

MAPPING THE UNSTABLE SELF
IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MEMOIR "A SKETCH OF THE PAST"

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ABSTRACT

In her memoir “A Sketch of the Past,” Virginia Woolf takes a different approach from traditional life writing norms by offering a more philosophical exploration of the self. In this unfinished work, Woolf criticizes conventional life writing for focusing too much on public achievements and socially significant events. She argues that many memoirs are “failures” because “they leave out the person to whom things happened” (65). In her own memoir, Woolf strives for a deeper engagement with private introspection and lived experience, asserting the significance of both aspects of identity. She suggests that the self is composed of moments of being, non-being, and shocks in equal measure. In this paper, I engage with all three types of moments to illustrate how Woolf represents the self as unstable, always in relation and in flux. Additionally, I identify three key aspects of those moments that are crucial for understanding the dynamics of selfhood: mystical, temporal, and intersubjective. My analysis of these dimensions is central to understanding how Woolf situates the self within a larger experience that encompasses but also transcends the immediate material world. This paper is organized into three sections: the first explores Woolf’s mystical experiences and her view of the self as interconnected with a larger reality; the second addresses the temporal aspects of selfhood, highlighting its fluidity across time; and the third investigates the intersubjective nature of the self, which is influenced by societal and historical forces. Woolf’s representation of the self as a composite of mystical, temporal, and intersubjective experiences challenges traditional biographical and autobiographical norms, pioneering a new approach to representing a life.

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Mapping the Unstable Self in Virginia Woolf's Memoir "A Sketch of the Past"

Although Virginia Woolf often urged women she knew to document their life stories¹ it was not until April 1939, at the age of 59, that she began her own autobiographical work, "A Sketch of the Past." Woolf wrote the last entry to her unfinished memoir in November 1940, just months before her suicide in March 1941. A devoted and avid reader of memoirs and a biographer herself—she was concurrently working on writing *Roger Fry: A Biography*, published in 1940—Woolf was well-versed in the genre. In "A Sketch," Woolf argues that many memoirs are "failures" because "they leave out the person to whom things happened" (65), criticizing the fact that many works of life writing often become so engrossed in external events that they neglect the individual's lived experience of those events. Woolf questioned the purpose of an autobiography that prioritizes socially significant events at the expense of revealing the subject's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. For her own memoir, Woolf was not interested in simply chronicling what happened to her or what she achieved. Instead, she aimed to reflect on moments of deep significance, marked by their powerful emotional impact and the intensity of their effect on her. However, "A Sketch" goes even deeper, transcending the ostensible division between the external and internal elements that make up a life as she seeks to articulate her philosophy on the collective nature of existence and the fluidity of the self.

In her essay "The New Biography" (1927), written twelve years before "A Sketch," Woolf critiques the conventional approach to biography, which often creates a binary between "truth" and "personality" (117). She highlights this tension by noting that biographers have

¹ These encouragements are found in Woolf's letters, perhaps most notable to Ethel Smyth. See Hermione Lee pg. 13.

historically found it easier to focus on the “granite-like solidity” of their subject’s external actions rather than the “rainbow-like intangibility” (117) of their inner thoughts and emotions, which “meander darkly and obscurely through the hidden channels of the soul” (118). Woolf challenges this artificial division, which is a product of social, cultural, and literary conventions, rather than a reflection of human experience itself, by suggesting that the ultimate “aim of biography” is to present a life as a “seamless whole” (117). This idea resonates in “A Sketch,” where she distinguishes between “moments of being”—those slightly “above... average” moments that are noted and remembered—and moments of “non-being,” which she describes as more mundane, “nondescript” moments that are “not lived consciously” (“A Sketch” 70). Indeed, however insignificant these moments of non-being might seem, Woolf argues that “the things one does not remember are as important; perhaps they are more important” (69) than the things one does remember. Additionally, Woolf introduces her experience of “exceptional moments” (71), which she describes as “sudden violent shock[s]” (71) that leave a lasting impact and reveal underlying patterns of daily life. Her self-awareness emerges in her depiction of daily life *as a mix* of “being” and “non-being” (70), punctuated by “exceptional moments” (71). Together, these three concepts form the “seamless whole” that Woolf mentions in “The New Biography.” For Woolf, all registers of being are equally important in shaping an individual.

