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“The synthesis of my being”:
Autobiography and the Reproduction of Identity
in Virginia Woolf

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I thought, driving through Richmond last night, something very profound about the synthesis of my being: how only writing composes it: how nothing makes a whole unless I am writing.¹

Through her fiction, Virginia Woolf raises the question of identity again and again: how does one represent the self, assuming that such a core identity exists? Commentators on Woolf’s novels note this question in discussions of form and characterization; further, they frequently extend the issue of identity to include the ways in which Woolf incorporates her own life in her writings.² Autobiographical criticism of Woolf generally suggests connections between Woolf’s experiences as a child and young woman and the characters and situations she creates; it is a truism, for example, that To the Lighthouse represents Woolf’s final laying to rest of the influence of her parents on her life—as Woolf herself believed.³ In such criticism, the connection between Woolf’s real-life experience and her imaginary creation becomes the focus of attention, not Woolf herself: curiously, her “self” drops from consideration. Yet in order to understand a writer so much concerned, as Woolf was, with her sense of “being” and how that being connects with others, we should also consider how Woolf represents her changing sense of her identity as a woman and a writer in her creation and re-creation of experience, especially personal experience.

Twice Woolf attempted to construct an autobiographical retelling of her childhood, at the beginning and end of her career as a writer, and the differences between the earlier version, “Reminiscences,” and the later version, “A Sketch of the Past,” reveal much about Woolf’s consolidation of her identity. “Reminiscences” was written at about the same time that Woolf began her first version of what became The Voyage Out: each creation reflects, among other things, Woolf’s attempt to re-present and represent her separation from her mother and the ambivalence she feels about it. In both the work of reality and the “work of imagination”—Woolf’s term for the
Figure 2. Reproduction of Woodcut by Vanessa Bell for Virginia Woolf’s *Monday or Tuesday* (London: Hogarth Press, 1921). From Cyril Connolly’s Library, Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa.
fiction then called *Melymbrosia*—Woolf distances herself from her subject matter. As we shall see, both of these early works reveal Woolf’s need to define her identity by separating her self from her same-sex object, the mother. In the “safer” fictional medium of *The Voyage Out*, however, Woolf tentatively reconnects her self to the figure of the mother through the imaginative projection of Rachel Vinrace. Yet at this point, Woolf refuses to admit such a connection, even imaginatively, and Rachel’s death embodies both Woolf’s ambivalent need for the past presided over by the mother and her wish to break from it. By the end of her career, Woolf has approached a balance between past and present; her sense of self admits both identification with the central mother-figure and separation from her. “A Sketch of the Past,” begun about two years before her death, reveals the result of Woolf’s struggles for an identity of her own: here she is the woman who defines identity through relationship and the writer who, having become more comfortable with this self-identity, may even merge with the identities of others through imagination. “A Sketch of the Past” reflects Woolf’s resolution of the problems of identity raised in the earlier texts.

Until fairly recently, theorists of autobiography have focused upon its generic definition without considering the influence of gender upon that definition. The oversight, as feminist autobiography critics have increasingly established, derives in large part from the assumptions upon which, in the past, autobiography theory has been based. Genre critics of autobiography have traditionally assumed that, no matter what form one’s presentation of a personal past takes, there is an absolute self that informs the telling. William C. Spengemann represents the extreme of this position in his belief that the autobiographies he examines—no woman’s autobiography is represented—have “been grounded in the assumption of an absolute, unconditioned self or soul that transcends and hence justifies all conditioned experience.” The narrative persona of an autobiography represents, for Spengemann, “on the one hand, the self he knows or wishes to know, and on the other hand, the self that knows or seeks to know.” Many theorists have thus assumed that while autobiographies may involve self-creation in the process of self-revelation, there is a stable self residing somewhere in the autobiography or in the life it records. Estelle C. Jelinek was one of the first feminist theorists to disagree with this assumption; she points out that women are less likely than men to have a stable self-image and, consequently, are more likely to write fragmented narratives in which the sense of stable identity recedes.

The identity image is similar throughout women’s autobiographies. In contrast to the self-confident, one-dimensional self-image that men usually project, women often depict a multi-dimensional, fragmented self-image colored
by a sense of inadequacy and alienation, of being outsiders or "other"; they feel the need for authentication, to prove their self-worth.7

Because women's autobiographies frequently represent experiences of the world and the self that are outside canonical definitions of autobiography, they have often been misread or ignored completely.8

More recently, however, structualist and poststructuralist theories have contributed to the revision of essentialist notions about the self by calling attention to the self as a rhetorical construct, and feminist critics in particular have drawn attention to the role of gender in autobiography and in autobiography theory. If men and women have different cultural experiences, their representations of their experiences in the rhetorical self-creation that is autobiography will also differ. By reading autobiographies by both men and women for the multiple identities created and not created by language, we avoid the exclusive binarism—with its implied hierarchies—of stability/instability, public/private, which have been characteristic of much theoretical work in the past, including earlier feminist work like Jelinek's, and we admit all versions of self-creation as valuable representations of particular personal and cultural moments.

