

Introduction

Whose lives are worth living? Whose lives are worth writing about? Whose lives are worth remembering? These questions preoccupied Virginia Woolf. In *Jacobs's Room*, she asks whether or not history should focus only on the biographies of great men. Her answer, which she develops and discusses in most of her works, is emphatically negative. Indeed, Woolf's interest in biographical writing is closely tied to her reading and writing about "the lives of the obscure", which, she believes, overlap more often than not, with the lives of women (Bowly xxii).

In her essay, "The New Biography", Virginia Woolf reflects on the delicate balance that, she thinks, ought to exist between fact and fiction in the writing of biography. The peculiarity, as well as the challenge of this genre, she argues, is inherent to the difficulty of "trying to find a *modus scribendi*", a way in which to write, "that might do justice to both the 'granite' and the 'rainbow', the solid fact and the less tangible individuality of a life" (Bowly xxiii).

In *Orlando*, which is subtitled "A Biography", this relationship between the "granite" and the "rainbow" becomes so mesmerising that it is nearly impossible to distinguish between the two. But why should it be necessary to do so? *Orlando's* narrator invites us to ask this question over and over again, while taking us through the story of a life spanning from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, from one sex to the other. It begins with the young sixteenth-century boy, Orlando—"for there could be no doubt of his sex" (13)—and ends with Orlando who is now a woman in her late thirties in 1928. As the story unfolds, the narrator, a self-professed biographer whose gender is not revealed, comments on her or his narrative choices and claims she/he wishes to write according to the conventions of biography. In so doing, she/he enjoys speculating on the distinction, or non-distinction as the case may be, between the factual and the imaginary, and between truth and its opposite. These comments often establish connections between the biographer and the historian:

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. (184)

For *Orlando's* narrator, then, the writing of a life is the writing of history, and the biographer or historian is also a poet or a novelist.

To the best of my knowledge, so far no critic has described *Orlando* as a *historical* novel. Yet the account of Orlando's life as a young boy during the sixteenth century is based on historically verifiable and recognisable settings. Her encounters with eighteenth and nineteenth century misogynist attitudes and legislation are historically accurate. As a modern woman writer in the early twentieth century, *Orlando* is credible, and so are the many historical figures she meets during her long life. Why, then, do we hesitate to call *Orlando* historical fiction? Does this prove the claim that what is usually taken to be an historical novel is, in fact, "just historical referents appearing and functioning in a series of other, more clearly delineated and demanding forms" (Lazzaro-Weis, "Stranger" 31)? Or does *Orlando's* uneasy position between

genres prove Woolf's point that any truthful account of the past is beyond the powers of the biographer or the historian, and that "[o]nly those who have little need of the truth, and no respect for it—the poet and the novelists—can be trusted [to give any truthful account of the past]" (*Orlando* 184)?

Today there is a lot of discussion about biography and the role of the biographer in shaping his or her subject's life. The publication of three monographs on biography by Paula Backscheider, David Ellis and Richard Holmes, respectively, once more sparked a debate about the relationship between biography and other forms of expression, including autobiography (Lee, "Tracking"). The relationship between biography and fiction has been theorised mostly with regard to the biographer's inevitable rearrangement of events, yet most contributors to the debate do not consider fictional biographies legitimate case studies in order to reflect on biography. In *Elusive Subjects*, I revisit the canonical separations between genres by placing biography at the centre of debates about the boundaries between genres and disciplines. I present a theory of biography based on metafictional dialogues between biographers as self-declared writers of fiction and their biographical subjects. In so doing, I shift the focus of inquiry from the role of the biographer to that of the subject in shaping the biographer's tale. My approach is cross-cultural and interdisciplinary. I use texts and theory to illuminate ongoing debates about fiction and biography as genres and historiography as a discipline.

I discuss Woolf's claim that "[o]nly those who have little need of the truth . . . can be trusted" in the light of feminist reconceptualisations of history. These have mostly come in the form of women's history, women's personal narratives and postmodernist historical fiction, and as reflections on the nature of historical and biographical writing. I perform a critical analysis of four Italian and English language novels representative of life writing. These novels, all of them fictional renditions of the lives of women from an historical past, variously adopt either of those rhetorical and biographical forms. I focus on the degrees to which these books use the "very stuff of historical practice: a document, a text, some trace of the past"—to employ Steedman's words (*Past Tenses* 41)—and to which they then use the very stuff of fiction and that of biography to reinterpret or invent history. I also discuss how the varying degrees of public prominence variously enjoyed—or endured as the case may be—by the novels' protagonists affect the ways in which their life stories are told.

When selecting four case studies, I was guided by my interest in exploring the intersection of history and fiction as it has been manifest in the writing of women's lives. I wanted to analyse fictional biographies in which, with varying degrees of self-reflexive metafiction, women feature as authors, narrators and biographical subjects. My aim has been to investigate how select women writers play out in literary practice both the current feminist theorising of women's life writing and the debates amongst feminist historians about the rescue of the forgotten and the excluded, and the reinterpretation of the misunderstood and maligned women from the past.

