**On or About December 1930:**

**Gender and the Writing of Lives in Virginia Woolf**

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**Abstract:**

This article examines some important historical, literary, and theoretical questions that are posed by the idea of “writing a life” in the early years of the twentieth century. Its focus is primarily on the constitutive relations between gender, literature and culture in the work of Virginia Woolf, and it proposes readings of a range of texts that were written by Woolf “on or about December 1930” that engage with questions of life-writing. The texts analysed include Woolf’s novel, *The Waves* (1931) and *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). These are read alongside other texts from the same period in which Woolf deploys a first-person voice, including her *Diary* (for the years around 1930) and a long letter she wrote as a kind of preface to a published collection of letters by working women. Finally, the article also draws on a number of Woolf’s essays to suggest ways in which the problems of writing a life might intersect with other political, historical and literary problems with which she was preoccupied in the early 1930s.

**Reading Woolf:**

Virginia Woolf wrote a striking number of texts around the year 1930 that engage in important and original ways with the nature of biography, autobiography, subjectivity, and (fictional) character. Her writings thus offer a complex set of responses to the possible relations between gender, identity and life-writing, which resonate productively with other articles in this volume. Throughout her writing career, Woolf deployed a wide range of modes of life-writing, and reflected explicitly on the literary, aesthetic, and theoretical questions these modes of writing raised both for a writer and for her readers. She was a novelist, a biographer, an essayist, a diarist, and a letter writer, and in all these genres she was intrigued by the possibilities for representing a life in words. In addition to such substantive engagement with issues of life-writing, Woolf’s modernist literary style also opened up new possibilities for representing women, their lives, and their writing. The key aspects of this style on which this article concentrates include innovative approaches to the representation of subjectivity, productive and frequently surprising juxtapositions of ideas, formal innovations in relation to narrative temporalities, and the rich deployment of “imagist” ways of seeing and representing the world. These formal literary innovations created a space for Woolf to conceive and represent both gender and subjectivity as multiple, complex, and contested.

The decision to focus on the period “on or about December 1930” in this article is driven partly by the richness and diversity of Woolf’s reflections on life-writing around this specific year. But it also reflects a broader commitment to the importance of critical and historical studies focussed on a single year as a productive method within the overall field of cultural history. Focussing on a single year facilitates certain kinds of interdisciplinary work in cultural history that address a diverse range of texts and contexts. For example, George Cotkin’s *Feast of Excess: A Cultural History of the New Sensibility* (OUP, 2016) argues that in order to enable “interplay” between individual artists and their historical moment it is important that “each chapter deals with a single year” (p. 13). The same approach can be found in Hugh MacDonald’s *Music in 1853: The Biography of a Year* (Boydell Press, 2012), and perhaps even more pertinently for this discussion of Woolf, in the highly original and influential study by Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (OUP, 1999). Each of these studies draws on the potential for such tightly temporally focussed historical inquiry to enable productive comparison and contrast between diverse texts and events. This is not, of course to deny the analytical and critical importance of engaging also with questions of geography and space within cultural history, as this volume as a whole so clearly illustrates. But the focus of this particular chapter is shaped by the rich possibilities generated by the study of a single year.

Reference to the cultural history of a single year is by no means an anachronistic or random imposition on Woolf’s texts of course. Indeed, many readers may well already have recognised that the title of this article is an allusion to an argument Woolf developed in the 1920s about the nature of human character and its link to historical change, which focussed particularly on the transformative potential of a single year. Woolf was thinking hard about literature, history and the representation of individual character in 1923 and 1924, when she published both an essay entitled “Character in Fiction” and a related essay focussed on the representation of female character, “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown.” In these essays she argued that:

On or about December 1910 human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered or a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Although many readers have found Woolf’s claim here excessive and unpersuasive, this is, I suggest, a serious attempt to articulate the various factors that can lead to the emergence of a significantly new cultural moment. Class mobility, changes in education, and the intensification of commerce are all factors that Woolf alludes to when she claims there was a radical shift in 1910 that could be observed in human relations, both at work and within the family. These shifts led, necessarily she suggests, to transformations in religion, conduct, politics and literature, “on or about 1910.”