Jeanne Schulkind’s decision to title her collection of Woolf’s autobiographical writing *Moments of Being* implies that this concept is central to those writings. However, as Alex Zwerdling observes, “Woolf herself does not give the term such primacy” (184). Woolf herself does not present the distinction as a rigid theoretical framework. She refers to the terms as her “private shorthand” (70), which indicates their provisional use. I do not mean to undermine the work that scholars have done on the significance of moments of being in “A Sketch.” However,

my analysis expands to encompass how Woolf's exploration of these levels of being results in a nuanced understanding of an unstable self, made up of cosmic, temporal, and intersubjective dimensions.

My analysis of "A Sketch" examines how Woolf's understanding of the self aligns with early twentieth-century modernist ideas. Laura Marcus notes that modernist writers, including Woolf, were concerned with "the increasingly complex... nature of the self and identity" (299). As Jane de Gay observes, Woolf's work reflects a modernist engagement with spiritual experiences outside of traditional religious institutions (16). De Gay further notes that "Woolf herself used the word 'mystic' to describe her experiences and her aspirations" (15), while W.H. Auden even described her as possessing "a mystical, religious vision of life" (qtd. in de Gay 15). Indeed, shifts in the understanding of spiritual, physical, and psychological realities, driven by thinkers like Darwin, Einstein, and Freud, influenced Woolf's conception of identity. Thus, Woolf's portrayal of the self in "A Sketch" reflects the transformative ideas of her time and enhances our understanding of modernist perspectives on identity and spirituality.

My paper is organized into three sections. The first section explores Woolf's mystical experiences, revealing how she perceives the self as part of a larger, interconnected reality that encompasses and transcends the immediate material world. The second section investigates the temporal aspects of selfhood, as Woolf considers the self as fluid and interwoven across past, present, and future. The final section explores Woolf's exploration of the intersubjective self, emphasizing a fluid experience in which the external forces of society and history shape the individual. "A Sketch" suggests that the self is composed of moments of being, non-being, and shocks in equal measure, and it is through this understanding that the spiritual, temporal, and intersubjective fluidity of the self emerges most powerfully. Woolf deconstructs the binary

between “truth” and “personality” (“The New Biography” 117), challenging traditional approaches to life writing and pioneering a new form of writing about one’s self that embraces the complexity and fluidity of identity.

The Cosmic Self

Woolf begins her memoir by considering how her sense of self emerged from simply being alive in the world and experiencing its wonder through the senses. Starting this way is unconventional, as most autobiographical accounts embark with factual matters, such as the individual’s place and date of birth. However, Woolf intends to write an account that avoids chronologically detailing what happened to her or what she has achieved. Rather, her purpose is to “give a feeling” (65). To accomplish this, she invokes a range of senses and vividly describes her first memories as rhythmic and colourful, emphasizing how they are composed not of events but of sensory “impression[s]” (65) made up of “colour-and-sound” (66). For example, she recalls “the pale yellow blind; the green sea; and the silver of the passion flowers” and thinks that if she were to “paint these first impressions,” she “should make curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline” (66). Within the first few pages of “A Sketch,” she writes of the “red and purple flowers on a black ground—[her] mother’s dress” (64), the nursery at St Ives, where she remembers the rhythmic sound of waves breaking (64-5), and the gardens which “gave off a murmur of bees,” where “apples were red and gold” and “there were also pink flowers; and grey and silver leaves” (66). These early sensory experiences are so intense that they inspire, even in recollection, a sense of spiritual ecstasy.

