the selection process in the archives is crucial in shaping the nature of the resulting biography. Strachey defines as the "first duty" of the biographer the preservation of "a becoming brevity [...] a brevity which excludes everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant" (Strachey 2003: 7). By mainly writing about artists and writers, Strachey and Woolf had to come to terms with the "mental archives" of their subjects in order to depict a credible psychological portrait; and, in doing so, their works read as an attempt at un-

[6] In another letter, besides noting the difficulty of writing a biography, Woolf stresses the plurality of one's consciousness: "I am almost dazed with writing my book; and think it would be better acted. I should make the end into a play for you to act. Some of it is good; most of it is bad. It is too long. And I have to write about Roger [Fry]. At least Nessa wants me to; and Margery Fry has given me masses of letters; and all his diaries; how he dined out or went to Paris. *Do you think it is possible to write a life of anybody? I doubt it; because people are all over the place.* Here are you, for instance, walking in the Tuileries; and buying necklaces; and seeing the sunset; and writing to me; now, which is you?" (Letter to Angelica Bell, 18 November 1935; Woolf 1975: 445).

archiving that which it is impossible to archive, namely a person's life – which, in its turn, must subsequently be re-archived within the written biography.

Transference

Referring to Freudian psychoanalysis, Leon Edel has suggested that biography entails the concept of *transference*, the psychological involvement of the biographer with his/her subject and the consequent (over)presence of the author in a seemingly objective genre (see Edel 1984). In 1929, André Maurois already stated that "biography is a means of expression when the author has chosen his subject in order to respond to a secret need in his own nature" (Maurois 1929: 111), thus indirectly affirming that the transference process begins with the very act of choosing one's subject. This applies to Woolf's "literary" biography but also to Strachey's, as the two writers' biographies show how their subjects' public and private archives continually blend with their own private archives; and, in the interaction of this multitude of data, marginalia, and references, we see a hybrid kind of literature emerge, one that combines reality and fiction and employs literary devices in order to transform the archives of an existence into a work of art.

Strachey's juxtaposition of strong and masculine women with weak, feminine men has been read as reflecting his unresolved relation with his powerful mother (Taddeo 2002). However, transference in Strachey (and Freud) is more subtle, as it involves an indirect description of his method in relation to the lives of other biographers and historians, which he himself investigates with the "torch of the imagination":

> The first duty of a great historian is to be an artist. The function of art in history is something much more profound than mere decoration […]. [U]ninterpreted truth is as useless as burned gold, and art is the great interpreter. It alone can unify a vast multitude of facts into a significant whole, clarifying, accentuating, suppressing and lighting up the dark places with the *torch of the imagination*. (Strachey 2003: 5)

Strachey stressed the importance of the imagination for the biographer who interprets the truth when "unifying a vast multitude

of facts into a significant whole". In the "debunking biographies" (Holroyd 2005) of *Eminent Victorians* he presented four characters by simply exposing them and avoiding any direct commentaries. And yet, the portraits also read as a fierce criticism of hypocritical and conservative Victorian attitudes and culture. In *Portraits in Miniature*, moreover, the concept of transference is more evident, and it reveals, through a series of brief sketches, Strachey's own method as a biographer, since he writes about the lives and literary methods of other biographers and historians like himself (Aubrey, Boswell, Gibbon, Hume, and Macaulay, among others). By quoting Horace's sentence "est brevitate opus" ("brevity is necessary"), Strachey praises Aubrey's brevity and his precise style (and he puts the same style into practice), while, by discussing Gibbon, he states that "it is obvious that history is not a science: it is obvious that history is not the accumulation of facts but the relation of them" (Strachey 1931: 54). As a consequence, the accumulation of the biographical portraits becomes a fascinating "self-portrait" of Strachey himself as a "modern biographer". Through the exposition of other biographers' lives and personalities, he manages to select their aesthetic views so as to present his ideal kind of biography and to shed light on his own enterprise of renewing the genre.

