SCRITTURE D'OLTREMANICA

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Questa collana di studi inglesi comprende sia saggi critici, sia edizioni critiche di testi in traduzione italiana, con o senza originale a fronte, preceduti da un'introduzione e corredati di un apparato di note. Si selezioneranno, nel primo caso, scrittori e scrittrici, opere e tematiche di carattere letterario che risultino di sicuro interesse culturale e di attualità; nel secondo caso, testi appartenenti a generi letterari diversi, composti in un ampio arco di tempo — dalla prima età moderna alla contemporaneità, ma con un'attenzione particolare ai secoli XIX e XX —, poco o affatto noti nel nostro Paese e per la prima volta tradotti in italiano. I curatori e/o gli autori sono docenti, ricercatori universitari, dottori di ricerca con specifiche competenze nelle aree entro cui si opererà la scelta dei testi e degli argomenti. Il titolo della collana intende indicare sia l'area geografico–culturale alla quale si riferiscono i lavori qui ospitati, sia la direzione dello sguardo dei loro autori: dall'Italia alla Gran Bretagna.

Claudia Cremonesi

The proper writing of lives

Biography and the Art of Virginia Woolf

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To my parents and Sandro

"What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck un-expectedly in the dark; here was one."

Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

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A Writer Sits at a Desk: Virginia Woolf and (Human) Life.

A Foreword

In May 1940 Virginia Woolf displayed the tools of her trade to the benefit of the Workers' Educational Association, and summed up her lifelong effort, curiosity and commitment to the art of writing into a few clear sentences:

> A writer is a person who sits at a desk and keeps his eyes fixed, as intently as he can, upon a certain object […]. What is his object – his model? Nothing so simple as a painter's model; it is not a bowl of flowers, a naked figure, or a dish of apples and onions. [...] A writer has to keep his eye upon a model that moves, that changes, upon an object that is not one object but innumerable objects. Two words alone cover all that a writer looks at – they are, human life.[1]

In more than one way these words provide the post scriptum as well as the prologue to Woolf's entire activity as a writer. They retrace her first steps, through the straight avenues of biography her father had already mapped out for her in his exemplary career; they recall the images of pure visual beauty she had seen and discussed with her sister Vanessa, with Roger Fry and Clive Bell – each of them strongly addicted to the gospel of pure form, tempting the young writer to follow it. But as the opening sentences of "The Leaning Tower" make clear, the writer's object is not a bowl of flowers, a naked figure, a dish of apples and onions. Cézanne is a great master, but the writer's trade does not aim at visual beauty. The choice of these two

[1] V. WOOLF, "The Leaning Tower" (1940), in V. WOOLF, *A Woman's Essays*, edited by Rachel Bowlby, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1992, pp. 159-178.

words, "human life," defines at once Woolf's early intentions and mature achievement, pursued along paths and experiments which intersected with biography and painting, but would eventually focus on the art of fiction.

Thus the title of this book by Claudia Cremonesi, *"The Proper Writing of Lives:" Biography and the Art of Virginia Woolf*, sets the scene for an investigation touching a multiplicity of interrelated issues, at once historically layered in the ancient literary tradition of biography, and simultaneously elucidating its bearing upon the modern writer, her concerns, and the contemporary critical debate on the art of fiction, biography, and "the proper writing of lives."

By focusing initially on biography as a genre, Cremonesi provides the reader with its definitions and metaphors, recalling the terms of the contemporary critical debate, and, significantly, the theoretical contribution of Hermione Lee, who is also the author of Woolf's classic biography. Today biography is likened to autopsy, to photography and the art of the portrait, emphasizing not only (André Maurois) the relationship with the reader through "respect," moral "responsibility" and the biographer's "duty" towards facts, but also (Leon Edel) the creative effort of the biographer, who has to weld together into one coherent "vision" the mass of heterogeneous materials and facts of a life. Recent research projects about life-writing highlight this dimension, adding the wealth of the hybrid materials attended by interdisciplinary studies to the literary tradition of biography and memoir, strictly based on written reports and letters. Thus we are inevitably brought back to the fathers of biography, but we are able to contemplate their work from the critical perspective Woolf endorsed, when she considered the current state of the art.