Woolf did not conceive of "Reminiscences" as her autobiography: as she tells her brother-in-law, Clive Bell, "I have been writing Nessa's life; and I am going to send you 2 chapters in a day or two."9 Yet although Woolf claims to be writing a memoir of her sister and not of herself, less than one third of the text as we have it concerns Vanessa Stephen; indeed, after her introduction of Vanessa's character, Woolf moves quickly into a description of her mother's life and death, then into a description of her half-sister, Stella Duckworth, upon whose death she returns the narrative to the original subject, Vanessa, to describe how her sister assumed the place of mother in the family. The assumption that "Reminiscences" is autobiographical seems clearly correct since the events detailed are those of Woolf's lifetime as well as of her sister's, but we ought to ask, what kind of autobiography do we have? Jelinek assumes that there exists in women's texts a narrative persona—however fragmented—congruent with the author's own, yet "Reminiscences" is striking for its impersonality. There is a narrative "I," but that narrative persona is more an observer of the effects of events than an experiencer of them. Note, for example, Woolf's ornate comment on her mother's death, admittedly the most significant event of her life:

She died when she was forty-eight, and your mother ['Reminiscences" was to be written for Julian Bell] was a child of fifteen. If what I have said of her has any meaning you will believe that her death was the greatest disaster that could happen; it was as though on some brilliant day of spring the racing
clouds of a sudden stood still, grew dark, and massed themselves; the wind flagged, and all creatures on the earth moaned or wandered seeking aimlessly.10

Compare this Victorian literary treatment to the highly personal treatment with which Woolf records the same event in “A Sketch of the Past.” In the latter, she first details her own actions after the death of her mother—stretching out her arms to catch her father, drinking warm milk with brandy, kissing her mother for the last time, meeting Thoby at the station, receiving visitors; then she goes on to sum up the effect of the death:

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. Thoby put this into words. One day before he went back to school, he said: “It’s silly going on like this . . .”, sobbing, sitting shrouded, he meant. I was shocked at his heartlessness; yet he was right, I know; and yet how could we escape? (p. 95)

In the account given in “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf includes herself in what she describes. Despite the Woolfian use of “one” (“It made one . . .”), she recalls herself as part of the group that reacts to Julia Stephen’s death, the “us” and “we” who felt hypocritical. She is careful to distinguish her past feelings, noting her feeling of shock at Thoby’s heartlessness at that time, though she now “knows” he was right. In “Reminiscences,” Woolf observes the effect of Julia’s death on others, but gives us none of her own feelings. Twice she refers to the death as a great “disaster” (pp. 32, 40), but the text is silent on the particular emotional impact of this death on the child Virginia Woolf. Woolf’s identity—both the self recorded and the self recording—recedes behind an impersonal and often melodramatic style of narration.

Christopher Dahl places “Reminiscences” in the Stephen family tradition of autobiographical writing and claims that the style and form of the piece are in keeping with that of her father’s Mausoleum Book: “All too often Woolf’s writing seems self-consciously literary, and where her style is most artificial, it reveals most clearly her indebtedness to formal Victorian memoir writing.” Dahl sees “Reminiscences” as highly similar to Leslie Stephen’s book:

Both . . . are a series of portraits held together by the first-person voice of their author, whose relation to the various figures portrayed is the real focus of each
work. In their depiction of Julia Stephen (and to a lesser extent in their portraits of Stella Duckworth), the two works obviously overlap. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to see her "Reminiscences," with their preoccupation with death and bereavement and their attempt to memorialize two beloved figures who have been lost, as Virginia Woolf's own version of her father's Mausoleum Book.¹¹

Structurally and stylistically, then, Woolf follows the tradition of the male autobiographers of her family. But there is a crucial difference that Dahl overlooks. Even though Leslie Stephen adopts a public tone in his memoir, he nevertheless includes himself in his narrative. As Dahl himself notes, the Mausoleum Book begins with "a brief account of Leslie Stephen's early life," includes "Stephen's attitude toward Anny Thackeray" and "a memorial portrait of Julia which is intertwined with Stephen's confessional account of their marriage," and ends with "Stephen's evaluation of his own life." Dahl even complains of Stephen's "egotistical tendency to dramatize his own grief."¹² Woolf clearly rejects the self-focus that is an important part of the autobiographical tradition inscribed by her male relatives and particularly her father: she may adopt Leslie Stephen's methods for lack of one of her own at this early stage in her writing, but she fails to adopt his egotistical sense of identity. If we were to read "Reminiscences" according to autobiography theories that assume a transcendent ego—or according to revisionist theories that simply invert this (male) model and assume a woman's fragmented ego—we would miss what is actually contained in Woolf's first memoir: the literal absence of an individualized identity or an identity of her own.

