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THE ACTIVE NARRATOR: FIELDIAN NARRATION IN STRACHEY AND WOOLF

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The Active Narrator: Fieldian Narration in Strachey & Woolf

Not many biographers, or historians for that matter, would begin their work by declaring that the true story could not even be told in the first place, but that is exactly what Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf, two integral figures of the Bloomsbury Group, did in their contributions to the art of biography. Strachey, who wrote his biography before Woolf would delve into the genre, took inspiration as an avid lover and student of great authors, one being the great Restoration era author, Henry Fielding. Fielding became well known for many innovative techniques after the publication of his epic novel, *The History of Tom Jones: A Foundling*, in 1749. One practice in particular, was an active and outspoken narrator whose meta-language breaks the “fourth wall” of literature and calls to the reader. Strachey went on to take the prototype of Fielding’s narrator and apply it to biography, a discipline that demanded complete separation and objectivity, on the part of the author. His work would become “the new biography” and change the field forever. Woolf’s contributions went even further by complementing this narrator, whom she monikers “the biographer” in her work, with her own brand of parodic surrealism. The biographical work of Strachey and Woolf, specifically in the books: *Eminent Victorians* and *Orlando: a biography*, go beyond the point of exposition, at times interjecting opinion and introducing distinctive points-of-view through an active narrator.

Both Woolf and Strachey extend the genre-bending techniques of Fielding with their particular voice and style, showcasing a new take on the role of the narrator in biographical texts.

In regards to their narrators, Strachey and Woolf share much with the orator in the canonical text, *Tom Jones*, as the narrators in *Eminent Victorians* and *Orlando* both break the “fourth wall” and begin a meta reader/writer relationship. One of the most comedic examples of Fielding’s innovative narrative approach can be found in the beginning of the novel. He writes, “Reader, take care. I have unadvisedly led thee to the top of as high a hill as Mr. Allworthy’s, and how to get thee down without breaking thy neck, I do not well know. However, let us e’en venture to slide down together; for Miss Bridget rings her bell, and Mr. Allworthy is summoned to breakfast, where I must attend, and, if you please, shall be glad of your company” (Book I, Ch.iv). Literary scholars have done critical analysis on this aspect of Fielding’s work alone, as the narrative style was the first of its own to create this sort of candid, unconventional relationship with its audience. James Lynch writes, “Recent rhetorical studies of *Tom Jones* demonstrate convincingly how Fielding urges us to participate in the novel by making us conscious of our own readership” (1). By making the reader conscious of the reality that they are reading a book and forcing them to actively participate throughout, the narrator gives up an omniscient God-like perspective for the position of the everyman who offers subjective exposition to his confidant: the audience.

Strachey and Woolf go even further pushing the boundaries of story structure by applying this active narrator and direct relationship with the reader to the genre of biography. In his final chapter on the infamous Victorian figure, General Charles Gordon, Strachey writes, “The circumstances of that tragic history, so famous, so bitterly debated, so often and so controversially described, remain full of suggestion for the curious examiner of the past” (189).

By calling to this biographical perspective in the middle of the narrative, Strachey—the “curious examiner”—interrupts and reneges the traditional role of biographer to reveal himself as the man behind the curtain.

In *Orlando*, more parodic than Strachey’s text, Woolf even names the publishing house that would go on to publish the book itself, adding an air of humor and irreverence to her narrator’s biographical approach. Woolf writes, “This method of writing biography, though it has its merits, is a little bare, perhaps, and the reader, if we go on with it, may complain that he could recite the calendar for himself and so save his pocket whatever sum the Hogarth Press may think proper to charge for this book” (196-197). Like Strachey, Woolf interrupts the narrative pace to remind the reader that they are not only reading a biography but reading Virginia Woolf’s biography which most would know would be published by the Hogarth Press. These interruptions to the narrative pacing give “the biographer” a singular voice and creates a meta relationship with the reader, freeing them from the detached positioning of the traditional biographical/literary experience.

Strachey expands his innovations to the genre, through his active voice, not only by brief moments of raw reality, but also the allusion to the fact that most biographers heavily omit details from the narrative to fit into their particular point-of-view. His is not unlike Fielding’s narrator, who frequently comments on the fact that his exposition is based on curated taste rather than the pursuit of depicting the events factually. He writes, “In like manner, the excellence of the mental entertainment consists less in the subject than in the author’s skill in well dressing it up. How pleased, therefore, will the reader be to find that we have, in the following work, adhered closely to one of the highest principles of the best cook which the present age, or perhaps that of Heliogabalus, hath produced” (Book I, Ch.i). It seems that Strachey’s narrative

voice has a similar mentality, as he details in the prologue that, “They are, in one sense, haphazard visions—that is to say, my choice of subjects has been determined by no desire to construct a system or to prove a theory, but by simple motives of convenience and of art. It has been my purpose to illustrate rather than to explain. It would have been futile to hope to tell even a précis of the truth about the Victorian age, for the shortest précis must fill innumerable volumes” (9). Strachey makes it clear for the readers that he is picking and choosing facts that cast his subjects in a particular light. He not only attributes this technique to himself, but also broadens his claim by calling out historians and biographers for doing the same and yet presenting their perspectives as the absolute reality.

