

Virginia Woolf's *Flush*:

Fictional Metabiography/Metabiographical Fiction¹⁾

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In 1932, Virginia Woolf published a review of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's epic poem 'Aurora Leigh', lamenting thusly: '... fate has not been kind to Mrs Browning as a writer. Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place ... Elizabeth, so much more loudly applauded during her lifetime, falls farther and farther behind' (202). This view actually reflected the then-current reception of the works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. By that time, although her romance with Robert Browning had continued to be fairly well known, her poetry had become less read. According to Sandra Donaldson, early twentieth-century interest in Barrett Browning was limited mainly to bibliographical studies (2–3). It is Woolf who 'trouble[d] to put her in her place'. Interestingly, however, her view on 'Aurora Leigh' is not completely favourable, but is rather ambivalent. She calls this work a 'novel-poem', considering it while not 'the masterpiece', certainly 'a masterpiece in embryo', by which she means 'a work whose genius floats diffused and fluctuating in some pre-natal stage waiting the final stroke of creative power to bring it into being' (208). The reason for this is 'the sense of the writer's presence', which she finds at once 'a sign ... of imperfection in an artist' and 'a sign ... that life has impinged upon art more than life should' (205–06). She goes on to remark: 'Aurora the fictitious seems to be throwing light upon Elizabeth the actual' (205–06). At around this point, Woolf started to write *Flush: A Biography* (1933), inspired by two of Elizabeth Barrett

Browning's poems on her spaniel, 'To Flush, My Dog' and 'Flush, or Faunus', as well as by Barrett Browning's published correspondence with her future husband, Robert Browning. This work is not a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself, but a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog Flush, tracing the events of his life from his birth in the household of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's friend Mary Russell Mitford through his days in London to his final days in Italy. The reader sees the city life of London, class differences, and Victorian morality through the fictitious point of view of the dog, themes frequently explored by Woolf in her fiction and essays. The dog is also described as if perceiving and meditating, for which Woolf adopts some of the narrative techniques employed in her modern experimental fiction. Consequently, *Flush* differs completely from traditional biographies in many ways, making it possible to categorise it as fictional metabiography, or perhaps meta-biographical fiction.

'Metabiography' is a newly emerging concept. Neither the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2009) nor the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* (2001) includes this term. As far as this author can discern, the term was first used sometime around 2002. The book review of Patricia Fara's *Newton: The Making of Genius* (2002), which appeared in the 21 November 2003 issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, calls this biography a 'metabiography'. The editorial of the inaugural issue of *Life Writing* published in 2004 predicts the emergence of 'a new category ...

that will be called “metabiography”. Meanwhile, Nicolaas A. Rupke’s *Alexander von Humboldt* published in 2005 has “A Metabiography” as a subtitle. In the same year, Ansgar Nünning entitles his article ‘Fictional Metabiographies and Metaautobiographies’, in which he presents four characteristics of metabiographical writing, namely, ‘to cross the boundaries between fact and fiction’, ‘to blur genre distinctions’, ‘to be read as an allusion to the increasing degree of self-reflexivity’, and ‘to reveal more about the individual biographers than they do about their elusive subjects’ (195–96), and from the standpoint of these characteristics discusses works of postmodern metabiographical fiction such as Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* (1987), Julian Barnes’ *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), and A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1994) and *The Biographer’s Tale* (2001). Hence, what is meant by ‘metabiography’ seems to be somewhat equivocal; however, these examples of how the term is used point to at least two types of metabiography: a biography about other biographies, such as Fara’s *Newton* and Rupke’s *Humboldt*, and a biography after traditional biographies, as explored in Nünning’s article.