But my choice of texts was also guided by my interest in finding characters and writers with whom I could establish a dialogue. For this reason, the selection is as much grounded in theoretical premises as in biographical circumstances. The inclusion of writers from Italy, the United States and Australia reflects the trajectory of my itinerant life, in both a personal and an intellectual sense, rather than a desire to compare the cultures from which these writers come. As "a migrant who turned nomad"—to borrow Rosi Braidotti's words (1)—I approach the texts in question as representatives of particular theoretical issues, rather than as exemplars of specific national cultures.

Although fully aware of cultural, political and social differences, I weave my argument across these differences, respecting each writer's individual background but ultimately appropriating her novel to my transnational way of thinking.

My intention is to reflect on the relationship between history and fiction and to question the notion of historical truth by looking at specific examples in which history turns into fiction, and fiction becomes history. Hence the novels chosen stand at the crossroads between history and fiction and the relevant issues regarding the relationship between feminist history, biography, and autobiography. I use these works, differentiated by time and cultures, to present the responses of four women writers who have sought, explicitly or implicitly, to account for the absence of women in history. The texts also facilitate the exploration of biography as metafictional dialogue. They are neither exclusively historical novels, nor straightforward biographies, but mix biographical and historical accounts with fictionalised personal narratives such as diaries, memoirs, letters and autobiographical fragments. Thus they establish a direct relationship between historical fiction, biography, and personal narratives.

Artemisia and *Rinascimento Privato* by the Italian writers Anna Banti (1947) and Maria Bellonci (1985), respectively, are fictional biographies: the former of the painter, Artemisia Gentileschi, and the latter of the prominent Renaissance aristocrat, Isabella d'Este. *Artemisia* is a dialogue between the narrator and the fictional Artemisia. *Rinascimento Privato* is written in the first person singular as if it were Isabella d'Este's memoir, containing also her epistolary exchanges with a fictional correspondent who, incidentally, is the only non-historical character in the text.

L.C., by the North American writer Susan Daitch (1986), recounts the story of Lucienne Crozier. The novel comprises two different translations from the French of the diary of a young woman (who may or may not have existed) who becomes involved in the French revolution of February 1848. The fictional Lucienne, a middle-class woman from the provinces who moves to Paris in order to find a rich husband, interacts with notorious historical figures such as the painter Eugène Delacroix and the socialist philosopher Proudhon. She measures herself against famous women such as Madame de Staël and George Sand and comments on the social conditions of French women in the late 1840s, emphasising their disenfranchisement as subordinate citizens of the "dull" and "oppressively pedestrian" bourgeois regime of Louis-Philippe (Daitch 2). Writing her diary at a time of social and political upheaval, Lucienne discovers that women's oppression continues despite the brief respite of the first months of 1848. By August of that year, in fact, all women's groups—which flourished in the wake of the previous months' revolutionary fervour—have been banned. *L.C.* is a translation of a diary whose original is partly lost, and also an account of the biographies, as well as autobiographies, of the diary's translators.

The fictional biography *Poppy*, by the Australian writer Drusilla Modjeska (1990), presents an altogether different situation. It stages the story of a daughter, an established feminist academic, who attempts to write a biography of her mother. The biography is interspersed with references to a variety of feminist, postmodernist and poststructuralist writers, is equipped with bibliographical references, and includes a final section on "sources quoted". Unlike Daitch, Modjeska—particularly since the publication of *Poppy*—is a well-known writer in her country. In the wake of *Poppy*'s success, she published another novel, a novella, and a biography of the Australian painters Stella Bowen and Grace Cossington-Smith. She is often invited to speak at writers festivals, and contributes to current social and political debates. Of the four, *Poppy* is the only text that may be called a biography proper. Yet a large part of the

story is devoted to questioning what a biography proper may be. For this purpose, the book is not only a biography of Poppy, but is also her biographer's tale. It is punctuated by the narrator's autobiographical intrusions and by a metafictional commentary on the methodology of feminist historiography, biography, and self-representation.

In my discussion of these works, I link the general issue of women's history—intended as the act of revising, recuperating, or simply writing it as History—to a specific narrative strategy that I call gendered metafiction. To define this strategy, I analyse the ways in which the authors both claim and disclaim authority as story-tellers. They denounce the legitimacy of their authority by emphasising the fictionality of their stories and celebrating the power fiction gives them to invent themselves and their characters through the act of writing. I point to the varying degrees to which the writers discussed render their presence as story-tellers visible. In so doing, I have attempted to reflect on and problematise the concealment that the writing of history and biography have traditionally involved, and discuss feminist biography as gendered metafiction.