Woolf would agree with this notion, as she described such inclinations in her essay: “The New Biography”. She says, “the biographer’s imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist’s art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life” (478). Woolf takes Strachey’s observation on the biographer’s role one step further by calling selective detail of biography an art, elevating the ability to craft historically-based prose to only those with the aesthetic vision for it. But Woolf and Strachey’s contributions to the genre do not end with their admission of historical edits.

To advance a grand denouncement of traditional biography, Strachey communicates to the reader that another obligation of his biographer is to remain ignorant of unfavorable facts, or any information that would divert from the chosen narrative arc. Strachey writes, “For ignorance is the first requisite of the historian—ignorance, which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits, with a placid perfection unattainable by the highest art [...] It is not by the direct method of a scrupulous narration that the explorer of the past can hope to depict that singular epoch” (9). With the details of his position laid out so neatly, Strachey commands his audience to look at the

narrator as the credible curator of the novel while also separating his brand of biography from other writers in the genre by lifting the curtain on the “true” biographical process.

Almost exactly like Strachey’s statement, Woolf includes a diatribe in *Orlando* about how “the biographer”—her narrator—must always look away from aberrant information. She says, “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” (13). Glancing at “eyes and forehead” gives a great visual to Woolf’s concept of the historian or biographer averting their eyes from facts that would derail or transform opinions about the subject. Woolf’s addition of more direct, comedic strikes against the formal institution of biography adds another layer of innovation to her take on Strachey’s “new biography”. Though most of these affronts to the genre are directed at biographers and historians, Strachey and Woolf also take the opportunity to take a shot at their own reporting in a parodic way.

The narrators of *Orlando* and *Eminent Victorians* clearly state that their accounts remain as unbiased as the genre allows, however this proves to be an ironic statement as neither author seem to stick by their dictum. Again, in his prologue on the duty of the biographer, Strachey writes: “It is not his business to be complimentary; it is his business to lay bare the facts of the case, as he understands them. That is what I have aimed at in this book—to lay bare the facts of some cases, as I understand them, dispassionately, impartially, and without ulterior intentions” (9). Though, his chapter on the infamous Victorian, Florence Nightingale, does quite match up with his claim of impartiality. For he writes, “But the truth was different. The Miss Nightingale of fact was not as facile fancy painted her. She worked in another fashion, and towards another end; she moved under the stress of an impetus which finds no place in the popular imagination. A Demon possessed her” (111). Perhaps insinuating that Florence Nightingale was possessed by

demons is Strachey's way of poking at the religious rigidity of her fame, but other critics contend that his dramatic depictions are much more cerebral. Richard Hutch argues that Strachey's pointed style of exposition was a direct attempt to further him from the Victorian subjects he detested. Hutch writes, "The strategy of using irony in his biographical narratives maintained (sometimes created) a distinction between Strachey the working biographer and the subjects toward whom his hostility was directed, and upon whom his unique literary craft worked." (2). Though Hutch contends the ironic statements are for the purpose of separation, they can also be seen as a means of humanizing himself, in addition to the Victorian figures. Since Strachey spends the majority of the novel selecting unconventional—and sometimes unflattering—details about his subject's lives in an effort to humanize them, it would not be unlikely for him to apply the practice to himself as the biographer to prove that all humans are ultimately contradictory, flawed beings.

In her particular method of whimsical depiction, Woolf positions "the biographer" in his/her own situational irony. She writes, "The first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write finis on the tombstone above our heads" (49). However, a couple scenes later, the biographer finds Orlando doing something boring and laments at the job of the historian to document everything. She writes, "Therefore--since sitting in a chair and thinking is precisely what Orlando is doing now--there is nothing for it but to recite the calendar, tell one's beads, blow one's nose, stir the fire, look out of the window, until she has done. Orlando sat so still that you could have heard a pin drop. Would, indeed, that a pin had dropped!" (197). The fact that the biographer goes on for an entire page to describe and complain about the main character pondering in a chair for a long

period of time shows the proclivity of him/her to get off topic and become “enticed by flowers”. Though, in this example, our narrator is enticed by the falling of a pin. These examples of places where Woolf and Strachey contradict their narrators present the reality that historians and biographers are not as factual and succinct as one might assume for a genre grounded in historical fact and evidence.

The pivotal blow to biography comes through Strachey and Woolf declaratively stating that history can never be contained or described fully through the mouthpiece of their narrators, whom are both ironically biographers. In fact, Strachey makes this his initial introduction to his piece of biography, writing in the prologue: “The history of the Victorian Age will never be written: we know too much about it” (9). This is a very weighted statement to begin this particular work with, especially because depicting the history of the Victorian Age through the profiles of the most infamous figures is what he has set out to achieve through the novel. This undoing of his capability to achieve this at all encapsulates his narrative voice throughout, as he appears to be constantly undoing the work of the biographer and forcing the reader to consider his potential biases towards the era.