I have used elements of this way of thinking about cultural change in shaping my overall argument in this article, but have picked a different moment (1930) that seems more significant to Woolf personally, and also to her experiments in the relations between gender, subjectivity and writing than does the year 1910, when she had not yet published her first novel. The second half of the 1920s had seen Woolf developing her thinking about writing, character, subjectivity and history in very productive ways. In late 1929 she published *A Room of One’s Own*, an essay that explored both the history of women’s writing and the creative possibilities of future literary engagements with gender and culture. The previous year had seen the publication of her fictional biography *Orlando*, which as discussed below stages radical experiments in the representation both of gender and of history, while in 1931 she was to publish one of her most radically experimental texts, *The Waves.* The years just before and after 1930 were thus a particularly fruitful moment in Woolf’s life as a writer, which produced a range of texts that have a much broader significance for the analysis of life-writing as well as of women’s writing more broadly.

***Orlando: A Biography* (1928)[[2]](#endnote-2):**

Woolf’s *Orlando* is a fictional text that is presented in the guise of a biography. But this is no circumscribed “life” set in a precise historical period. Its central character begins life in the Elizabethan period as a man, and is last encountered in the early twentieth century as a woman. The text has a rich array of allusions to recognisable historical and literary figures, which creates a dense and humorous intertext, constantly troubling the reader’s sense of the central character’s identity and also of the novel’s temporal framing. The character of Orlando is closely modelled on aspects of the life and history of Vita Sackville West, Virginia Woolf’s lover at the time the novel was written. As Woolf wrote in her diary, “instantly the usual exciting devices enter my mind: a biography beginning in the year 1500 & continuing to the present day, called Orlando: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another.”[[3]](#endnote-3) The representation of character and of history in the novel are both imagined in terms of exciting fictional devices that make the writing of the novel seem to Woolf like “a treat.”

The opening sentence of *Orlando* is: “He – for there could be no doubt about his sex, though the fashion of his time did something to disguise it – was in the act of slicing at the Head of a Moor” (p. 11). Doubt about sexuality is thus there at the very beginning of the novel, even as it is disavowed – there could be “no doubt,” but yet the style of Elizabethan dress “disguises” such apparent certainty. The masculine identity asserted with that opening “He” is rendered unstable before the end of the novel’s first sentence. This opening sentence also introduces a clear association between masculinity and violence, which will continue to permeate the novel. The “head” that Orlando is caught in the act of slicing actually transforms into a skull in the next paragraph, and turns out to have been taken home as a trophy from Africa by one of Orlando’s ancestors. This diminishes to some extent the shock of finding the novel’s central character apparently in the middle of an act of murder, but only by displacing this violence into a much longer and larger history of colonial violence. Orlando carries the weight of his ancestry, and his masculine identity is a collective as well as an individual one.

By paragraph two of the novel Orlando moves swiftly from slicing at the Moor’s head to writing poetry: “Orlando … sat down at the table, and, with the half-conscious air of one doing what they do every day of their lives at this hour, took out a writing book … and dipped an old stained goose quill in the ink” (p. 12). Important intersections between gender, violence and writing are already being established at this early stage of the novel, as also is the question of the limitations of established literary form. Orlando’s attempt at writing at this point in the novel fails because he becomes aware of the chasm between the literary forms at his disposal and his sense of their inadequacy to render the life he observes outside his window: “nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces” (p. 13). Orlando’s literary frustration here echoes arguments made by Woolf herself, for example in the essay “Modern Fiction” which she published in 1925. Here she argued that the naturalist modes of representation that dominated fictional writing in the period could never adequately capture the richness of “life” and indeed that “the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek.”[[4]](#endnote-4) The parallel between Woolf’s exploration of the writing of lives and Orlando’s own literary endeavours is thus established at an early stage of the novel.

In the second chapter of *Orlando* Woolf goes on to develop some explicit reflections on the nature of biography:

The biographer is now faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over. Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando’s life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth … But now we come to an episode which lies right across our path, so that there is no ignoring it. Yet it is dark, mysterious and undocumented; so that there is no explaining it. (p. 41)

The incident that lies right across the biographer’s plodding path is the moment when Orlando sleeps for seven days, and wakes up radically transformed (pp. 41-2). This fairy-tale metamorphosis sits perhaps oddly within the genre of biography, reaching out as it does to both fantasy and myth. But Woolf’s literary text allows for such a hybrid generic approach, drawing on the links between life-writing and fantasy.