As she recalls “lying half asleep, half awake” (64) in the nursery, Woolf describes “hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach;

and then breaking one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind” and of “hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out” (64-5). She recalls that “hearing this splash and seeing this light” (65) evoked an emotional and overwhelming response, in which she felt “it is almost impossible that I should be here” (65). In his analysis of “A Sketch,” Benjamin D. Hagen proposes that this feeling of impossibility comes from “a sense that ‘I’ am not simply here, not simply now, for what and who ‘I am’ is always spread out, composed elsewhere, not only across time but across spaces, objects, and in the lives of others” (32). Hagen’s interpretation suggests a concept of the self as diffuse, perhaps even doing away with the notion of a singular or personal identity altogether. I agree, but I would emphasize that additionally, what Woolf seems to be expressing with the phrase “it is almost impossible that I should be here” (Woolf 65) is an awe so profound that the moment feels mystical, like an out-of-body experience. Arguably, what Woolf describes is a spiritual experience, as her sense of self dissolves into a larger, more universal consciousness. She becomes “hardly aware of herself, but only of the sensation” (67) as her feelings of “the purest ecstasy” and “rapture” (66) expand, and she feels them in a self that exists both in and beyond her physical body.

Furthermore, Woolf’s account of these early memories is elaborated to suggest that the self is not synonymous with the feelings it harbours. She describes herself as “*only the container* of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture” (67; emphasis mine), implying that emotions are separate entities that, although they reside in her, also have an existence of their own. She contemplates how she held this feeling of ecstasy in the past but also how she holds it still, explaining how the past can sometimes feel even “more real than the present moment” (67). Woolf writes, “[a]t times I can go back to St Ives more completely than I can this morning. I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there” (67). This ability to

access the past prompts her to speculate, “is it not possible... that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence?” (67). For example, when recalling how her mother would have one of the children go for a walk with her father every afternoon, Woolf transports herself back to “the lemon-colored leaves on the elm tree; the apples in the orchard; the murmur and rustle of the leaves” which causes her to “pause... and think how many other than human forces are always at work on us” (133). In the present moment, as she writes her memoir, “the light glows; an apple becomes vivid green” (133). Once again, the past becomes almost tangible in the present moment. Her whole body “respond[s]” to the memory becoming real before her eyes, and the intensity of re-living this scene proves so strong that she cannot fully comprehend “how” it is happening (133). Likewise, the “pure delight” of St Ives appears “before [her] eyes” the “moment” she thinks back on it (133), as though the joy that the place brought her as a child does not remain in the past but accompanies her now in the present.

This remembered experience of the past as having an almost independent existence is so powerful that it leads Woolf to speculate that access to past experiences and emotions might even be facilitated by some future technology:

[W]ill it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them... Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen in to the past. I shall turn up August 1890. I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start. (67)

This conception of the enduring existence of past emotion disrupts the binary oppositions of past and present, as well as internal and external, and suggests that memories are living entities that

transcend the boundaries of time. Woolf's exploration of her memories and emotions highlights how the intensity of her experiences—whether recollected or lived in the moment—carries a spiritual quality that offers a glimpse into a profound state beyond everyday realities.

Woolf's realization of the interconnectedness between a flower and the earth represents a mystical insight into the unity of all existence. Reflecting on this moment, Woolf describes “looking at the flower bed by the front door” and saying to herself, “[t]hat is the whole” (71). As she recalls, “it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower” (71). This seemingly simple act of observing a flower bed becomes a significant moment in her life, one she “often tell[s]... over” (71) and writes about years later, not because the event in itself is significant by the standards of conventional biography, but because of the mystical revelation it has facilitated. Woolf's recognition that the flower is part of the earth, as well as its own separate entity, leads her to understand that all things, including herself, are interconnected and that existence transcends the limits of physical form, even while it encompasses the material. In this moment, she perceives a cosmic dimension of the self as part of a shared existence with other living beings.