Woolf is another great example of this undoing because she uses the voice of “the biographer” to directly inform the reader that some of the novel’s elements, namely London society, will never be able to be accurately depicted by the biographer, who conventionally should be accurately depicting everything that goes on. She writes, “To give a truthful account of London society at that or indeed at any other time, is beyond the powers of the biographer or the historian. Only those who have little need of the truth, and no respect for it — the poets and the novelists — can be trusted to do it, for this is one of the cases where the truth does not exist” (141). Woolf comically undercuts the role of biographer/historian by stating that painting an

accurate picture of London society can only be done by artistic types because of their lack of respect, or “little need”, for the truth. Because she is in fact coming from the perspective of a novelist, her biographer’s insight stands out to the reader as an obvious joke, a jab at the left-brained historian who cannot accurately illustrate complex or romantic descriptions because of their reliance on truth. Though, this disregard for the truth in *Orlando* is exactly what sets Woolf’s biography apart from her predecessors.

Despite Strachey’s active voice and “the biographer” sharing numerous similarities, there is one cold, hard truth. Woolf strays from Strachey in terms of fact versus fiction. For one major way that *Orlando* differs greatly from *Eminent Victorians*, and *Tom Jones* for that matter, is her unique use of surrealism throughout a book she herself calls a biography. Literary critic Ray Monk writes about Strachey’s differing opinion on the construction of a biographical narrative, saying: “Strachey had argued for brevity, style, irreverence and an interest in character; he had *not* argued for fiction in biography. On the contrary, at the heart of his conception of the genre, with its insistence on the need to strip away the pieties of the Victorian age in order to reveal the reality that lay underneath, was a concern to sharpen, not blur, the distinction between truth and illusion, fact and fiction” (3-4). Strachey’s strict code for narratives based in fact rather than fiction sets the work of Strachey and Woolf apart in regards to their biographies. He was very particular about stripping away the guise of Victorian heroes to reveal the humanities that made them less god-like figures, a motif that would most likely lose its effect if he had added an element of the sublime like Woolf. Monk goes on to write, “Indeed, *Orlando* is not only fiction but pointedly and determinedly unrealistic fiction. It describes things that could not possibly be true. The central character, for example, lives for three hundred years and magically changes sex from male to female” (28). By incorporating such fantastical and surreal elements like Orlando’s

sudden sex change and the impossible timeline, Woolf leaves the reader to undoubtedly discern that this is not a truthful biography, but a parody of one.

In another interesting perspective on this difference, Kathryn Benzel points out that the role of “the biographer” is what both links Woolf to these other authors and sets her apart.

Benzel writes, “The significance of this aesthetic is found in the dual nature of Woolf’s innovation: that is, as Woolf purposefully deconstructs biography and narrative in *Orlando*, she not only creates a new narrative form but also redefines the relationship of reader and writer” (169). By creating such a frank discourse between “the biographer” and reader, Woolf deconstructs the role of the biographer in the matter of reportage of a story and separated positioning between the historian, subject and audience. Additionally, as Orlando performs his and her fantastical feats, “the biographer” seems to also, as they both transverse the planes of existence and time itself. Benzel continues with: “As readers, we enter this fiction, waiting and wanting to confirm the reality of the story, a biography about a character of some presumed significance. And in spite of the novel’s fantastic elements (climactic phenomena, conflation of time, physical incongruities), certain novelistic conventions (particularly characterization and plot) seemingly maintain a natural flow of narrative events for the reader” (169). Benzel claims that, because of Woolf’s adherence to a classical literary “natural flow of narrative events”, the reader still maintains their suspension of disbelief throughout the surrealist novel. This coupled with the comedic commentary added on by “the biographer”, who interrupts the narrative to interject his/her two cents, the reader can easily believe the fantastical happenings because its well-understood that all is done for the sake of parody. In this way, Woolf tacks on another innovation to the art of biography while critiquing the discipline itself, like Strachey.

The biographical work of Bloomsbury members, Woolf and Strachey, transformed the entire genre for generations to come. Just like Fielding reinvented the novel in his day, Strachey, and later Woolf, reinvented the way that biographical character study was done. Their use of an active narrator created a new relationship between reader and author, breaking the “fourth wall” of literature and challenging the objective approach of biography and historical fiction. Each author contributed their own innovations to the genre, Strachey using strategic irony to reveal the humanity of not only his subjects but also himself and Woolf inundating her biography with elements of surrealist fiction. In their own way, they added voice to the biography, a discipline that demanded complete separation and detachment from the material. Using their narrators, Strachey and Woolf directly participate with their readers, like Fielding had done before with his intrusive narrator. By applying this outspoken narrator to the genre of biography, Strachey and Woolf introduced a new way to approach the past, while artfully dismantling the Victorian traditions that came before them.

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