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When the Self Portrays the Self¹: Composite Portraiture

The portrait is a form of biography.
Arnold Newman

Anxiety over wearing the bottoms of one's trousers rolled,² over pursuing heroically the wearing of clothes wisely and well,³ or indulging in a play of masquerades rejecting naturalness altogether, but also apprehension about walking naked, discarding embroidered coats altogether, haunted most modernist selves.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, notions of portraiture were changing in response to tensions in/forming the carrying of new types of disciplined and mobile bodies. The increasing specularity of culture and speed of life, new emerging technologies of self-display, self-imaging, and publicity reinvented dramatically expressions of subjectivities. The engagement in the complicated enterprise of recording appearance, a stratum of subjectivity always in the circulation of looks, was thus linked with intense attention paid to creative construction not of a defining unitary summative image creating an apotheosis of a person, but of a production of multiplicity of images,⁴ or accumulation of collections of frag-

¹ It is my transposition of Virginia Woolf's image of the self speaking to the self. The revealing passage in *Monday or Tuesday* reads like this: "But when the self speaks to the self, who is speaking? — the entombed soul, the spirit driven in, in, in to the central catacomb; the self that took the veil and left the world — a coward perhaps, yet somehow beautiful, as it flits with its lantern restlessly up and down the dark corridors" (1921: n.p.; <http://www.bartleby.com/85/>. Date of access: October 2010).

² As we overhear it in Prufrock's monologue.

³ I am indebted here to Thomas Carlyle, who in *Sartor Resartus* describes the modern figure of the dandy as totally dedicated "to this one object, the wearing of Clothes wisely and well" (1983: 188).

⁴ Hunter suggests that Bergson's "The Cinematographical Mechanism of Thought and The Mechanistic Illusion" had a possible influence on modernist writers, especially Lawrence and Rosenfeld (1987: 150).

mented images. The first post-Impressionist exhibition organized by Roger Fry in 1910, the year Woolf famously identified with a profound change in human character, argued for creative ways of seeing a subject, ways some of its shocked reviewers characterized as anarchic.

Portraying others and portraying oneself, especially photographically, is always in itself a composite sort of activity inextricably connected with other people. In modernism, the new types of portraiture objectified subjects not in full-blown, static or sharply-contoured ways, but in a sketchy, inventive, strikingly abstract, serial and also collective ways. Paul Strand aptly summarized this new direction in photographic portraiture as a “record of innumerable, elusive and constantly changing states of being manifested physically” (in Hunter 1987: 100). On a more dramatic note, Virginia Woolf, speaking of literary valuations observes: “Movement and change are the essence of our being; rigidity is death; conformity is death: let us say what comes into our heads, repeat ourselves, contradict ourselves, fling out the wildest nonsense, and follow the most fantastic fancies without caring what the world does or thinks or says” (1968: vol. 3, 22).

In the same essay, Woolf acknowledges that only life and order matter (1968: 22). Clothes impose shape, constitute the frame out of which the body, though not consubstantial with clothes, is made visible. Clothes configure choices and details and, like the body, are orchestrated in images aiming to portray the ever-elusive sense of numberless states of subjecthood of modernist artists. John Jervis argues that clothes as signifiers of identity are both “constructing and perfecting the self,” they may reveal “often involuntarily, an already constituted self” (1998: 121), may become facts of existence. Thus whether “one wears silk stockings summer and winter” or “has never worn spectacles”⁵ is always more than a fashion statement. In the twenties and thirties, Elsa Schiaparelli’s and Coco Chanel’s collections of imaginative vestimentary designs performed⁶ most fascinating experiments with the idiosyncrasies of appearance and of character. They probed the ways of showing the body in public and ways of questioning their and their subjects’ terms of self-knowing and self-expression.⁷

But as Giorgio Agamben argues, there is also another dimension of the experience with clothing. “Being in fashion ... entails certain ‘ease,’ a certain quality

⁵ Examples Virginia Woolf uses in her essay “Montaigne” (in vol. 3 of her *Collected Essays*) to place such facts against the changing facts of imagination (1968: 25).