Woolf ties this understanding of interconnectedness to her belief in the significance of “exceptional moments” (71), which she perceives as opportunities to glimpse the underlying patterns of human existence. Her exploration of these moments highlights how direct, often sudden experiences reveal truths about reality which are not immediately apparent. The “sudden violent shock[s]” that accompany these moments hit her powerfully with a “revelation of some order... a token of some real thing behind appearances” (70). This intuition “proves that one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in

relation to certain background rods or conceptions” (73). For Woolf, the “conception” that she lives in “relation to” is that “there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool,” and “this conception affects [her]” daily life (73). Her bold assertion that “we are the thing itself” (72) is far from merely a passing thought or even a conventionally logical deduction; it is an “intuition” that she describes as “so instinctive that it seems given to me, not made by me” (72), which suggests that her insights come from a place beyond conscious thought.

These essentially mystical experiences and insights illustrate the self’s interconnectedness with others, complicating the convention of individuality and instead suggesting that the self is a centre of perception and experience not limited to a purely material existence. This idea is first articulated in “Reminiscences,” which she wrote when she was only twenty-five. There, Woolf asserts, “our lives are pieces in a pattern and to judge one truly you must consider how this side is squeezed and that indented and a third expanded and *none are really isolated* (Woolf “Reminiscences” 30; emphasis mine). This early contemplation of interconnectedness demonstrates its lasting significance—not merely a passing thought but a foundational belief that persisted for over thirty years more. In “A Sketch,” Woolf expands on this idea by likening the world to a continuous creation in which every individual is integral to the whole. She writes,

the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (72)

Woolf views artistic creation as something greater than its physical medium and envisions the world itself as a composition to which each person contributes. In this view, Beethoven’s

listeners become part of the music, sharing in the collective experience of listening and becoming. Woolf aligns herself with this idea when she surmises that “[a]ll artists I suppose feel something like this” (73), implying that her work, too, is not merely a product of her individual mind but a creation shaped by the collective consciousness that she has glimpsed, which can be seen as one aspect of “the truth about this vast mass that we call the world” (72).

The belief that her intuitions and understanding of the world were connected to something beyond herself compelled Woolf to write. Her “exceptional moments” were often emotionally difficult, accompanied by a “feeling of hopeless sadness” (71) or a “peculiar horror and physical collapse” that hit her with what felt like a “sledge-hammer blow” (72). However, rather than simply enduring these shocks, Woolf embraced the effort required to process them and allowed them to transform her. She recognized these moments as “particularly valuable” and regarded her “shock-receiving capacity” as a gift, which fueled her “desire to explain” their significance (72). By “putting it into words,” she transformed each “blow” into a “revelation” and sought to “make it whole” (72). This act of writing, then, became more than just a calling; it became an essential process of meaning-making. While others might spend their time “walking, running a shop, or learning to do something that will be useful if war comes” (73), Woolf felt a deeper calling. For her, “writing” was “far more necessary than anything else” (73), which reinforces her belief in the spiritual importance of her literary work.

Woolf’s great sense of purpose in her writing connects to her understanding of her mental illness as a valuable aspect of her creativity. Although she omits explicit references to her mental health struggles in “A Sketch,” it is well-known that she suffered from severe episodes of mental illness throughout her adult life, which led to several suicide attempts before a final successful attempt in 1941 (Grace 112). However, Woolf considered her mental illness “central to her

ability as a writer” (Grace 112), describing it in a letter to Ethel Smyth as a powerful, volcanic influence that shaped her writing profoundly: “As an experience, madness is terrific I can assure you, and not to be sniffed at; and in its lava I still find most of the things I write about. It shoots out of one everything shaped, final, not in mere driplets as sanity does” (Woolf qtd. in Grace 112). This recognition of “madness” (112) as a state that she appreciates for its contribution to her creative process highlights the intense relationships between her mental health and writing, suggesting that periods of heightened consciousness during her breakdowns gave her access to a deeper self-understanding.