In "Reminiscences," there is no account of Woolf's early childhood nor, indeed, of the present in which she writes the text; there is no description of her relationships with others. When Woolf ventures an opinion of someone, she frequently qualifies it, as though she fears to assert herself. When, for example, she attempts to describe Julia's first marriage to Herbert Duckworth, Woolf undercuts her authority as narrator:

She had been happy as few people are happy, for she had passed like a princess in a pageant from her supremely beautiful youth to marriage and motherhood, without awakenment. If I read truly, indeed the atmosphere of her home flattered such dreams and cast over the figure of her bridegroom all the golden enchantments of Tennysonian sentiment. But it would need a clearer vision than mine to decide how far her husband, though now so obviously her inferior in all ways, was able then to satisfy noble and genuine passions in his wife. Perhaps she made satisfaction for herself, cloaking his deficiencies in her own superabundance. (p. 32; my emphases)

While this tentativeness to read motives is consistent with Woolf's lifetime concern with the barriers placed on our complete understanding of others,
the uncertainty is handled quite differently here than in “A Sketch of the Past.” In “Reminiscences,” Woolf implies that a true picture, a “clearer vision,” does exist, but she lacks the ability to represent it. In “A Sketch of the Past,” she begins by acknowledging her ignorance as something to be expected:

If it were possible to know what Herbert himself was like, some ray of light might fall from him upon my mother. But, like all very handsome men who die tragically, he left not so much a character behind him as a legend. Youth and death shed a halo through which it is difficult to see a real face—a face one might see today in the street or here in my studio. (p. 89)

Woolf knows that she is not expected to be able to understand a man she has never met and affirms her limitation as a quality she ought to have. The tone of the “Reminiscences” passage, on the other hand, suggests that Woolf, in acknowledging her limitation, believes this limitation ought to disqualify her opinion.

After admitting she does not know “what Herbert himself was like” in “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf goes on to create an identity for him:

He must have been to her the perfect man; heroic; handsome; magnanimous; “the great Achilles, whom we knew”—it seems natural to quote Tennyson—and also genial, lovable, simple, and also her husband; and her children’s father. (pp. 89-90)

Woolf’s treatment in this passage and throughout “A Sketch of the Past” reveals a commitment to and an involvement with her material; in her creation of identities and imagining of scenes, she projects herself into her remembrances so completely that we never forget her presence. In “Reminiscences,” Woolf attempts to remove herself from the text, at times unsaying what she has just said, at other times making an observation on character appear to be a generalized understanding. Daniel Albright has commented about all of Woolf’s autobiographical writings: “It is a kind of autobiography which seems ‘in mysterious ways’ to exclude the author.”13 I disagree with the extent of Albright’s comment, for reasons I shall develop below, but it provides an apt expression of the sense of distanced identity in “Reminiscences.”

If Woolf herself is absent from her text as a fully realized identity, the identity of her mother instead permeates this memoir. The importance of Julia Stephen to Woolf is such a critical commonplace that it scarcely needs special emphasis, but consideration of the psychological impact of the mother-daughter bond—and in Woolf’s case its too-early destruction—
affords an important alternative account of or model for Woolf’s creation of her autobiographical self. Recent feminist psychoanalytic theorists have explored the repercussions of the mother-daughter bond for the creation of women’s identity; in particular, object-relations theory with its notion of a self-in-relation, which Nancy Chodorow represents, suggests the difficulty the child girl has in forming a sense of separate identity. Chodorow identifies two sources of identity for a person:

One origin is an inner physical experience of body integrity and a more internal “core of the self.” This core derives from the infant’s inner sensations and emotions, and remains the “central, the crystallization point of the ‘feeling of self,’ around which a ‘sense of identity’ will become established” . . . . The second origin of the self is through demarcation from the object world. Both ego boundaries (a sense of personal psychological division from the rest of the world) and a bounded body ego (a sense of the permanence of physical separateness and of the predictable boundedness of the body) emerge through this process. The development of the self is relational.  

According to Chodorow, it is more difficult for a girl child to develop a sense of separateness than for a boy child because a girl is the same sex as her mother and tends to experience her mother as “more like, and continuous with” herself:

This means that a girl continues to experience herself as involved in issues of merging and separation, and in an attachment characterized by primary identification and the fusion of identification and object choice. . . . A boy has engaged, and been required to engage, in a more emphatic individuation and a more defensive firming of experienced ego boundaries.

The male’s ability to form more rigid ego boundaries is often reflected in the autobiographies men create—hence the impression of commentators on male autobiographies that the narrative personae represent coherent self-images. Women autobiographers cannot easily represent discrete self-images for two important reasons: culturally, as Estelle Jelinek rightly points out, women’s experiences have generally been seen as insignificant and so do not contribute to an affirmative sense of self in the autobiographies that record them; and psychologically, the woman’s initial bond with a same-sex object makes it difficult for her to achieve a sense of separateness and so increases the likelihood that the self represented in an autobiography will be defined in terms of others. For Woolf, the task of achieving a sense of her own identity was doubly problematic: she needed to achieve separation from the identity of her mother, yet the death of her mother at the crucial beginning of Woolf’s adolescence (she was thirteen) meant that Woolf lost the figure
from which her identity derived. It is not surprising, then, that "Reminiscences" reflects Woolf's uncertainty about her identity and the process by which she attempts to distinguish it, a process she did not feel she had completed until she was forty-four, when she described her mother in To the Lighthouse and so achieved separation from her. Further, it is not surprising that "Reminiscences" is centered on the mother-figure, represented by Julia Stephen, Stella Duckworth, and Vanessa Stephen. In her first attempt at autobiography, Woolf tries simultaneously to merge with and separate from the lost mother, the embodiment of and barrier to Woolf's own identity.