This essay aims to show that Woolf’s modernist approach to an actual writer—Elizabeth Barrett Browning—in *Flush* should open the way to the second type of metabiography, that is, a biography after traditional biographies, and even to postmodern metabiographical fiction. Attempts at a generic classification of *Flush* have been controversial. Michael Lackey articulates that neither Woolf’s *Flush* nor Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* should be considered biographical fiction (or biofiction); he rather considers the former ‘a version of the historical novel’, the latter ‘a version of fictional biography’ (14). And yet he admits, ‘these hybrid works pose unique challenges to our definitions and have contributed to the aesthetic and genre innovations that made contemporary biofiction both possible and popular’ (14). In contrast, Julia Novak counts

Flush as one of the six works of biographical fiction that represent Elizabeth Barrett Browning as the ‘noble woman’.²⁾ Further, she illuminates Woolf’s ‘metabiographical stance’ (94). David Herman, too, sees *Flush* as ‘a metabiographical text’, with a focus on ‘an inextricable entanglement not just of male, female, upper-, and lower-class life histories, but also of human and nonhuman ways of encountering the world’ (547). When we examine Woolf’s *Flush* in light of Nünning’s argument in ‘Fictional Metabiographies and Metaautobiographies’, we can see that this work actually bears some similarities to postmodern metabiographical fiction. Although Nünning does not consider when and how metabiography arose as a genre, it would seem that its origin goes back to the period of modernism and the emergence of the so-called ‘New Biography’ developed by modernist biographers, in particular Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicolson. Woolf had very close relationships with both men, and was greatly influenced by the new trend of life writing they had developed.³⁾ This essay will first demonstrate how Woolf came up with the new type of biography through her personal and literary relationships with Strachey and Nicolson, and then examine the metabiographical facets that *Flush* displays with reference to both Strachey and Nicolson’s efforts and Nünning’s arguments for postmodern metabiography and fictional metabiography.

Woolf’s *Flush* can be considered as the outcome of her interactions with Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicolson. According to David Herman, ‘Woolf designed *Flush* as something of a spoof or parody—in particular, a send up of Lytton Strachey’s biographical methods’ (550), while her ‘biographical practices in *Flush* were also shaped by Harold Nicolson’s radical experiments with the conventions of life writing in his 1927 book *Some People*’ (551). It is said that Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918) marked a turning point in the history of biographical writing.⁴⁾ His impact on the biographical writing of the time

must be clarified when comparing his ideas and practice to those of Victorian biographers, whose works typically exhibited considerable length and elaborate detail. In the preface to *Eminent Victorians*, he insists that it is 'futile to hope to tell even a précis of the truth about the Victorian age' (5). All he can do, he believes, is 'to examine and elucidate certain fragments of the truth' (6). For him, 'the first duty of the biographer' is to 'preserve ... a becoming brevity' (6). The 'second duty' is 'to lay bare the facts of the case, as he understands them' (6).

However, as Ray Monk argues, 'Strachey was not abandoning or weakening the robust distinction between fact and fiction' (4). It is Harold Nicolson who blurred the boundaries of fact and fiction to a much greater extent. In *The Development of English Biography* (1927), Nicolson reacted positively to Strachey, viewing him as a biographer who had ended 'pure biography' and who was ushering in the future of biography. At the same time, he predicted that biographies would in future take a different form by mixing fact and fiction. In fact, Nicolson tried to execute this in *Some People* (1927). *Some People* consists of nine short sketches of people that Nicolson knew in certain phases of his life. The introduction to this work states that it was 'initially conceived as a *jeu d'esprit*, a diversion written to entertain his friends'. A reviewer from *The New York Times* called it '[a] peculiar amalgam of autobiography and fiction, memoir and imaginative improvisation' which 'mirror[s] his [Nicolson's] own development, resulting in a narrative that reads like a Bildungsroman'. Consequently, Monk concludes that '[the] book was, and remains, hard to classify' (3), and yet it can be regarded as one of the earliest modernist examples of metabiography, crossing genre distinctions and blurring fact/fiction boundaries.