⁶ Schiaparelli’s famous designs produced in tandem with Salvador Dalí, and especially her *Circus Collection* from 1938, were all about play and illusion in fashion. “Wearing her clothes, suggests Evans and Thornton, a woman ‘creates herself a spectacle; but the moment she displays herself she also disguises herself’” (in Jervis 1998: 139).

⁷ Virginia Woolf’s face, for example, despite her strong objection to claims of truthfulness in photography, and her fear of being captured by anyone, did in the end become a commodity. She herself agreed to pose for *Vogue* in 1924, in one of her mother’s Victorian dresses, she also wrote five articles for this hybrid magazine, a “*mélange* that defied its own time and its covers.” *Vogue* exhibited modernist graphics, alluding to Brancusi, Modigliani and Picasso” (Macedo 2003: 137).

of being out-of-phase or out-of-date.” Because fashion likes to “cite,” it allows relationships which connect with “other times,” making relevant even the least relevant moments from the past: “It can therefore tie together that which it has inexorably divided — recall, re-voke, and revitalize that which it had declared dead” (2009: 49–50). Most commentators seem to agree that the portraits modernist artists produced at the time did not aim to capture the whole man, but often attempted to render personality, physical image, and the subjects’ awareness of being recorded.

This paper sets to present the composite portrait as a development of Francis Galton’s *fin de siècle* photographic technique, which found its literary analogue, among others, in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography*. I am going to draw on Max Saunders’s supreme study of its origins, bringing out not so much the connections and reasons for the migration of this method to literary texts, but more so the less noticed aspects of the function of clothing, illustrating how composite portraiture bears upon autobiographical expression. I am going to ask how clothing, identified by Baudelaire as “a relative circumstantial element” which is “like the amusing, teasing, appetite-whetting coating of the divine cake” (1998: 103) flashes out infinitely variable and always fugitive conceptions of identity, and how it helps to momentarily fuse arbitrary and necessarily composite collections of individual features and attributes. In Galtonian composite portrait, individuality, character, personality, even nature, become a fantastic and richer impersonal multiplicity, “many thousand”⁸ often across time and space in what, though often multimedial, is fundamentally one frame.

Composite portraits’ emphasis on similarity complicates the exacerbating question of summative personal expression. Living not in remembering, but in moving,⁹ modernist subjects viewed clothes as shaping forms capable of expressing ever-present change, “the transient, the fleeting, the contingent” (Baudelaire 1998: 107) not as a whole, not in its vitality but in the dress of the day, with the self often disappearing into a photographic realm. Because clothes touch the body, “functioning simultaneously as its substitute and its mask” (Hollander 1993: 236), they are carriers of social meanings connecting the public world with what is most inner and intimate. Offering thus a rich texture of references, clothes “mobilize qualities such as substance, form, colour, tactility, movement, rigidity, luminosity” (Barthes, 236). In the study of individual lives and also group lives, they really are a “paradigmatic emblem of changeability” (in Jervis 1998: 120). The wealth of possible configurations makes clothes an interesting aspect to keep in mind in the study of the making of composite portraits.

Certainly not only modernist subjects reveal consciousness in orchestrations of clothes. But conceived in metaphoric, painterly and most of all photographic

⁸ Woolf’s narrator in *Orlando* says: “all having lodgment at one time or another in human spirit” (1956: 308).

⁹ Gertrude Stein thus identifies the modernist “generation” (109).

portraits, modernist subjects are often made visible dressed in ways conjoining elusively both the intelligible and the unpredictable as well as the fantastic. It was Gertrude Stein who first asserted the paramount importance of the portrait genre in modernism, of a new way of making portraits. Her essay "Portraits and Repetition" published in 1935, highlights the significance of motion, of accumulation, of construction of inventory of moments and appearances. Wendy Steiner in her study of the portrait, argues that Stein "has provided us with probably the fullest theoretical and practical exploration of the enigmatic possibilities of the genre" (1987: 173). Stein offered a new style of portraiture based on what she felt was "a perfect equivalent of her perception of a person's innermost being." What she sought in portraiture was not knowledge of the person but an "unmediated awareness" of that person. Stein's "Portrait of Tom Eliot": "Silk and wool, silken wool, woolen silk" (in Beaton 1979: 2) or Stein's famous first verbal portrait of Picasso, illustrated her serial principle of founding images upon images, of movement shared by the subjects who wanted to portray all "what the world in which they are living is doing" (1967: 106).