Although Woolf excludes direct expression of feelings from the text of "Reminiscences," she includes them obliquely in her account of the effect of Julia Stephen on both Stella and Vanessa. Stella's relationship with her mother was extraordinarily close:

Living in close companionship with her mother, [Stella] was always contrasting their differences, and imputing to herself an inferiority which led her from the first to live in her mother's shade. Your grandmother too was, I have said, ruthless in her ways, and quite indifferent, if she saw good, to any amount of personal suffering. It was characteristic of her to feel that her daughter was, as she expressed it, part of herself. (pp. 41-42)

Woolf's comment on this relationship is one of the rare instances in the memoir when she clearly associates herself with an opinion:

It was beautiful, it was almost excessive; for it had something of the morbid nature of an affection between two people too closely allied for the proper amount of reflection to take place between them; what her mother felt passed almost instantly through Stella's mind; there was no need for the brain to ponder and criticize what the soul knew. (p. 43)

Woolf's position is ambiguous; the relationship is both "beautiful" and "excessive," demonstrating Woolf's own ambivalence to her mother. Yet the decisiveness of the declarative sentences at this point—"it was" and "it had" without a "perhaps" or "seems"—suggests that Woolf's emotional investment in the subject is great enough to overcome her confusion of identity and allow her to assert herself.

If Woolf's presentation of Stella allows her to consider, consciously or unconsciously, her feelings of connection to her mother, her development of Vanessa allows her to add to that consideration the necessity of separation from her mother. Close to Woolf in age and profession—she was an artist—Vanessa substitutes for Virginia and thus permits Woolf to explore her own
reactions without having to attribute them to herself. Woolf first records the check to Vanessa’s developing identity that Julia’s death causes:

She was a happy creature! beginning to feel within her the spring of unsuspected gifts, that the sea was beautiful and might be painted some day, and perhaps once or twice she looked steadily in the glass when no one was by and saw a face that excited her strangely; her being began to have a definite shape, a place in the world—what was it like? But her natural development, in which the artistic gift, so sensitive and yet so vigorous, would have asserted itself, was checked; the effect of death upon those that live is always strange, and often terrible in the havoc it makes with innocent desires. (pp. 31-32)

Substitute Woolf’s “being” for Vanessa’s, and Woolf’s motive for writing a memoir centered around her mother, but excluding herself, becomes clear; at this point, her being lacks a “definite shape” and can only be known from the lost mother she seeks, a mother Woolf will repeatedly recreate in her writing.17

Through her portrayal of Vanessa, Woolf explores the other check to identity, to which their mother contributed, and the ambivalence it caused. Upon the death of Stella, Vanessa took over the maternal role. But she could not take on this role in her own way: Woolf stresses that Vanessa was expected to follow the example of their mother: “In our morbid state, haunted by great ghosts, we insisted that to be like mother, or like Stella, was to achieve the height of human perfection” (p. 53). Again, the result for Vanessa was a loss of her individual identity:

Your mother, as I have said, coming into this inheritance, with all its complications, was bewildered; so many demands were made on her; it was, in a sense, so easy to be what was expected, with such models before her, but also it was so hard to be herself. She was but just eighteen, and when she should have been free and tentative, she was required to be definite and exact. (p. 54)

The restrictions are not just Vanessa’s, but, by association, Woolf’s as well. Later she will claim she had to kill the Angel in the House (“Professions for Women”); here she raises the issue through Vanessa but dissociates herself from its repercussions for her own developing identity.

In “Reminiscences,” then, Virginia Woolf makes her first attempt to confront the importance of her mother for her own sense of identity. The narrative method she chooses for her presentation, that of observer rather than experiencer, reflects her insecurity in her identity—as well as in her own voice as writer—and suggests her attempt to separate herself from the stifling influences upon her, to prevent her self from merging with the figure of her mother. Her first novel, The Voyage Out, also reflects Woolf’s concern
for identity; her choice of a fictional medium initially allows her to express the personal emotions she distances herself from in the memoir. Yet in the process of endless revision—Louise DeSalvo estimates that “no fewer than seven drafts of the novel once existed” and “perhaps as many as eleven or twelve”18—Woolf excises direct connections to her own life and publishes a version of the novel that once again distances her self from her material, this time through intentional obscurity.