Woolf’s descriptions of her mental breakdowns resonate with her portrayal of “exceptional moments” (“A Sketch” 72), as both allow for an intensified connection of the self with outside forces that are otherwise inaccessible. For example, she describes a moment of clarity when words transcend their literal meaning and become an intuitive experience, which parallels the nature of her mental breakdowns. She writes, “instantly and for the first time I understood the poem” (93), noting that the poem’s title is irrelevant compared to the fact that it “became altogether intelligible” (93). Woolf recalls a “feeling of transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them; to foretell them as if they developed what one is already feeling” (93). Once again, Woolf dismantles the idea of art and humanity as separate entities, as she, in a way, becomes the poem; she becomes “the thing itself” (72). Her understanding of the poem parallels the “lava” of her “madness,” as it “shoots out... everything shaped, final,” describing a state of pure consciousness and understanding unattainable during periods of “sanity” (112), which only produce “driplets” (Woolf qtd. in Grace 112). Woolf understands her madness as mystical, connecting her with a force or reality beyond ordinary experience.

The Self in Time

Building on this mystical vision of selfhood, Woolf's exploration of identity broadens to include the concrete realities of life, not to abandon or negate her earlier insights but to expand and enrich them. Woolf acknowledges the undeniable impact of her physical body, her genetic heritage, and the social hierarchy within which she lives on the shaping of her self. By examining both the mystical and the material, Woolf's memoir engages with fundamental questions such as *Who am I?* and *What is the self?* in different but equally important ways. This approach illustrates the fluidity of mystical and material realities, showing that both are essential to understanding the human experience.

In her exploration of the body, Woolf suggests that a dimension of the self is inherently connected to genetic heritage. Among her early childhood memories is her aversion to seeing her reflection in the "small looking-glass in the hall at Talland House" (67), explaining, "when I was six or seven perhaps, I got into the habit of looking at my face in the glass. But I only did this if I was sure that I was alone. I was ashamed of it. A strong feeling of guilt seemed naturally attached to it" (67-8). She thinks, "I must have been ashamed or afraid of my own body" (68). She then briefly explains what her stepbrother, Gerald, did to her when she was a young child: "I can remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes, going firmly and steadily lower and lower. I remember how I hoped that he would stop; how I stiffened and wriggled as his hand approached my private parts. But it did not stop" (69). The memory prompts her to question how she instinctively knew this action was wrong and leads to the conclusion that the self is interwoven with a genetic legacy that reaches back thousands of years:

I remember resenting it, disliking it – what is the word for so dumb and mixed a feeling? It must have been strong, since I still recall it. This seems to show that a feeling about certain parts of the body; how they must not be touched, how they must not allow them to be touched, must be instinctive. It proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago, and had from the very first encounter already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past. (69)

Notably, this passage challenges her previous assertion that “Adeline Virginia Stephen” was “born on 25th January 1882” (65). She plays with the idea that in some sense she existed long before her physical body came into this world, as she feels a connection to women across millennia: their experiences seem somehow encoded in her genetic makeup. Woolf recognizes her material experience as one shared by many women throughout history. She becomes part of a continuum of women and knows the wrongness of Gerald’s actions not just because she has been told but also because her body bears the experience of previous generations of women. This intuition does not arise from within her alone but from a shared legacy of suffering and resilience passed down through generations.

Woolf’s belief in a dimension of the self that encompasses past, present, and future selves reinforces the notion of instability and draws attention to the “immensely complicated” (69) nature of any individual, thus resisting simplistic representations of a life. She addresses this complexity not only through the content of “A Sketch” but also through its form, as she embraces a diary format part way through. This format allows Woolf the freedom to weave together her past and present selves through the act of remembering and enables her to retain the purity of her childhood perceptions while interpreting them from an adult perspective that is itself deeply concerned by World War II and an uncertain future. On the “2nd [of] May,” Woolf

explains, “I write the date because I think that I have discovered a possible form for these notes. That is, to make them include the present” (75). By integrating the present with the past, Woolf suggests how different selves across time inform and shape one another.