There were many fathers indeed. A whole genealogy of them. Each name would contribute to the early twentieth-century debate Woolf was actively engaged in: each book had been read under her father's shadow, and carefully re-read by her under the shadow of "those 68 black books" (Woolf, *Letters*

4: 145) which documented his commitment to the art of biography.

The first author in the lineage is the legitimate "father" of biography, Plutarch; in his footsteps came the initiator of so many new directions in English studies – Dr Johnson – so frequently quoted, so fervently loved by Woolf, whenever she felt that criticism ran the risk of becoming dogmatic and stiff, or of losing sight of that most important figure in the text, the common reader; the Johnson who taught her that between the acts, characters would still be acting out the form of their lives; the Johnson who, in constant dialogue with Boswell, had imagined a modern biography full of information, details and moral instruction to be derived even from the exposure of great men's vices and faults. Thus it was for the eighteenth century. The Victorian tradition, whenever writers touched the genre of biography, was less enlightened: Cremonesi mentions John Gibson Lockhart's caution in sparing the feelings of Walter Scott's close entourage and friends, Elizabeth Gaskell's trouble with the family of Charlotte Brontë, and the criticisms, verging on indignation, meted out to James Anthony Froude for his exposure of Carlyle's weaknesses. From this tradition, and its impregnable moral battlements, Woolf would inherit the uneasy feelings incarnated in the formidable figure of her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, who became editor – the year Virginia was born – of the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

The strands that are going to be woven into Virginia's work as a novelist, critic, and biographer, are thus carefully disentangled and yet kept in constant harmony in the first two chapters of the book. The scene is set for "The New Biography." In this 1927 essay Woolf projects her experience as biographer (she had contributed to Maitland's *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*) and author of fictional 'lives' of characters: among them, Cremonesi considers the failed attempt at biography made by Katherine Hilbery and her mother in *Night and Day* (1919), the Cubist portrait of Jacob Flanders in *Jacob's Room* (1922) dramatically challenged by his essay on history and the lives of "great men"; the record of a family life enduring the

rupture of sudden death, and its consequences, as in *To the Lighthouse* (1927); and finally the revolutionary achievements of *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and *Flush: A Biography* (1933) in which despite of – or because of – the experimental stretching of the genre to its utmost limits, Woolf offers a serious comment on the state of the art, dwelling on the granite of facts and on the rainbow of personality. Within these last two novels Woolf combines the advantages of fact and fiction, and experiences the exhilarating freedom of the writer of fiction who believes in the unlimited territory which constitutes the proper stuff for the novel.

In the same years of intense activity as a novelist, Woolf not only worked on "The New Biography" but also as a critic. Her appraisals of literary criticism are later to be collected as *The Common Reader* (first and second series, 1925 and 1932), and, posthumously, as *Granite and Rainbow* (1956), and *Books and Portraits* (1977). "The Art of Biography" (1939) is the last essay providing her comment on past and future pages dealing with human life; "The Death of the Moth" (1942) is her last comment on life.

Concerned with investigating the nature of biography, a young art, she says, when compared with poetry and fiction, Woolf disentangles the troublesome knots she finds with "The Art of Biography" and eventually remarks that its necessary elements also function as necessary limitations.

> The artist's imagination at its most intense fires out what is perishable in fact; he builds with what is durable; but the biographer must accept the perishable, build with it, imbed it in the very fabric of his work. Much will perish; little will live. And thus we come to the conclusion, that he is a craftsman, not an artist; and his work is not a work of art, but something betwixt and between.[2]

[2] V. WOOLF, "The Art of Biography" (1939), in V. WOOLF, *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, edited by Rachel Bowlby, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1993, pp. 144-151.

One could not imagine statements more soberly distant from the exalted experimentalism of her previous years: fiction and biography part ways.

When composing this essay Woolf was also wrestling with the biography of Roger Fry, her friend, the mentor of the whole group of young artists who gathered in Bloomsbury, closest to her sister Vanessa, who had died in 1934. Fry's partner Helen Anrep and his sister Margery had asked Virginia to write his biography: and this is the task that, as argued by Cremonesi, would place Woolf at the edge of hard choices, selections, and necessary limitations. She was well aware of the cultural changes which had been occurring between biography as conceived by her father ("life at college, marriage, career") and the modern biography, getting rid of obsolete conventions, detecting falsity and unreality, admitting psychology into the account of a whole life. And yet, this being one of the major critical achievements of Cremonesi's book, when composing *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940) Woolf did apparently revert to a more traditional agenda.