DeSalvo has treated the changes Woolf made from the first draft of Melymbrosia to the published version of The Voyage Out in her book Virginia Woolf’s First Voyage; her arguments are convincing and exhaustively developed. To summarize her position, DeSalvo believes that Woolf’s decision not to publish earlier versions of The Voyage Out was “an act of self-censorship”: “in becoming the historian of Rachel’s soul. . . . she had also become the historian of her own soul.” For DeSalvo, the result is a published version of the novel that lacks shape:

In the excision of Dalloway’s identification with Willoughby Vinrace, the overt sadism of Helen, the motherly qualities of Clarissa, Woolf had removed the most significant and the most personal threads of meaning from her novel. . . . It was Woolf’s reclothing of Rachel Vinrace as an innocent victim rather than as a woman both fascinated with and repelled by her sexuality which robbed her of her vitality as a character and which seriously undermined the fundamental structure of her novel.19

Most critics find The Voyage Out a failure; some implicitly or explicitly assume that the novel is a fictional reflection of Woolf’s inability to “[exorcise] her obsessive love-hate feelings for her mother.”20 The judgments of the novel’s failure as a narrative must be connected to DeSalvo’s judgment of Woolf’s failure to represent her own experience faithfully. But with their unstated assumptions about what the narrative should contain, these appraisals do not allow for consideration of what the novel does represent. Setting aside the question of whether it provides a solution to the problem of feminine identity in the abstract or to Woolf’s own problem with her mother—it does not—the novel as published is successful in conveying Woolf’s sense of her identity or, more accurately, her lack of identity at the time she wrote the novel. The Rachel Vinrace who appears to be unrealized as a character, projecting an empty identity, may, in part, be seen as a projection of the Virginia Woolf who wishes to absent herself from her writing: “I should choose my writing to be judged as a chiselled block, unconnected with my hand entirely.”21 Woolf obscures the cause of Rachel’s death in the published version just as she obscures her own presence by refusing, finally, to represent biographical detail. Yet in both cases, the
obscurity is only superficial because Woolf’s subtext suggests that the cause of Rachel’s death—the ultimate loss of identity—is the connection with the mother, a connection that Woolf, though unconsciously recognizing its dangers if allowed to define one’s identity completely, was not ready herself to break.

Madeline Moore discusses the influence that matriarchal mythologies have on the novel and identifies Helen as the target of Woolf’s ambivalent feelings toward her mother; curiously, she does not mention Woolf’s most overt reference to a matriarchal culture, the village of women. In casting about for some explanation of Rachel’s death, the characters of the novel suggest that perhaps Rachel caught her illness as a result of the river voyage. What was the reason for the journey? To see the natives, “the village which was the goal of their journey.” Readers tend to recall only Terence and Rachel’s engagement, Helen’s involvement with the lovers, and a good deal of silence. The real encounter of the voyage is strangely downplayed, though the sight of the villagers affects all of the travellers. What they see is a society of women; although there is one man, he is not the focus of attention:

The women took no notice of the strangers, except that their hands paused for a moment and their long narrow eyes slid round and fixed upon them with the motionless inexpressive gaze of those removed from each other far, far beyond the plunge of speech. Their hands moved again, but the stare continued. As she drew apart her shawl and uncovered her breast to the lips of her baby, the eyes of a woman never left their faces, although they moved uneasily under her stare, and finally turned away, rather than stand there looking at her any longer. Soon the life of the village took no notice of them; they had become absorbed into it. The women’s hands became busy again with the straw; their eyes dropped. If they moved, it was to fetch something from the hut, or to catch a straying child, or to cross the space with a jar balanced on their heads; if they spoke, it was to cry some harsh unintelligible cry. Voices rose when a child was beaten, and fell again. Seeking each other, Terence and Rachel drew together under a tree. Peaceful, and even beautiful at first, the sight of the women, who had given up looking at them, made them now feel very cold and melancholy.

“Well,” Terence sighed at length, “it makes us seem insignificant, doesn’t it?”

Rachel agreed. So it would go on for ever and ever, she said, those women sitting under the trees, the trees and the river. (pp. 284-85)

The women are a voiceless presence in this scene, staring at the travellers as Woolf must have imagined her mother stared at her. Finally becoming uncomfortable watching the mother suckle her baby, the group turns away. Their reaction to what they have seen is ambivalent, for they are attracted to the beauty of the womanly, maternal figures going about their tasks and yet
are uncomfortable with the feeling that they are excluded from the attention of these women. The culture that the English strangers represent seems "insignificant" to the women involved in their domestic world. St. John Hirst, the representative of English education in the novel, also seems to sense his exclusion from this self-contained domestic world: his thoughts are "bitter and unhappy, for he felt himself alone" (p. 285). Rachel perceives that the women, the trees, and the river will "go on for ever and ever." Her association of the women with the trees and the river is echoed later in the novel by Terence when he describes the maternal figure of Mrs. Thornbury:

"She's got too many children I grant you, but if half-a-dozen of them had gone to the bad instead of rising infallibly to the tops of their trees—hasn't she a kind of beauty—of elemental simplicity as Flushing would say? Isn't she rather like a large old tree murmuring in the moonlight, or a river going on and on and on?" (p. 294)

This sense of the maternal embodied in the village women, omnipresent and eternal, beautiful with "elemental simplicity," yet stifling to art and education—because not acknowledging it—corresponds to Woolf's sense of her own stifled identity and recalls the accounts in "Reminiscences" of Stella's suffocating relationship to Julia and Vanessa's surrender to an identity already fashioned for her.