In her embrace of the fluidity of the temporal self, Woolf recalls “floating incidents” or “scenes” (77) from her childhood that she has remembered before but now reexamines in the present, allowing her to gain a new perspective on them and her present self. She acknowledges a continuity between the child and the adult but suggests that they remain distinct entities. Woolf explicitly aims to “make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast” (75). However, even as she recognizes the distinctiveness of her past and present identities and the difference in experience that has led to them, she also emphasizes the significance of the exchange between them. Woolf explores this exchange between past and present when she proposes that a peaceful present allows for a deeper reflection on the past, which, in turn, enriches the present and informs subsequent returns to these scenes. She writes that when the “present runs... smoothly,” it enables one to see “through the surface to the depths” (98). Woolf finds great fulfillment in these occurrences, even describing them as “one of [her] greatest satisfactions” (98). When her past and present selves converge, she feels herself “living most fully in the present” (98), implying that experiencing the present is more satisfying and complete when accompanied by an awareness and remembrance of the past. Although the present and the past are separate, bringing them together creates a deeper and more fulfilling sense of wholeness: “the present when backed up by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feeling nothing else” (98). In other words, the immediate present alone overwhelms and obscures everything else, whereas the present, enhanced by past experiences, gains depth and meaning.

Similarly, combining her past and present perspectives provides a fuller understanding of her past.

Woolf expands the concept of intertwined past and present selves by including the future self as well. Woolf's childhood self recognizes that merging the present and future selves will bring a wholeness and understanding that the child's current self alone lacks. Woolf's recognition of an internal "spectator" (154) from her childhood illustrates her early understanding of the layering between past, present, and future selves. She notes, "[t]here was a spectator in me who, even while I squirmed and obeyed, remained observant, note taking for some future revision" (154), which indicates an awareness that her experiences, though not fully comprehensible at the time, would be valuable for her future self. Another example of how Woolf consciously kept moments in safe keeping for later reflection is when she comes to understand the unity of the flower and the Earth: "It was a thought I put away as being likely to be very useful to me later" (71). This demonstrates how the past, present, and future selves are inextricably linked, informing and enriching each other.

Woolf's relationship with her father, Leslie Stephen, exemplifies the necessity of integrating her past and present selves. She admits that to fully describe her father's character, she must inhabit her childhood mind while also viewing him from an adult perspective: "I should have to be able to inhabit again the outworn shell of my own childish mind and body" (107). A dual perspective allows Woolf to see her father "from round the corner; not directly in front" (108). Blending the clarity of hindsight with the immediacy of childhood experience enables her to understand him better. However, Woolf is aware of her own subjective bias: "Undoubtedly I colour my picture too dark" (113). Thus, to achieve a fuller understanding of her father, she not only integrates her own selves, but she also brings together public and private perceptions of him

by examining how others portrayed him: “But before I analyse our relation as father and daughter, I will try to sketch him as I think he must have been, not to me, but to the world at large” (108). As she looks to his own biography to help her understand the kind of man he was beyond her own memories, Woolf contrasts her personal recollections with his public portrayal. Along the way, she critiques the limits of Victorian biographies, which often reduce individuals to a rigid “steel engraving, without colour or warmth or body; but with an infinity of precise clear lines” (109). She observes that her father was “not merely a Cambridge steel engraving intellectual” (113) but a more complicated figure who stirred up emotions in her of both “love” and “hate” (108). Woolf’s portrayal of her father as both a public figure and a private man reflects her broader exploration of identity with “A Sketch.” Just as she resists presenting her father as a one-dimensional figure, Woolf similarly resists fixed notions of the self, emphasizing its intersubjective nature. This approach leads to a deeper reflection on the fluidity of the self, in which personal identity becomes a collective, evolving narrative.