Such fictional exploration of the limits of biography in *Orlando* is part of a broader discussion of the art of biography in Woolf’s work. Woolf had been closely connected to the genre of biography from her childhood, as her father, Leslie Stephen, was the founding editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography* between 1885 and 1891. She was also to address the genre of biography in a number of essays, reflect on it in her diary (“have a plan already to get historical manuscripts and write Lives of the Obscure”[[5]](#endnote-5)), and test it through a range of texts including both *Orlando* and *Flush* (1933), an imaginative biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s dog. In her essay, “The New Biography” (1927), Woolf suggested that the conflict between “truth” and “personality” was the central dilemma for the genre of biography, which had to steer a path between the “granite-like solidity” of the former and the “rainbow-like intangibility” of the latter.[[6]](#endnote-6) She concludes this essay by suggesting that fictional character is in important ways more “real to us” than the objective representation of any historical individual, however clearly anchored in historical facts (p. 100). She suggests that this insight signals the end of the Victorian style of biography, and shows the importance of a style of biography that can deploy imagination, psychological insight, and at least some of the devices of literary representation to produce a more persuasive and complete biographical portrait.

Her exemplar in “The New Biography” is Harold Nicolson, and in particular his biographies of nine individuals, published as *Some People* in 1927, of which the essay was initially a review. In her later essay “The Art of Biography,” published in 1939, however, she turns to Lytton Strachey as the writer whose corpus illustrates the key theoretical and literary problems confronting the genre of biography. Woolf argues in this essay that biography is a relatively young genre, which achieved significant literary and cultural prominence only in the nineteenth century. She sees Strachey’s (and her own) generation as developing important new freedoms within the genre, deploying more complex models of human subjectivity and a broader range of tone and style to render the “reality” biography requires of its represented characters. In relation to *Orlando*, the most interesting part of this essay is its discussion of Strachey’s *Elizabeth and Essex*, which was published in 1928 just after Woolf had completed *Orlando* with its opening sections set in the Elizabethan period. In her diary, Woolf makes it clear that she sees Strachey’s biography as a failed experiment: “that lively superficial meretricious book … secretly pleased to find Lytton’s book a bad one.”[[7]](#endnote-7) But in the essay her argument is more nuanced, stressing the importance as well as the limitations of Strachey’s navigation of fact and fiction within his biography of Elizabeth and Essex. Woolf suggests that Strachey’s experiment was relevant to her own writing of *Orlando* as she asserts that Elizabethan society is particularly alien and unfamiliar to the modern reader: “By what art are we to worm our way into those strange spirits? Those even stranger bodies?”[[8]](#endnote-8) The strangeness of the period, as well as the need for literary devices to “worm one’s way” into the embodied experience of character in the period, clearly inform both *Orlando’*s narrative and its style.

Some forty pages after Orlando’s first transformative sleep, he wakes again from a long and deep sleep: “He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us … Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess – he was a woman.” (p. 83). The revelation is unexpected, and challenges one of the key gendered frameworks in which individual identity is typically lived and represented. The phrase “he was a woman” is an interesting one. The “was” is not here a past tense, and there is no suggestion that Orlando was and had always been a woman. Rather, the assertion is that he is now a woman, a transformation has taken place: “Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it … Orlando was a man until the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since.” (pp. 83-4).

The linguistic “strain” this change of sex causes within the novel is initially significant. Immediately after the transformation the narrator says rather emphatically, “the change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (p. 83). This move from “his” or “her” to “their” is a way of addressing the constraints of gender within language, and in particular the difficulty of finding a gender-neutral pronoun in English, but it also can be understood as a way of rendering Orlando as an individual character confusingly plural. Such a linguistic choice by the narrator seems to undermine the claim that no aspect of Orlando’s identity has been affected by becoming a woman. A few sentences later, however, the linguistic tension and ambiguity generated by the use of “their” is erased, with a clear statement of Orlando’s new sex through a different use of pronouns: “the change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly … and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it” (p. 83).