That Rachel's confrontation with the village women is the buried cause of her death is suggested by Helen's reaction to the women:

Helen, standing by herself in the sunny space among the native women, was exposed to presentiments of disaster... How small the little figures looked wandering through the trees! She became acutely conscious of the little limbs, the thin veins, the delicate flesh of men and women, which breaks so easily and lets the life escape compared with these great trees and deep waters. A falling branch, a foot that slips, and the earth has crushed them or the water drowned them. Thus thinking, she kept her eyes anxiously fixed upon the lovers, as if by doing so she could protect them from their fate. (pp. 285-86; my emphasis)

Again the maternal is suggested in the "great trees and deep waters" and is associated with crushing and drowning. Helen blames the Flushings for suggesting the expedition, "for having ventured too far and exposed themselves" (p. 286). The voyage out, the merging with the lost mother figured in this journey to a lost tribe of women, is the catalyst for death, metaphorically the lost identity produced by merging with the same-sex object. For Woolf to make this reason for Rachel's death more explicit, she would have had to expose that most elemental limitation of her own identity, still bound up
with her mother. While Woolf recognizes, consciously or unconsciously, the result of a wish to merge with the mother, to acknowledge the cause of death more explicitly in the text would have meant to accept separation from her mother before she felt ready.\textsuperscript{25}

The observation immediately above says nothing new; most critical studies of the novel are informed by knowledge of Woolf’s ambivalence about her mother. Yet it is surprising how little attention has been paid to the village scene since it appears to provide the most explicit connection between Rachel’s death and the figure of the mother.\textsuperscript{26} In the narrative, however, this turning point of the novel—the goal of the voyage out and the catalyst of events leading to Rachel’s death—seems less important than Rachel’s betrothal to Terence. Woolf masks her personal feelings contained in this episode by transferring attention to other subjects, just as she does in “Reminiscences.” If in “Reminiscences,” our attention is directed to Julia, Stella, and Vanessa rather than to Woolf herself, in The Voyage Out, our attention is deflected to other confrontations in the novel—to Helen and Rachel, Terence and Rachel, Mr. Dalloway and Rachel—rather than to the central confrontation of the maternal villagers and Rachel. Thus we are also prevented from tracing responsibility for Woolf’s views to her personal self, which may be too weak to bear this burden. Woolf’s comment to Clive Bell after submitting to him a draft of the novel reveals her insecurity as a writer:

I admit the justice of your hint that sometimes I have had an inkling of the way the book might be written by other people. It is very difficult to fight against it; as difficult as to ignore the opinion of one’s probable readers—I think I gather courage as I go on. The only possible reason for writing down all this, is that it represents roughly a view of one’s own [the connection of this phrase to the title of Woolf’s later tract on women writers is instructive]. My boldness terrifies me.\textsuperscript{27}

By the time Virginia Woolf returned to the subject of her childhood in “A Sketch of the Past,” she had matured as an artist and as a woman. She no longer needs to separate herself from her subject or to draw attention away from what is emotionally important. The style of the narrative reflects her ease, as she moves fluidly from past to present, from description of family members to description of herself. Gone is the need to distance herself from her mother; instead, Woolf asserts the connection of herself to her mother, as the following example illustrates:

Certainly there she was, in the very centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood; there she was from the very first. My first memory is of her lap; the scratch of some beads on her dress comes back to me as I pressed my cheek
against it. Then I see her in her white dressing gown on the balcony; and the passion flower with the purple star on its petals. Her voice is still faintly in my ears—decided, quick; and in particular the little drops with which her laugh ended—three diminishing ah... “Ah-ah-ah...” I sometimes end a laugh that way myself. And I see her hands, like Adrian’s, with the very individual square-tipped fingers, each finger with a waist to it, and the nail broadening out. (My own are the same size all the way, so that I can slip a ring over my thumb.) She had three rings; a diamond ring, an emerald ring, and an opal ring. My eyes used to fix themselves upon the lights in the opal as it moved across the page of the lesson book when she taught us, and I was glad that she left it to me (I gave it to Leonard). (pp. 81-82)

Note the comparisons Woolf makes: she laughs like her mother, but her fingers are different; she continues her mother’s act of gift-giving by passing on the opal ring to Leonard. Here and throughout “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf views the past through her own experience, weaving her sense of her self with the selves of her family. Unlike the narrator of “Reminiscences,” the “I” of “A Sketch of the Past” represents the presence, not the absence of Woolf.