The Intersubjective Self

Woolf resists not just the conventions of biography but also the conventions of Victorian society in her emphasis on intersubjectivity and the fluidity of the self. The majority of Woolf’s memoir focuses on people other than herself, who she sees as being so intrinsically connected to her that they make up part of her identity. As Woolf asserts, “I was from my earliest childhood so close with both Nessa and Thoby that if I describe myself I must describe them” (125). She cannot separate herself from her family members, particularly her siblings, which results in “A Sketch” becoming, at times, a kind of collective memoir. For example, in her reflection on life

after her mother's death, Woolf frames mourning as something shared among the children's collective consciousness:

The tragedy of her death was not that it made one, now and then and very intensely unhappy. It was that it made her unreal; and *us* solemn, and self conscious. *We* were made to act parts that *we* did not feel; to fumble for words that *we* did not know. It obscured, it dulled. It made one hypocritical and immeshed in the conventions of sorrow. Many foolish and sentimental ideas came into being. Yet there was a struggle, for soon *we* revived, and there was a conflict between what *we* ought to be and what *we* were. (95; emphasis mine)

The repeated use of "we" and the absence of "I" in this passage highlights intersubjectivity and even somewhat erases her individual experience of grief, portraying it instead as shared and as shaped by expectations. Woolf heightens this tension between personal emotion and social convention by emphasizing the lack of intense, individual memories during this time. Woolf's reflection on her younger self as one constantly negotiating between public and private influences, consciously and unconsciously shaped by societal norms, challenges the conventional biographical focus on public accomplishments, favoring instead the idea of a self which is influenced by both collective and individual forces.

Woolf extends this concept of collective grief to her understanding of how individuals are constantly absorbing and being shaped by their environments. Woolf conceptualizes the self as deeply impacted by the "invisible presences" of society and history (80) and uses various metaphors to illustrate this idea, such as "a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place, but [unable to] describe the stream" (80), which represents how individuals are continuously shaped and confined by the unseen currents of society. Like fish in water, human beings are deeply

embedded in and shaped by their environments and cannot exist apart from them, no matter how unaware they might be of the entanglement. Woolf acknowledges the undeniable power of these forces and asserts that “it is by such invisible presences that the ‘subject of this memoir’ is tugged this way and that way every day of his life; it is they that keep him in position” (80). Specifically, these influences include “the consciousness of other groups impinging upon ourselves; public opinion; what other people say and think; all those magnets which attracts us this way to be like that, or repel us the other and make us different from that” (80). Recognizing these invisible influences becomes essential for understanding the self. Indeed, Woolf argues that these forces deeply permeate the individual and asserts that “[i]f we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject” (80). Woolf’s insights on the self’s permeability reveal how deeply individuals are embedded in and shaped by their environments.

Expanding on this idea, Woolf introduces an image of the self as “porous,” absorbing its surrounding forces. She describes herself as a “porous vessel afloat on sensation; a sensitive plate exposed to invisible rays” (133), which suggests a certain level of vulnerability, as something “porous” involuntarily absorbs its surroundings. Moreover, the phrase “afloat on sensation” (133) implies being carried or overwhelmed by sensory experiences, also indicating vulnerability. Thus, this line, while seemingly beautiful, carries an underlying sense of fear as the sensations are like a sea in which she floats, perhaps without much or even any control. By describing herself as “a sensitive plate exposed to invisible rays,” Woolf refers to an old photographic process where a plate was sensitive to light and could capture images invisible to the naked eye. She feels similarly sensitive, perceiving things that are not immediately visible. Woolf revisits the metaphor of the self as a “porous vessel” when she asserts that “it is irrational” to suppose “that we are sealed vessels” (142). In this passage, however, Woolf suggests that we

oscillate between “porous” (133) and “sealed” (142) states. On one hand, we are contained and separated from the full experience of reality. On the other hand, this “seal” is not absolute: “at some moments, without a reason, without an effort the sealing matter cracks” (142) and “in floods reality” (142) to penetrate our enclosed existence. Woolf’s recounting of her mother’s death further emphasizes this notion of the porous self: “[e]ven if I were not fully conscious of what my mother’s death meant, I had been for two years *unconsciously absorbing it* through Stella’s silent grief, through my father’s demonstrative grief; again, through all the things that changed and stopped” (124; emphasis mine). This recognition reinforces the notion of the porous self, where even if she was not fully conscious of the impact of Stella’s and her father’s grief, their pain still permeated her being and became a part of her.