After this transformation into a woman, Orlando reflects on what such a change of sex means for her social identity, for her sexuality, and for her habits of living. The narrator suggests that Orlando may be discovering something of the androgyny that haunts all sexual identities:

In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness … Of the complications and confusions which thus result everyone has had experience; but here we leave the general question and note only the odd effect it had in the particular case of Orlando herself. For it was this mixture in her of man and woman, one being uppermost and then the other, that often gave her conduct an unexpected turn.[[9]](#endnote-9) (p.111)

Such an “unexpected turn” is experienced by Orlando through and in her literary writing, when she finds herself and her writing taken over in a way that is physical and corporeal by an obsession with the need for a husband. Her poetic writing style is transformed, “nothing more repulsive could be imagined than to feel the ink flowing thus in cascades of involuntary inspiration” (p. 138). Orlando becomes “conscious of an extraordinary tingling and vibration all over her” (p. 138), and her writing is literally subsumed by the pressure of the domestic as blots of ink appear and erase her writing. She is at first rendered incapable of writing at all, but then is driven by forces she cannot control to create a completely different style of poetry. The narrator presents this episode as conclusive proof of the fact that writing is a physical act, intimately connected to the fibre and the fabric of the body, and therefore presumably that it has a sex: “For it would seem – her case proved it – that we write not with the fingers, but with the whole person. The nerve which controls the pen winds itself about every fibre of our being, threads the heart, pierces the liver” (p. 141). The final image lends to the assertion a certain mythic quality, evoking as it does Prometheus’s punishment for his theft of fire from Zeus, which was to be tied to a rock and to have his liver eaten daily by an eagle. The claiming of an embodied female form of writing is, it would seem, a risky transgression.

***The Waves* (1931)[[10]](#endnote-10):**

*The Waves* is a formally experimental novel, centrally concerned with the question of how to write a life. As one of the six characters, Bernard, says in his final summary, discussing the factors that generate a sense of personal completeness: “’Muscles, nerves, intestines, blood vessels, all that makes the coil and spring of our being, the unconscious hum of the engine, as well as the dart and flicker of the tongue’” (p. 156). *The Waves* is a structurally innovative text, punctuated by interludes describing the progress of the sun over a single day and across the globe (engaging with both the temporal and the spatial frameworks of selfhood), and organised around a series of episodes involving six characters whose perspectives, voices and lives unfurl across the text (though not all survive to the end as this is also a novel about death).

*The Waves* posed for Woolf, over a period of around four years, a series of technical writing problems about the representation of human character, and the impact of these complex problems is recorded at various points within her diary. For example, on 23 April 1930 she wrote:

This is a very important morning in the history of The Waves, because I think I have turned the corner & see the last lap straight ahead. I think I have got Bernard into the final stride. He will go straight on now … We are at Rodmell & I daresay I shall stay on a day or two … & finish it. O Lord & then a rest. (p. 301)

While on 20 August that year she wrote: “The Waves is I think resolving itself (I am at page 100) into a series of dramatic soliloquies. The thing is to keep them running homogeneously in & out, in the rhythm of the waves” (p. 312). Despite this optimism, and the sense that she had found viable approaches to the representation of individual characters and their narrative interactions, it was to be a year later until she was finally finished with the text.

So what are the literary and stylistic innovations of *The Waves,* with which Woolf was wrestling, and how do these relate to questions of gender and writing? In order to suggest how questions of life-writing and literary style are addressed in the novel I concentrate here on the representation of just one of the six narrators, Rhoda, and analyse some of the images and techniques that are deployed to represent her subjectivity, and to construct something like a first-person voice. We first encounter Rhoda reflecting on the aesthetic and personal meanings of the petals she is floating in a basin, the “ships” she is floating on the waves:

”All my ships are white,” said Rhoda. “I do not want red petals of hollyhocks or geraniums. I want white petals that float when I tip the basin up … And I will now rock the brown basin from side to side so that my ships may ride the waves … I hate dangling things. I hate dampish things. I hate wandering and mixing things together.” (p. 9)

The passage is striking in its insistent repetition of the first-person singular “I” while simultaneously describing a very tentative and fragile kind of subjectivity. Rhoda hates dangling, damp, wandering things, and yet occupies herself by looking into a basin of water with floating leaves that are presumably both damp and wandering as they “ride the waves”. The waves of Rhoda’s imagination seem to offer little consolation, but rather to be part of an impossible search for the fulfilment of what Rhoda “wants”. The semantic range of such “wanting” stretches between desiring (what Rhoda would like) and lacking (what she does not have), creating a particularly unstable and precarious subjectivity.