While “Reminiscences” and The Voyage Out suggest Woolf’s attempt to form her identity by separation, a strategy she would eventually find unsuccessful, “A Sketch of the Past” reflects a woman’s definition of her identity by relation. Carol Gilligan has considered the implications of object-relations theory for women’s moral development: because women delineate their selves through connection rather than separation, as men do, “women’s development points toward a different history of human attachment, stressing continuity and change in configuration, rather than replacement and separation.”28 Woolf’s theory of writing expressed in “A Sketch of the Past” posits that all human beings are defined by relationship:

It [finding wholeness through writing] is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. (p. 72)

In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf comments on the past from the viewpoint of the present, recording feelings then and now in order to present a balanced view. She is willing to reserve judgment on what she describes, realizing that her view is only a part of the whole called “reality.” Her description of her mother’s death, cited earlier, is one example of this
technique of acknowledging both past and present feeling—both can exist simultaneously. Here is another:

My father now falls to be described, because it was during the seven years between Stella's death in 1897 and his death in 1904 that Nessa and I were fully exposed without protection to the full blast of that strange character . . . . In order to explain why I say "exposed," and why, though the word is not the right one—but I cannot find one that is—I call him a strange character, I should have to be able to inhabit again the outworn shell of my own childish mind and body. I am much nearer his age now than my own then. But do I therefore 'understand' him better than I did? Or have I only queered the angle of that immensely important relationship, so that I shall fail to describe it, either from his point of view or my own? (pp. 107-08)

In this passage, Woolf acknowledges her own childhood feelings and her father's position; there is no black or white, no right or wrong. Woolf's goal in representing her past is to include as many facets of experience, both her own and her family's, as possible. Only in this way can she produce an accurate vision of the past. I suspect that Daniel Albright, who complains that in her autobiographical writings Woolf attempted "to retain the plasticity, the abandon, the evasiveness of the ego," would be among those critics who omit women's autobiography from the canon because of its formlessness: he seems to base his judgment on male experience. Woolf's willingness to become a part of her past by imagining scenes signals not her submergence of her present self, but her emergence from her earlier self-in-crisis; she asserts a positive identity that allows relationship.

Having reached a clearer understanding of who she is, Woolf can also celebrate her past relationship with her mother. She begins "A Sketch of the Past" with her first memory, a memory suggestive of the non-verbal, pre-Oedipal stage of connection with the mother. She sees her mother's dress and remembers being on her lap in a train (p. 64). Factually, she admits that they must have been going to London, but artistically, she chooses to suggest that they were going to St. Ives, because St. Ives, for Woolf, is associated with her mother. Woolf goes on to say that another first memory was of hearing the waves and the blind drawing its acorn across the floor, "of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive" (p. 65). Her description of this feeling associates it with the child contained in her mother's womb: "the feeling, as I describe it sometimes to myself, of lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow" (p. 65). From this ultimate experience of complete union with the mother, Woolf moves on to expand upon her sense experiences:

The next memory—all these colour-and-sound memories hang together at St. Ives—was much more robust; it was highly sensual. It was later . . . . The buzz,
the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked. But again I cannot describe that rapture. It was rapture rather than ecstasy. (p. 66)

"It was rapture rather than ecstasy"; these memories, sensual and natural rather than verbal and so associated with the mother, are positive ones for Woolf. "A Sketch of the Past" details this pre-Oedipal history (one of the most evocative sections of the memoir), covers the same material as "Reminiscences," and ends with Woolf’s introduction into the social world of late Victorian culture—the last section is filled with suggestions of repression rather than freedom, as Woolf felt herself forced to enter the "great patriarchal machine" (p. 153). In psychological terms, Woolf records the time span of her identification with and then separation from her same-sex object.

The writing of this last memoir, however, reflects Woolf’s ability to reestablish her bond with her mother as she returns imaginatively to the pleasure of that union. It is in this writing that Woolf can become “whole”; it is in the world of imagination that she finds the relationship that defines her identity. As the artist of her past, she becomes much like her own creation of Lily Briscoe in To the Lighthouse, who is able to represent in her work her love for the maternal Mrs. Ramsay when finally she is in no danger of being annihilated by her.31 The projected fate of Lily’s artistic representation of her experience might be seen as a metaphor for the possible fate of Woolf’s own representations of self:

There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again . . . . With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (pp. 309-10)

It would be easy to see Woolf’s early self-expressions as merely “attempts at something” and so condemn them to obscurity because they belie our assumptions of what autobiography should be. But in reading her earlier autobiographical work for what it attempts, for what it represents of Woolf’s sense of identity at the start of her writing career, we are more aware of her final achievement of “vision” in “A Sketch of the Past.” In her last autobiographical memoir, Woolf records her rediscovery of a maternal world and,
by reestablishing a bond with her mother on a different basis, affirms her identity as a woman.

NOTES


3 Woolf comments, “I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her,” in “A Sketch of the Past,” Moments of Being, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p. 81. Future references to “A Sketch of the Past” are to this edition and will appear in the text.