One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming. (1967: 213)

The result, complains Wendy Steiner, is the similarity of early portraits created based on her principles. Her style and her preoccupation with self-examination stand out more than the subjects in Stein's portraits (1967: 174). Despite the validity of this comment, which illustrates also the insurmountable barrier between the visual and verbal arts, Stein's portraits continued to intrigue as a unique proposition to meet the new ways of seeing and looking at the subject in the rapidly changing world. They certainly offered new ways of conflating the subjective and the objective. What emerges from her thinking on and practice of portraiture is an assumption that portraying people you know, you can empty yourself "completely," of all they were by assimilating them into the continuous present of portrait writing. Her comparison of this continuous present to the structure of film, in which the frames simulate motion and life so there is no memory of any other thing and there is only "that thing existing" (1967: 105) illustrated also the difficult struggle of modernist writing to capture the provisional.

Virginia Woolf, like Stein, could say she was interested in "any one" or in the lives of the obscure and the lives of the mediocre, as the titles of her collections of portraits show. "Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography[?]," (1968: vol. 3, 125), she asked and answered with countless creative biographical sketches of those lives. Stein says: "I must find out what is moving inside them that makes them them, and I must find out how by the thing moving excitedly inside in me can make a portrait of them" (1967: 110). Woolf thought that "for the ordinary eye, the English unaesthetic eye" not the cinema

with its “hubble-bubble, swarm and chaos” but photography could offer a better, more natural alliance in picture making¹⁰ (1968: vol. 2, 268). Always worried about the inadequacy if not artificiality of the visual image,¹¹ Woolf never tired of looking for new ways to intensify its rigidity, as her intense and long photographic activity shows. “After all,” she asks, “how many people have succeeded in drawing themselves with a pen?” Hard as it is “talking of oneself, following one’s own vagaries, giving the whole map, weight, colour, and circumstances of the soul in its variety, its imperfection,” creating a good portrait is almost impossible. The pen, she complains, “is a rigid instrument; it can say very little,” it is “dictatorial too,” changing not just the appearance, but more importantly, the character of people portrayed (1968: vol. 3, 19).

That said, Woolf devises a way of overcoming the supreme difficulty of communicating herself in a technique of opacity, as she calls her way of self-representing through others. Most openly, she confronts her attempts and superimposes them onto the “irrepressible vivacity”¹² and the masterful art of life and self-portraiture of Michel de Montaigne. Woolf’s essayistic writing is a composite writing where the essayist essays herself intersubjectively through gathering intimacies of Montaigne’s elliptic, formless self in order to explore and communicate a hidden stream of her own troubled nature. Montaigne in his monumental *Essais* indicates to his reader: “I want to appear in my simple, natural, and ordinary dress, without strain or artifice; for it is myself that I portray” (1993: 23). In the essay form, Woolf finds a satisfying frame for self-expression. As “self-portrait and book of the self” (Gualtieri 1998: 52), the essay accommodates her attempts to display her self, to make it visible, to exteriorize it, to project it — to write herself down on paper. Looking for vital connections, she frequently reminds us that we live in the mirrors of others.¹³

Francis Galton (1822–1911), an extraordinary Victorian polymath, a cousin of Charles Darwin, worked on a photographic way to address not questions of individual presentation but problems that he felt needed more scientific proof. Composite portraiture offered what he felt was a method for establishing the nature of cultural categories like the ill or the criminal. As he described it in his numerous publications in *The Photographic Journal*, and *Journal of the Anthropological*

¹⁰ It is not an accident that both writers, living in the period of the cinema, address expanding specularity of culture. In the twenties women “were devotees of Kodaks,” “active domestic photographers” and also movie goers. They constituted as many as “87 per cent of the film audiences” (in Humm 2003: 4).