Notably, Woolf wrote a very positive review of *Some People* in 'The New Biography' in the 30 October 1928 issue of the *New York Herald Tribune*. After positively evaluating Strachey's

new attitude to biographical writing in comparison to that of his precursors, such as Sidney Lee, James Boswell, and Victorian biographers, Woolf shifts her attention to Nicolson's treatment of fact and fiction: '*Some People* is not fiction because it has the substance, the reality of truth. It is not biography because it has the freedom, the artistry of fiction' (98). When she wrote this review, she was working on *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). Orlando, the eponymous character, was modelled on Woolf's then intimate friend, Vita Sackville-West, the wife of Nicolson. Three years later, Woolf started to write *Flush*, publishing it in 1933.

Interestingly, Woolf, like Nicolson, wrote both *Orlando* and *Flush* during her 'writer's holiday' (*Diary* iii 177). She remarked on 14 March 1927, after completing *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), two of her modernist masterpieces, and before beginning *Orlando*: 'For the truth is I feel the need of an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely considered. I want to kick up my heels and be off. I want to embody all these innumerable little ideas and tiny stories which flash into my mind at all seasons. I think this will be great fun to write' (*Diary* iii 131). A similar urge to write for fun came over her after finishing *The Waves* (1931) and before starting *Flush*: 'I was so tired after the Waves, that I lay in the garden and read the Browning love letters, and the figure of their dog made me laugh so I couldn't resist making him a Life' (*Letters* v 161–62).

In fact, *Flush* embodies what can be called fictional metabiography or metabiographical fiction. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Ansgar Nünning has detailed four characteristics of metabiographies, the first three of which can be observed in *Flush*, namely, 'to cross the boundaries between fact and fiction', 'to blur genre distinctions', and 'to be read as an allusion to the increasing degree of self-reflexivity'. How Woolf crosses fact/fiction

boundaries in *Flush* is most clearly observed in an episode where Flush is stolen by dog snatchers. In Woolf's fictitious version, Flush is stolen by Mr Taylor on Tuesday afternoon, the 2nd of September (54), and is retrieved on the night of Friday 5th September (66). The year is set as 1846. According to Margaret Forster's biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Flush was, in reality, stolen three times: on 13th September 1843, in October 1844, and on 2nd September 1846. As shown in Woolf's note,⁵⁾ she knew these biographical facts and combined them into one episode. In the scene in which Flush returns home, Woolf once again mixed fact and fiction while quoting from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's letter to Robert Browning: 'But the door opened to admit the letter, something rushed in also; —Flush. He made straight for his purple jar. It was filled three times over; and still he drank. Miss Barrett watched the dazed, bewildered dirty dog, drinking. "He was not so enthusiastic about seeing me as I expected", she remarked. No, there was only one thing in the world he wanted—clean water' (67). This description shows a striking contrast to Margaret Forster's strictly fact-based explanation of the same event in her biography; Elizabeth Barrett Browning's brother Sette went to Taylor, paid him a considerable number of guineas, and brought Flush back home (176). The comparison between these two versions of the same event shows that Woolf's description of Flush gulping water endlessly helps the reader to conjure up a more realistic and impressive picture of the scene.

As Herman observes,⁶⁾ blurring genre distinctions in *Flush* is caused by the adoption of the same innovative literary techniques that Woolf uses in her experimental fiction, such as narrative subjectivity, stream of consciousness, and free indirect discourse. After he is stolen and loses consciousness, Flush comes to in a dark, filthy room. It is notable that narrative focus is given to Flush: 'He [Flush] found himself in complete darkness. He found himself in chillness and

dampness' (55). Then, he sees things in the room from his lower perspective, such as 'broken chairs, a tumbled mattress, ... [g]reat boots and draggled skirts kept stumbling in and out, ... [f]lies buzzed on scraps of old meat, ... and 'animals of different kinds' (55). Woolf also elucidates what Flush is thinking and how he is feeling by using the techniques of stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse. On the third day after he is dognapped, Flush meditates: '—to what fate? Was it better to be killed or to stay here? Which was worse—this life or that death?' (58). Then, he suddenly remembers 'the scent of eau-de-Cologne' in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's bedroom in Wimpole Street, the scent that 'he had detested' (58). 'Fragments of old memories began turning in his head' (58) until the sound of the wind brings him back to his current, terrible situation, and back to the feeling of being 'forgotten and deserted' (59). Thus, Woolf presents one of the most crucial and dramatic events of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's life through Flush's perspectives and perceptions (senses of sight, smell, and touch), for which she exercises her full imaginative and creative powers.