The concept of transference through selection is evident also in Virginia Woolf as a biographer and as a critic, and it directly connects with her activity as a novelist. As Susan Dick argues, the contrast that *Orlando* sets up between the time of the clock and the time of the mind can be linked to the tension Woolf (as a writer) felt between "the reality of the observable world and the intangible reality she knew to exist elsewhere" (Dick 2000: 51). Discussing Bennet's criticism of *Jacob's Room*, Woolf affirms:

> I daresay its [sic] true, however, that I haven't that reality gift. *I insubstantise*, wilfully to some extent, *distrusting reality* – its cheapness […]. *Have I the power of conveying the true reality*? Or *do I write essays about myself?* (Woolf 1984: 248)

Throughout her career, Woolf dealt with the interdependence of "fact and vision", of concreteness and ephemerality, of reality and an imaginative reconfiguration of it. In "The Art of Biography", she writes of the difficulty of the genre as that of "trying to find

a *modus vivendi* or rather a *modus scribendi* that might do justice to both the 'granite and the rainbow', the solid facts and the less tangible individuality of a life" (Woolf 1993: 155). It is interesting to note, in the light of the concept of transference in biography, that the same forces are operational in her apparently objective *Roger Fry*[7], where the description of the critic and painter Fry subtly mixes with her own thoughts and is illuminated by her own "torch of the imagination". The voice of the biographer appears as the voice of an impersonal (albeit unreliable) narrator, a voice that blends with the voice of Woolf as critic by letting symbolic elements emerge. Although Woolf often reveals and underlines her role as a biographer by using meta-narrative expressions such as "it is recorded that" or "it is significant to mention an episode", she does not aspire to simply recount the episodes of Fry's life, but rather aims at discovering the impact those events had upon Fry's consciousness. It is in this light that this kind of experimental biography may be connected to the novelistic practice, where Woolf also wanted to move from the surface to the unfathomable deep of "being", or from the periphery to the centre of life, as she often states. As for the life of Fry, she rather aimed at recreating *all of his lives* out of the innumerable and fragmentary archival documents. Such fragments mirrored an equally fragmented life or, better, "the several lives that Fry lived simultaneously": "The War years, then, as these *scattered and incongruous fragments* show, broke into *many of the lives* that Roger Fry lived *simultaneously*" (Woolf 1940: 213). Of those same war years Woolf later stated that "so full were they of change and of experiment that *only a rapid and fragmentary sketch of those transformations* and their results can be attempted" (Woolf 1940: 246). Besides echoing the aesthetics of *Orlando*, these statements suggest that the route to a good biography is to consider *both* the many lives one lives simultaneously, and to realize that the

[7] Although she famously declared that for *Orlando* she intended "to revolutionise biography in one night", one may argue the same for *Roger Fry*, despite the obvious differences: "Yesterday morning I was in despair […]. I couldn't screw a word from me; and at last dropped my head in my hands: dipped my pen in the ink, and wrote these words, as if automatically, on a clean sheet: Orlando: a Biography […]. [I]t sprung upon me how I could revolutionise biography in a night". (Woolf, letter to Vita Sackville-West, 9 October 1927; Woolf 1975: 428).

biographer, similarly to the novelist, can only ever achieve a partial recreation of a life. This partiality, however, must be achieved through wit and sympathy, a scrupulous sense of discrimination, and an accurate use of language.

In her biography, Woolf decided to highlight and expand upon Fry's activity as a critic and as a painter, and, in this regard, it is striking how far the chosen facts and features of Fry's life are connected to her own life and thoughts. As a direct and involved relationship between the subject and his "subjects", transference was also prominent in Fry's work and intentions, as Woolf herself argues: "His excitement transmitted itself. Everybody must see what he saw in those pictures – must shape his sense of revelation" (Woolf 1940: 152). This statement becomes a sort a meta-narrative or meta-biographical element, as it describes a process that is evidently active and operational in Woolf's text, in that she herself is "transmitting her excitement for her subject". In her biography, Fry's transference is revealed, and then further elucidated, by the strength of the identification that he established with respect to the paintings and artists he was analysing and exhibiting. As a result, Woolf notices that the same sense of identification was felt by the audience towards Fry's empathy, in a sort of double-process of transference. Similarly, the biographer wants the reader to partake in the same sense of revelation she felt while examining Fry's documents (she described the biography as "the amalgamation of all of [Fry's] letters" (Woolf 1975: 381)), so that the process of transference acquires yet another level. While reading *Roger Fry*, one is struck by the lexis employed, which bears impressive connections to the one in Woolf's novels, especially when she deals with moments of revelation or the flow of time:

> Yet it was conveyed and there it still is – a sense that everything had fallen into place and *all the odds and ends of existence had come together to make a whole*, a centre of peace and satisfaction. (Woolf 1940: 97)