Very quickly Rhoda’s fascination with the leaves floating in a basin, and the associated impossibility of escaping from the things she “hates,” moves towards a psychological state of terror, which is closely associated with the act of writing, or rather with the failure to write:

“Now the terror is beginning … Louis writes; Susan writes; Nevile writes; Jinny writes; even Bernard has now begun to write. But I cannot write. … Look, the loop of the figure is beginning to fill with time … I myself am outside the loop; which I now join – so – and seal up, and make entire. The world is entire and I am outside of it, crying ‘Oh save me, from being blown for ever outside the loop of time!’” (p. 11)

The scene is the classroom of her childhood, and the “writing” is the response required to what appears to be an arithmetic problem. The other children hand in their answers, but Rhoda “has no answer”. The description of herself as “outside the loop” oscillates in its meanings between a literal failure to find meaning in the loops on the blackboard and the more metaphorical sense of Rhoda’s isolation and exclusion from social relationships. Rhoda’s isolated and alienated subjectivity leads her to quote herself in an effort to reassert some first-person reality as her sense of time spirals out of control. She imagines herself calling for help, asking to be saved, but fears that her subjectivity is already being blown beyond any secure narrative temporality. This narrative voice that is reduced to quoting only itself creates a powerful literary representation of a subjectivity that can ultimately be grounded neither in time nor in space.

The sense of disembodied, fractured and fragile subjectivity is built further as the novel progresses. Rhoda says:

“Now I cannot sink; cannot altogether fall through the thin sheet. Now I spread my body on this frail mattress and hang suspended. I am above the earth now. I am no longer upright, to be knocked against and damaged. … Out of me now my mind can pour. I can think of my Armadas sailing on the hard waves. I am relieved of hard contacts and collisions.” (pp. 14-15)

She can survive only by being effectively disembodied, spread thin, suspended above the earth, relieved of hard contacts. A little later in the novel the de-materialization of Rhoda becomes even more striking: “’That is my face,’ said Rhoda, ‘in the looking-glass behind Susan’s shoulder – that face is my face. But I will duck behind her to hide it, for I am not here. I have no face.’” (p. 24). And ultimately identity fails her completely, in a strange contradictory passage where she simultaneously speaks and announces her own erasure, “’I came to the puddle, I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell’” (p. 37).

The potential for literature to inhabit this contradictory space, where identity is asserted through the very act of representation that negates it, is an important preoccupation of *The Waves*. The novel seeks to imagine ways of being that can be represented as partial, incomplete, and contradictory, and to avoid doing violence to the complexity and precariousness of human subjectivity. To do this requires new modes of narrative and new formal structures for the novel. Rhoda says, “’If I could believe,’ … ‘that I should grow old in pursuit and change, I should be rid of my fear; nothing persists. One moment does not lead to another. The door opens and the tiger leaps. You did not see me come’” (p. 76). In terms of novelistic form the key insight given to Rhoda here is that “one moment does not lead to another.” The narrative structure of fiction cannot be shaped, Woolf is suggesting, by narrative causality, by one thing following another. Rather the structural associations within the novel have to be driven by metaphor, by image, by the deeper meanings that can resonate through memory, and through the material relationships between signifiers deployed across the novel as a whole: the waves, the leaves, the water, the windows and the doors.

But the connections generated in this way remain both tentative and fragile. Subjectivity lived through the temporality and metaphoric complexity of modernist fiction does not prove viable for all of the characters in *The* Waves. Rhoda does not survive to the end of the novel, and the circumstances of and reasons for her death remain cruelly under-described:

”Now to sum up,” said Bernard … “I went into the Strand, and evoked to serve as opposite to myself the figure of Rhoda, always so furtive, always with fear in her eyes, always seeking some pillar in the desert, to find which she had gone; she had killed herself. ‘Wait,’ I said putting my arm in imagination (thus we consort with our friends) through her arm … For this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am man or woman, Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, or Rhoda – so strange is the contact of one with another.” (pp. 142 and 168)

The conclusion is powerfully challenging for any notion of life-writing. If this, as Bernard concludes, is “not one life” then how can it be narrated or represented? And what kind of damage is necessarily done to any individual in the very act of writing a life?