Cremonesi actually highlights the crucial passages in letters and diaries which record Woolf's tortured commitment to the biography of her friend; her feeling of being at "the grind" and not only overwhelmed by thousands of letters, but also, as she writes to Ethel Smyth, "How does one euphemise 20 different mistresses?"

> Trying to unravel the huge mass of facts, within her attempt to describe Fry's personality, Woolf composed a biography which is neither totally traditional – for she had to detach her way of writing from the past tradition – nor inventive as *Orlando* and *Flush* had been. However, she hit the mark, realizing a regular "classic" factual biography.[3]

Against several contemporary critical comments which view her biography of Roger Fry as a failure, as a *manqué* experiment in modern art which even jeopardizes the whole reputation

[3] See page 172.

of Woolf as a modernist author, Cremonesi states that the adherence of *Roger Fry: A Biography* to standards of classical biographical writing is not the failure of the modernist author, but the achievement of the modern writer of lives. While involved with contemporary issues, Woolf was also able to resort to her English literary ancestry, to write in the wake of Johnson, Boswell, Lockhart, Froude… perhaps even to listen to the distant voice of her father.

The conclusion of this admirable book leads us to consider the undue emphasis recent writers and a few critics have set on Woolf's death – at the expense of a critical outlook placing in the foreground her tireless commitment to reading, reviewing, keeping a diary, editing, composing lives, taking photographs, writing to friends, relatives, contemporaries – filling six volumes of letters, five volumes of essays and reviews, five volumes of diaries. It is illuminating to read "The Death of the Moth" to find Woolf's true commitment to life, and to life-writing:

> The same energy which inspired the rooks, the ploughmen, the horses, and even, it seemed, the lean bare-backed downs, sent the moth fluttering from side to side of his square of the window-pane. [...] One's sympathies, of course, were all on the side of life.[4]

This manifold task, this committed energy, are the facts of Woolf's life: against them, Cremonesi is able to set in critical counterpoint the rainbow of a personality which could at once be able to profit from the classical models of the past, while accepting the challenges of modernity.

Francesca Orestano, 8th July 2013

[4] V. WOOLF, "The Death of the Moth" (1942), in V. WOOLF, *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, cit., pp. 179-181.

Introduction

Monk's House, Rodmell. On Friday 28th March 1941, a bright, clear, cold day – as Quentin Bell reports in his aunt's biography – Adeline Virginia Woolf went to her studio room in the garden. She wrote two letters, one for her husband Leonard and one for her beloved sister Vanessa. She put Leonard's letter on the mantelpiece of their sitting room. Then she put on her fur coat, took her walking stick, and went out, across the meadow near the house. She reached the River Ouse, left her stick on the bank, and filled her pocket with a large stone. She walked into the river and drowned herself.[1]

On 1st April, Leonard wrote to the editor of *The Times*, Geoffrey Dawson, telling him what he feared had happened. After two days, *The Times* reported:

> We announce with regret that it must now be presumed that Mrs Leonard Woolf (Virginia Woolf, the novelist and essayist), who has been missing since last Friday, has been drowned in the Sussex Ouse at Rodmell, near Lewes. We also regret to announce the death of Lord Rockley, who had a long and distinguished career in Parliament and was well known in the City.[2]

That night the BBC announced Virginia's death on the evening news. *The Brighton Southern Weekly News* recorded on its front page:

> RIVER OUSE DRAGGED FOR MISSING AUTHORESS: Unavailing search has been made of the countryside around Rodmell for Mrs Virginia Woolf, the authoress, who disappeared from her Rodmell

[1] Q. BELL, *Virginia Woolf. A Biography* (1972), 2 vols., Pimlico, London 1996, vol. II, p. 226.

[2] *The Times*, 3rd April 1941, p. 4, quoted in H. LEE, *Virginia Woolf* (1996), Vintage Books, London 1997, p. 762.