Besides echoing her concept of the "moment of being", this passage on the one hand shows a privileged ecstatic phase of Fry's life and, on the other, seems to describe the method of the biographer who reconciles all fragments into a whole (although it is a temporary whole, subject to perennial transformations). Even more significant

is another passage, where Woolf describes Fry's visionary moments in a manner that strongly recalls many of her novels' characters. The final sentence reveals the necessity for the artist to understand the role of the critic, and vice-versa:

> *Such moments of vision, when a new force breaks in*, and the gropings of the past suddenly seem to have meaning are probably familiar with most artists. But most artists leave them unexplained. It would need a critic endowed with his own interpretative genius to single out and sum up all the elements in that long process which at last seemed to bear fruit. (Woolf 1940: 161)

During the composition of *Roger Fry*, Woolf was also writing her autobiographical "A Sketch of the Past" (considered as a "holiday from the tiresome 'Roger'") where she famously described several such "moments of being". The topics of the two texts appear very similar and often seem to lend meaning to one another. In "A Sketch of the Past", for instance, she famously speaks of the "shock-receiving" capacity that made her a writer:

> I still have the peculiarity that I receive these sudden shocks [...]; after the first surprise, I always feel instantly that they are particularly valuable. And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it[8]. (Woolf 1975: 72)

Similarly, *Roger Fry* begins with a long quotation from Fry (which Woolf describes as "a fragment of autobiography") that he wrote while attempting to recall a painful childhood memory (Woolf 1940: 11). After the quoted fragment, the biographer's voice breaks in and explains that, "the *shock* of that confused experience was still tingling fifty years later" (Woolf 1940: 16) and then continues to describe Fry's relationship with his mother.

[8] Woolf's letters indicate a rather controversial relationship with Freud. In 1932, for example, Woolf wrote to Harmon H. Goldstone: "I have not studied Dr Freud or any psychoanalyst – indeed I think I have never read any of their books; my knowledge is merely from superficial talk. Therefore any use of their methods must be instinctive" (Woolf 1975: 36; see also Sabatini 2014).

Conclusion

Both Woolf and Strachey as biographers attempt to achieve a reconstruction that takes into account many voices and many kinds of experiences pertaining to a single subject; and, in so doing, their selection reveals something of their own personalities and artistic/critical methods. In this light, the metaphorical biography of *Orlando* might retrospectively be taken to demonstrate Woolf's multifarious and nuanced approach to the idea of "life". Although, as both Woolf and Strachey emphasized, it is impossible to grasp an ultimate meaning or to recreate the very essence of a life – its temporal and spatial reconfiguration, the influence of consciousness and the changes brought about by experience – there are nonetheless some moments in which our being is revealed, in which we discover an ecstatic "pattern" behind all tangible appearances. Orlando lives many lives and possesses many selves, which ultimately converge in her poem "The Oak Tree". Significantly enough, Orlando has been also dealing with manuscripts:

> *All her life long Orlando had known manuscripts*; she had held in her hands the rough brown sheets on which Spenser had written in his little crabbed hand; she had seen Shakespeare's script and Milton's. She owned, indeed, a fair number of quartos and folios, often with a sonnet in her praise in them and sometimes a lock of hair. But *these innumerable little volumes, bright, identical, ephemeral, for they seemed bound in cardboard and printed on tissue paper, surprised her infinitely*. [...] On tables and chairs, more 'works' were piled and tumbled, and these she saw, turning a page or two, were often works about other works by Sir Nicholas and a score of others whom, in her ignorance, she supposed, since they were bound and printed, to be very great writers too. (Woolf 203: 140)

Besides absorbing several centuries of external stimuli, therefore, Orlando also eventually absorbs all of these books and manuscripts as well – and, more poignantly, she condenses them all into a single one, namely the manuscript of her poem:

> The manuscript which reposed above her heart began shuffling and beating as if it were a living thing, and, what was still odder, and showed how fine a sympathy was between them, Orlando, by inclining her head, could make out what it was that it was saying. It wanted to be read. It must be read. It would die in her bosom if it were not read. (Woolf 2003: 134)

The manuscript that has followed her always and everywhere eventually becomes not only the literary counterpart of her life, readings, and experiences, but an organ of her own body, a beating heart that desires to be explored again, possibly in the light of what Strachey himself called the "torch of the imagination".

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