Woolf extends her recognition of the self’s porous nature to include how society shapes identity, using the metaphor of a machine to describe the oppressive nature of Victorian society. She explains, “[s]ociety – upper middle class Victorian society – came into being when the lights went up. About seven-thirty the pressure of the machine became emphatic. At seven thirty we went upstairs to dress” (150). This imagery portrays society as a scheduled “machine” (150) that exerts pressure and controls their lives. Woolf describes how “the machine into which our rebellious bodies were inserted in 1900 not only held us tight in its framework, but bit into us with unnumerable sharp teeth” (152), evoking the sense of being forcibly confined within the machine, unable to escape from its hold. Woolf elaborates on how this machine shapes the males in her family: “Each of our male relations was shot into that [great patriarchal] machine at the age of ten and emerged at sixty a Head Master, an Admiral, a Cabinet Minister, or the Warden of a college. It is as impossible to think of them as natural human beings” (153). This emphasizes

Woolf's idea that the self is not isolated but continuously shaped and influenced by its environment.

By emphasizing intersubjectivity and moments of personal significance—whether of being, non-being, or epiphanic insight—Woolf resists not just biographical convention but also Victorian social norms that refuse to see the interconnectedness of public and private, past and present, self and other, individual and cosmos. Woolf's reflection on her brother George's immersion in Victorian society and his unquestioning belief in its norms represents the pervasive and often invisible influence of one's environment while also serving as a critique of the Victorian tendency to reduce individuals to “steel engravings” (109), as in the case of her father, or to follow societal expectations mindlessly. After the deaths of her mother, Stella, and later her father, Woolf and her sister Vanessa found themselves under George's care, who, deeply entrenched in Victorian society, imposed its norms on the sisters. Despite his commitment, George failed to “enter the intellectual machine” (153). There was, however, another machine – the “social machine” (153), in which he excelled and thrived. George's belief in society, described by Woolf as having “depth, swiftness, inevitability,” seemed as unchallenged as the stream's flow, drawing even outsiders into its “current” (153). However, Woolf contrasts this vivid depiction of George's immersion in society with the monotony and constraining force of life within that “machine” (153). Much like the “dullness” of grief (93), the moments of non-being imposed by societal expectations are repetitive and mundane. According to Woolf, George “never questioned his belief in the old tune that society played” (153). Woolf, however, observed George “going through the hoops; doing the required acts” (153) and wondered, “how could anyone believe what George believed?” (154). Later she asks, “[h]ow could we resist his wishes? Was not George Duckworth wonderful? And anyhow what else did we want?” (157). These

questions highlight how the “ruthless machine” of society leaves little room for “other desires” to “be taken seriously” (157). Woolf’s sensitivity to these social influences and her questioning of their inevitability challenges both biography’s refusal to acknowledge the interconnectedness of private and public life and the rigidity of Victorian social norms.

In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf reveals her philosophy that the self cannot be reduced to a singular, stable identity. Instead, the self is dynamic, consisting of indivisible internal and external components, and shaped by mystical experiences, time, and the pressures of history and society. By presenting the self as a composite of mystical, temporal, and intersubjective experiences, Woolf challenges the traditional biographical and autobiographical focus on public achievements and the rigid separation between “truth” and “personality” (“The New Biography” 117). Although much scholarship on “A Sketch” focuses on Woolf’s “moments of being,” more than half of her memoir is devoted to family members and to the rhythms of daily life. One is not more important than the other: they coexist, and all must be considered in order to fully appreciate Woolf’s attempt to communicate her life and her idea of the unstable self and its many dimensions. The memoir’s unfinished nature challenges us to consider the coexistence of these varied dimensions, leaving open the question of how Woolf might have ultimately concluded her exploration of the self, which is simultaneously cosmic, temporal, and intersubjective.

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