**Virginia Woolf’s introductory letter to *Life As We Have Known It; by Cooperative Working Women* (1930):**

The final experiment in life-writing this article will discuss can be found in a letter written by Virginia Woolf in 1930. This letter formed the Introduction to a collection of letters written by members of the Women’s Cooperative Guild, *Life As We Have Known It*. The Women's Cooperative Guild had been formed in the 1880s to work for improvements in the status of women and also to promote the principles and practices of the broader Cooperative Movement. *Life As We Have Known It*, a volume of letters exploring various aspects of working women’s lives, was edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies, who had been Secretary of the Guild from 1889-1921. Davies was born in 1861, educated at Queen's College, London and Girton College, Cambridge, and in the 1880s had been employed as a social worker in London. Under her leadership, the Women’s Cooperative Guild became increasingly concerned with a range of campaigns addressing social issues that were key both for feminism and for socialism. By the 1890s the Guild not only promoted the principles of the cooperative movement but also involved itself in a number of political campaigns designed to improve the political, legal and social conditions of women, especially of working-class women. It encouraged women to join trade unions and lobbied for a minimum wage for women and for equal pay, and also campaigned on issues related to women's health. For example, *Maternity: Letters from Working Women* (G. Bell and Sons, 1915), also edited by Davies, documented through a series of letters the poor medical care received by women in pregnancy, and the economic vulnerability of women who had large families. Woolf had been an enthusiastic proponent of the publications of these letters on women’s health, writing to Davies in December 1914, “Do publish those letters. I wish they could all be in full,” and then again in February 2015, “I do hope they will be printed – with lots of photographs. They are so amazing.”[[11]](#endnote-11) The Women’s Cooperative Guild was ultimately successful in forcing an amendment to the National Health Insurance Bill that meant maternity benefit would be paid to the mother and not the father of a child, a clear legislative response to issues raised in *Maternity: Letters from Working Women*.

*Life As We Have Known It* was published by the Hogarth Press some fifteen years after *Maternity*, in 1931. By the early 1930s the Guild had grown considerably in scale and influence, with over 70,000 members and more than 1,500 branches nationally. The publication of *Life As We Have Known It* thus took place at a moment when the Guild had considerable public prominence. The volume consists of six reasonably substantial memoirs, augmented by a series of extracts from letters from members of the Guild, detailing specific aspects of their lives. Woolf had been invited by Davies to provide a preface to the volume, and she chose to do this in the form of a letter addressed to Davies herself:

Turning the pages, I began to ask myself what is this book then, if it is not a book? What quality has it? What ideas does it suggest? What old arguments and memories does it rouse in me? And as all this had nothing to do with an introduction or a preface, but brought you to mind and certain pictures from the past, I stretched my hand for a sheet of notepaper and wrote the following letter addressed not to the public but to you.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Woolf’s letter here raises questions of identity and identification, of the nature of first-person narrative, and of the genre of the letter. First of all, Woolf’s introductory letter avows itself personal: it is described as being written in response to the ways in which reading the volume brought Davies “to Woolf’s mind,” along with some unspecified, but presumably powerful, “pictures from the past.” Woolf’s letter is directly addressed to Davies, and “not to the public,” but it also appears prominently in a published text from her own press.

Woolf’s letter deploys a very complex temporality. It begins with a description of a past moment in which Woolf was invited by Davies to write a preface to *Life As We Have Known It*. The assumption is that Woolf’s temporal reference point is the present (1930) in which she is writing to Davies, which is why she needs to explain the decisions in the past that got her to the point of writing. But in the next paragraph Woolf writes, “You have forgotten (I wrote) a hot June morning in Newcastle in the year 1913” (p. xviii). So we now encounter a different temporal framing, a past tense of writing -- but what can this writing be if it is not the actual letter we are reading? Was there another version of this letter that preceded this one? Is Woolf quoting herself here? Is the current letter thus a subsequent construction based on a text to which we as the public have no access? Alongside the simultaneous invoking of a memory from Newcastle in 1913, the temporal complexity is disorientating and further undermines the stability of the letter writer’s subjectivity.

Woolf goes on to describe her memories of the Cooperative Guild Conference she attended in 1913, casting herself very much as an external, and somewhat alien, observer. Then she writes: “Meanwhile – let me try after seventeen years to sum up the thoughts that passed through the minds of your guests, who had come from London and elsewhere, not to take part, but to listen – meanwhile what was it all about? What was the meaning of it?” (p. xx). What is the force of those adverbial “meanwhiles”, and what are the temporalities that are being juxtaposed? “Meanwhile” is a wonderfully productive adverb, signifying both “during the intervening period” and “at the same time,” and Woolf deploys this semantic ambiguity productively to set up questions about the temporal and the broader social relations between the moment of Woolfs writing the letter in 1930 and the experience of a conference in 1913.