¹¹ Woolf in a number of her autobiographical texts like “A Sketch,” comments that the film on the camera reaches the eye only and is therefore imprecise and superficial. To understand anything, she says, we need more than crude visual information, an intertwining perspective which only good writing, verbal pictures, can provide.

¹² Like Stein’s “vibration” and “intensity,” Woolf’s “vivacity,” “pulse and rhythm,” but also “intensity” belong to frequently, almost obsessively, used words.

¹³ Woolf’s highly diverse exploration of this assumption can be traced in her attempts at portraying others in photographic portraits but also essays written as portraits.

Institute, his goal was to obtain a generalized picture by optically superimposing two or more pictures by means of a stereoscope. “A composite portrait,” he says, “represents the picture that would rise before the mind’s eye of a man who had the gift of pictorial imagination in exalted degree” (1979: 134). Galton liked his results so much that he insisted that the composites were better looking, better defined than single, always deficient photographs. A composite portrait of a serial murderer or a family member, while morally highly suspicious, as Saunders says, was nevertheless a “suggestive idea for artistic and literary notions of representation, and particularly for thinking about the relation between particularities and generalities, between individuals and generals” (2010: 236).

Composite portraiture, which comes before the modernists experiments in self-presentation, is a hybrid figure with enormous creative potential allowing the expression not of a contained unitary subjectivity but of assemblies, of multiplicity, gathering connected and also contradictory personae. Since Galton introduced it, the form has been used by many writers in both fictional and non-fictional literary portraiture, impersonating diverse forms of writing like biography and comprising topographical and characterological features. Saunders’s valuable example of a literary use of a composite portraiture comes from its experienced practitioner Ford Madox Ford, who in *The Spirit of the People*, trying to define Englishness, speaks of the figure of composite portraiture as a “sort of common denominator” which produces “salient points, toning down exaggerations.” Very much in favour of this method, Ford believed that it produced “odd but quite strong individuality” (in Saunders 2010: 236). Saunders says that Ford applies the method to “frustrate biography” and open it up to autobiographical readings. He says Ford is interested in expressing “the relationship of the author to his work.” So presenting a novelist like Turgenev or Conrad, Ford recommends using a superimposition of the author’s single self with “other, imaginary selves.” He says that “to know Conrad you had to read all his books and then to fuse innumerable Conrads that are in all of them into what used to be called a composite photograph” (in Saunders 2010: 238). In *Portraits from Life*, on the other hand, Ford uses a composite portrait of a writer, fusing not imaginative but real details of his life with his work. As a collection, this book, says Saunders, illustrates another use of a composite portrait as it superimposes portraits of favourite writers to create a composite self-portrait (2010: 240).

Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) is an unrealistic fiction, or “truthful; but fantastic”¹⁴ book about a character who lives for three hundred years and who in a magical way changes sex from male to female while remaining essentially one, “undoubtedly one and the same person” (1956: 188) with “the same brooding meditative temper, the same love of animals and nature, the same passion for the country and the season” (1956: 237). The character is also an identifiable real person, Virginia’s friend, Vita Sackville-West. The book is about the life of a fig-

¹⁴ Woolf’s description from her diary (in Saunders 2010: 471).

ure illustrated with her pictures in which she is dressed as Orlando but in which there are also Vita's ancestors and other imaginary figures.¹⁵ *Orlando* thus offers a striking fusion of unstable fact and creative fiction, of photographs and realistic descriptions. The incongruity of its flamboyant subjectivity of fancy¹⁶ surprises especially if we remember what Woolf had to say about the truth of a person being discoverable not in hard facts like photography, or records of their lives, not in a traditional form of "biography" associated with Harold Nicholson and Lytton Strachey, but in the realm of the rainbow of the inner life.¹⁷ To depict the truthfulness of a life and personality of a friend, Woolf decided to manipulate not only facts but also forms of life-writing and readers' expectations. Saunders suggests that this feeling accompanied Woolf in her "resistance to the idea of how she might herself be portrayed as a biographical subject" (2010: 449).