8 Sidonie Smith parallels the omission of women’s autobiographies from discussions of the genre to their absence from theoretical speculation about the genre:

The theories seem to derive from certain underlying assumptions: that men’s and women’s ways of experiencing the world and the self and their relationship
to language and to the institution of literature are identical; or that women's autobiographies, because they emanate from lives of culturally insignificant people, are themselves culturally insignificant; or that women's autobiographies, because they may not inscribe an androcentric paradigm of selfhood, are something other than real autobiography; or that autobiography is fundamentally a male generic contract. (p. 14)

10 Virginia Woolf, "Reminiscences," in Moments of Being, pp. 39-40. Future references are to this edition and will appear in the text.
12 Dahl, pp. 182, 192.
15 Chodorow, pp. 166-67.
17 Mother-figures permeate Woolf's fiction: Helen Ambrose in The Voyage Out, Mrs. Hilbery in Night and Day, Mrs. Flanders in Jacob's Room, Clarissa Dalloway in Mrs. Dalloway (and in The Voyage Out, where she serves the same purpose of alternate mother to Rachel Vinrace as Helen), Mrs. Ramsay in To the Lighthouse. After Woolf writes To the Lighthouse and frees herself from her mother's influence, however, the number of mother-figures and their importance in the novels decrease. There is Susan in The Waves, but her character is not privileged over others. Mrs. Pargiter in The Years resembles Julia Stephen in her early death, but Mrs. Pargiter's daughter Delia is happy when her mother dies and frees her from bondage. In The Years, Woolf has let go of her worship of her mother and can represent the other side of her feelings toward Julia Stephen: resentment for stifling her separate identity. Isa Oliver and Mrs. Swithin are mothers in Between the Acts, but their maternal role is not their most identifiable characteristic; more important is their role in relationships with men and a world defined and governed by men. In her portrayal of Isa's stormy marriage to Giles and Mrs. Swithin's habitual disagreements with her brother and revisions of his views, Woolf has moved beyond the obsessive childhood bond with the mother to focus on the sexual and political dimensions of adult relationships. In her excellent study The Invisible Presence: Virginia Woolf and the Mother-Daughter Relationship (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), Ellen B. Rosenman advances the thesis that "the desire to recover the mother, to fill the center, informs artistic efforts throughout Woolf's works . . . as well as Woolf's own
aesthetic experience" (p. 106). Rosenman's discussion frequently parallels mine; I am more interested, however, in demonstrating how Woolf's changing attitude towards the mother-figure is embodied in her creation of herself rather than solely in her creation of the lost mother.

18 Louise A. DeSalvo, Virgin


22 Moore, pp. 82-104.


24 Further, it is Rachel and Terence who feel insignificant, as though Woolf were suggesting that opposite-sex bonds lack the power of the maternal bond.

25 As DeSalvo points out, Woolf went insane each time she came to write and rewrite Rachel's death scene, suggesting how powerful Woolf found the connection between her words and her own sense of being (p. 12). It is no wonder that Woolf initially attempted to absent herself from her texts.

26 Ellen Rosenman comments: "Rachel's return to the body of her mother is the culmination of her voyage out, a journey by sea into the female depths of the Amazon jungle, and finally back into the womb" (p. 30). Despite her understanding of the larger movement of the novel towards a merging with the mother, she makes no reference to the village more specific than the one quoted here. For various attempts to explain Rachel's death, see DeSalvo, Moore, and Froula, cited above; also Mitchell A. Leaska, "The Death of Rachel Vinrace," Bulletin of Research in the Humanities, 82 (1979), 328-37, and Deborah Guth, "Death as Defiance: A Study of Virginia Woolf," Southern Humanities Review, 19, No. 3 (1985), 221-29. Leaska sees Rachel's death as self-willed and as a flight from the uncertainty of reality; Guth also sees the death as the flight of the self from the world. Neither article is particularly compelling.

27 Woolf, Letter 471, to Clive Bell, 7 (?) February 1909, Letters, 1, 383.

28 Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 48. Gilligan has been criticized for the methodology she uses to establish the connection between a morality of care and woman's development and, further, for the way in which her description of a woman's ethic of care fits too easily the social stereotype of woman's greater empathy. See in particular Linda K. Kerber, et al., "On In a Different Voice: An Interdisciplinary Forum," Signs, 11 (Winter 1986), 304-33, and Joan C. Tronto, "Beyond Gender
Difference to a Theory of Care," Signs, 12 (Summer 1987), 644-63. While I agree with the cautions against assuming a biological basis for woman's moral development, I find that Gilligan's observations about connection and separation provide an instructive parallel to Virginia Woolf's own evolved attitudes toward human relationships.

29 Albright, "Virginia Woolf as Autobiographer," p. 11.

30 Woolf comments: "Scene making is my natural way of marking the past." For her, it is "not altogether a literary device—a means of summing up and making a knot out of innumerable threads. Innumerable threads there were; still, if I stopped to disentangle, I could collect a number" ("Sketch," p. 142). Woolf implies that she could sort out experiences and produce a judgment, but she chooses not to. Her representation of a scene allows all the facets of experience to exist simultaneously.

31 Especially in Part III, "The Lighthouse," Lily tackles the problem of Mrs. Ramsay's influence on her life and her work. She comes to realize that to leave her art, her independence, behind entirely in order to search for the dead Mrs. Ramsay is to "step off her strip of board into the waters of annihilation" (p. 269). Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (1927; rpt. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955). Future references are to this edition and will appear in the text.