The last and indispensable metabiographical element in *Flush* is the increasing degree of self-reflexivity.⁷⁾ It is obvious that Woolf was conscious of the art of biographical writing. While she took on a traditional form of biography, she looked at it from a detached, objective point of view. This is most clearly observed at the beginning of *Flush*, where the biographer tries to identify the origin and etymology of the word 'spaniel', but in vain: 'It is universally admitted that the family from which the subject of this memoir claims descent is one of the greatest antiquity. Therefore it is not strange that the origin of the name itself is lost in obscurity. Many million years ago the country which is now called Spain seethed uneasily in the ferment of creation' (5). It would seem natural for a traditional biography to have similar opening sentences.

Paula Backscheider scrutinized thirteen prize-winning biographies in order to present the following significant statistics: 84% start with a description of the family, while some others trace back to the parents or grandparents of the biographee. It is this standard style that Woolf parodies by highlighting the impossibility and absurdity of identifying the origin of the word 'spaniel'. A parody, as Backscheider says, is one of 'the tactics available to creative writers' but is 'not acceptable in biography' (110–11), and so, it is possible to take Woolf's parodic tone, observed at the beginning of the book, as another example of her creativity. In addition, Woolf refers to 'a biographer' three times in the text and twice in the notes. For instance, when writing about *Flush*'s breeding, the biographer suddenly shows up to explain: 'Such conduct in a man even, in the year 1842, would have called for some excuse from a biographer' (12). Traditional biographers neither appear in the biographies they write, nor confess the difficulties that they face in writing.

After publishing *Flush*, however, Woolf changed her view of biographical writing. In 'The Art of Biography', which first appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* in April 1939, she re-evaluated the 'distinction between biography and fiction' (117). *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940), which Woolf was tackling at the time, reflects this re-evaluation; it takes a traditional form, presenting Fry's major life events between birth and death in chronological order, quoting from his own writings and his family and friends' memoirs, and trying to avoid any subjective comments from the biographer. In conclusion, *Orlando* and *Flush*, Woolf's less serious and more avocational works, written under the influence of Strachey and Nicolson, are idiosyncratic enough to be represented as the modernist biographical works that led to the emergence of fictional metabiography and metabiographical fiction.

Notes

- 1) This is a largely rewritten and thoroughly revised

version of the paper previously presented at the 2016 Annual Conference of the British Association for Victorian Studies at Cardiff University, UK, in September 2016. The research is supported by JSPS KAKENHI, Grant Number 16K02446.

- 2) The other works of biographical fiction discussed by Novak are C. Lenanton's *Miss Barrett's Elopement*, Helen Elmira Waite's *How Do I Love Thee*, Constance Buel Burnett's *The Silver Answer*, Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid*, and Laura Fish's *Strange Music*.
- 3) See, for instance, Herman (547).
- 4) Richard Altick comments, 'After *Eminent Victorians*, biography could never be the same' (281); John Sutherland calls *Eminent Victorians* 'the biography that changed biography' (xviii), while William C. Lubenow calls it the 'revolution in biographical writing' (18). For this information, I am indebted to Dr Max Jones, Senior Lecturer in Modern History of Manchester University.
- 5) 'As a matter of fact, *Flush* was stolen three times; but the unities seem to require that the three stealings shall be compressed into one. The total sum paid by Miss Barrett to the dog-stealers was £20' (*Flush* 109).
- 6) Herman muses on 'how her [Woolf's] use of the [narrative] technique bears on the generic classification of the text (biography or fiction?)' (555).
- 7) Herman also points out '*Flush*'s self-reflexive engagement with biography's conventions' (549); 'Woolf's reflexive engagement with biographical methods in *Flush* harmonizes with ongoing efforts to retool ethnographic and life history research to accommodate nonhuman ways of living' (560).

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