Saunders also shows that *Orlando* is more than an excellent example of composite portrait of a person, it is, he says, a portrait of a transpersonal identity as it "is itself a composite, of multiple times and periods, multiple people, multiple selves, multiple genders, multiple literary forms" with Orlando as a composite figure *per se* combining all figures including Vita and her family members (2010: 470). Woolf's narrator points to that sense of multiplicity and serial arrangement, "These selves of which we are built up," she says:

one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own, call them what you will ... for everybody can multiply from his own experience the different terms which his different selves have made him — and some are too wildly ridiculous to be mentioned in print. (1956: 308–309)

Bringing in this multiplicity of selves together, superimposing them in one frame of the book, the "fictional identity *over*"¹⁸ a real one" represents, according to Saunders, "the real novelty of the book" (2010: 478). Additionally, as an "imaginary *self*-portraiture,"¹⁹ Saunders adds, it "triangulates" the autobiographical project revealing Sackville-West, Woolf, and the reader (480).

In biographies we expect images and photographs to be used in order to capture the content, to anchor or even double its meaning. The photographs often serve as additional information on the relationship between clothes and gender, history

¹⁵ The renewed 1956 edition of *Orlando* by Leonard Woolf contains a small gallery of eight "illustrations," photographs of paintings and flamboyant photographs of Vita captioned: "Orlando as a Boy," "The Russian Princess as a Child," "The Archduchess Harriet," "Orlando as Ambassador," "Orlando on her return to England," "Orlando about the year 1840," "Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire," and "Orlando at the present time."

¹⁶ Saunders refers to *Orlando* and *Flush* as "biographical fantasy fictions" (2010: 449).

¹⁷ See Ray Monk's "This fictitious life: Virginia Woolf on biography and reality" for an excellent study of Woolf's new biography.

¹⁸ Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Saunders's rigorous analysis includes especially discussion of issues of bisexuality and writing as both Orlando's and Woolf's "chief characteristics" (2010: 479), but the critic in no way implies that Orlando's life is modeled on Woolf's.

and privacy. But the eight “illustrations” inserted in the book provide false evidence. “The Russian Princess as a Child,” for instance, is a photo of Woolf’s niece Angelica Bell, who is dressed in a fancy dress but is not a Russian princess, nor is Vita Sackville-West a likeness of Orlando “about the year 1840.” Wussow identifies it to be the photographs of Vita taken when she was awarded Hawthornden Prize in 1927. The captions beneath the portraits lead the reader to accept their identification testifying to Orlando’s life. By multiplying not biographic evidence but what Wussow calls “bogus signs,” they are inserted to confuse, to deny clarification, and to frustrate the genre expectations. The book promising in its subtitle a fixture, a certainty — a biography, provides instead a composite portrait of a subject that eludes capture. The result is, as Saunders acknowledges it, that “The photographs pull the text’s fantasy into the real; the text pulls the photograph’s reality into fantasy” (2010: 479). Like Ezra Pound’s experiments with vortoscope, the book fragments appearance and human personality into shams.

Finally, clothes in *Orlando* constitute the outer layer of superimpositions, patterning themselves on the self. It is their liberatory possibilities that Woolf with her masterful graphic forms of language explores and stretches into countless sartorial creations to accommodate the dynamism of metamorphoses. Posing and rehearsing imaginary selves, Orlando puts on different costumes realizing that he/she is worn by them. “Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world’s view of us” (1956: 187). Orlando uses clothes in search of life and to experience the fantasy of multiplicity of lives, “seventy-six different times all ticking at once” (1956: 308) across vast temporal climate defying fixture. But in his/her transmigrations, it is clothes as potent surface agents that modulate their directions. After all, the narrator concludes, they “make our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking” (1956: 188).

The modernist proliferation of inclusive narrative and visual portraits reveals not only the expected interplay of the sitter and the artist but also the multiplicity of other, often imaginary characters and accessories. The differences clothes make for *Orlando*, their power to revitalize outline the composite portraiture’s potential to produce a mirage, a quality of phantasmagoric pleasure and confusing excess, which challenges the rigidity and seriousness of its older forms.

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