A little later in the letter, Woolf poses the question of identification and identity more starkly:

”Let’s pretend,” one said to oneself, looking at the speaker, “that I am Mrs. Giles of Durham City.” A woman of that name had just turned to address us. “I am the wife of a miner” … But after all the imagination is largely the child of the flesh. One could not be Mrs. Giles of Durham because one had never stood at the wash-tub; one’s hands had never wrung and scrubbed. (pp. xxii-xxiii)

The experiment in identification fails, but so too do Woolf’s pronouns. She oscillates between the gender-neutral and class-specific indefinite pronoun ‘one’, and what seems to be a very tentative first-person “I.” The “I” (“I am Mrs. Giles. … I am the wife of a miner”) would commit Woolf much more explicitly to an identification with the woman she is describing and performing, and she pulls back from this imagined subjectivity very clearly.

The pressure on the first-person singular pronoun (which one might think sat easily within the genre of the letter) continues as the letter progresses. Thus we find Woolf writing, “Therefore, however much we had sympathized our sympathy was largely fictitious. It was aesthetic sympathy, the sympathy of the eye and of the imagination, not of the heart and of the nerves …. Let us explain what we mean, we said” (p. xxviii). The collective “we” seems to allow Woolf some distance, in recognition of the very “failure” of the kind of sympathetic identification with another she describes, and perhaps even aspires to.

Woolf’s very particular letter then finally hands the formal and technical challenges of life-writing back to the working-class women whose writings constitute the substance of the volume. But it does so with a strong warning that these memoirs and letters are limited by their genre, and cannot offer the kind of broader vision, or forms of intersubjective identification, that one might hope to find within a literary text:

The writing, a literary critic might say, lacks detachment and imaginative breadth, even as the women themselves lacked variety and play of feature. Here are no reflections, he might object, no view of life as a whole, and no attempt to enter into the lives of other people. … These pages are only fragments. These voices are beginning only now to emerge from silence into half articulate speech. These lives are still half hidden in profound obscurity. To express even what is expressed here has been a work of labour and difficulty … But hush! You will not let me finish that sentence and therefore, with the old messages of friendship and admiration, I will make an end. (pp. xxxix and xxxxi)

The conclusion to Woolf’s letter is surely uncomfortable, though it is important to note that Woolf appears to be setting a distance between the voice of the first-person letter writer and the harsh judgments of the (male) literary critic, noting that “he might object.” Woolf “makes an end” of her letter certainly, but in doing so she also makes space for the “fragments,” the “half articulate speech” and the “obscure” lives that are written through and in the rest of *Life As We Have Known It*.

1. Virginia Woolf, “Character in Fiction,” in David Bradshaw (ed.), *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 37-54 (p. 38). The significance of the changes associated with the year 1910 for Woolf is further considered in Morag Shiach, “Periodizing Modernism,” in Peter Brooker et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), pp. 5-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, edited by Michael H. Whitworth (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 3, 1925-30*,edited by Anne Olivier Bell, assisted by Andrew McNeillie (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 5 October, 1927, p. 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” in David Bradshaw (ed.), *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, pp. 6-12 (p. 8). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Virginia Woolf, *Diary: Volume 3, 1925-30*, 28 February 1927, p. 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography,” in David Bradshaw (ed.), *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, pp. 95-100 (p. 95). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Virginia Woolf, *Diary: Volume 3*, *1925-30*, 28 November 1928, pp. 208-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Virginia Woolf, ‘The Art of Biography’ in David Bradshaw (ed.), *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, pp. 116-23 (p. 119). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This passage can be compared interestingly to Woolf’s discussion of androgyny in the final chapter of *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, edited by David Bradshaw (Oxford: OUP World’s Classics, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II: 1912-1922*, edited by Nigel Nicolson, assisted by Joanne Trautmann (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), pp. 54 and 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Virginia Woolf, “Introductory Letter” in *Life As We Have Known It; by Cooperative Working Women*, edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies (London: Virago, 1977), p. xvii. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)