

**Character and the Art of Memory:  
Interpreting Virginia Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past"**

**by**

**Glenn Deefholts**

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# Approval

**Name:** Glenn Deefholts  
**Degree:** Master of Arts  
**Title:** *Character and the Art of Memory:  
Interpreting Virginia Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past"*

**Examining Committee:** **Chair:** Stephen Duguid  
Professor

**Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon**  
Senior Supervisor  
Professor

---

**Samir Gandesha**  
Supervisor  
Associate Professor

---

**June Sturrock**  
External Examiner  
Professor Emeritus  
Department of English

---

**Date Defended/Approved:** September 18, 2015

## Abstract

The thesis examines Virginia Woolf's memoir, "A Sketch of the Past," in relation to her statement that in 1910, human character changed. A Freudian theoretical framework, Woolf's essays on character, and her novel, *To the Lighthouse*, are used to interpret and analyze the first thirty pages of the memoir, which cover the period from Woolf's first memories to the death of her mother, when Woolf was thirteen. The main character in this part of the memoir is Woolf's mother, and the thesis argues for the centrality of Woolf's mother in shaping Woolf's belief that character is the most important aspect of a work of fiction. The difficulty Woolf had in describing her mother is shown to relate to the challenge her generation of writers faced in creating character, representing memory and existence, and capturing truth, either in a memoir or in a finished work of art, such as a novel.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf; "A Sketch of the Past"; memoir; *To the Lighthouse*; human character; 1910

## **Dedication**

For my beloved:

mother, father, sister, aunt, uncle, brother-in-law, friends, and family

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# Table of Contents

Approval .....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Dedication .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	v
Table of Contents .....	vi
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One: The Creation of Character .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Chapter Two: The Presence of Memory .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Chapter Three: The Art of Truth .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Works Cited .....</b>	<b>69</b>

## Introduction

"[I]n or about December 1910 human character changed." (2008, 38)

Virginia Woolf, writing in 1924, is referring to a great shift that occurred in understanding the complexity of human beings and of life. Ten years after *The Interpretation of Dreams* appeared, *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis* was published in English in 1910. The first Post-Impressionist exhibition was held in London that year. In 1912, Dostoevsky - a huge influence on Woolf's generation of writers - was first available in English translation. Proust was active: the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time* was published in Paris in 1913. King Edward died in 1910, and King George succeeded him. For Woolf, all these changes reflected a transformation in society and in the meaning of human character.

Woolf's perception of the centrality of character - and the difficulty in describing it - is related to the early death of her mother. Her challenge in rendering the character of her mother was the work of bringing life to death. She attempted to understand and represent her mother through the character of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. However, a few years before Woolf died, she described her mother again in the memoir, "A Sketch of the Past." This late memoir-writing became another manifestation of the capacity to absorb shocks that she believed makes an artist. Woolf was dealing then with the violence of World War Two and the anticipated trauma of death, which she faced daily when German planes bombed the countryside where she was living. She wrote, seeing it as the most useful and necessary thing she could do. She wrote a memoir that started with her earliest memories and expressed as much as she could about her mother. The parallels between these memories of her mother and those that appear in *To*

*the Lighthouse* give these details added significance in both texts. These echoes show what was essential for Woolf in the creation of the character of her mother specifically, and in the creation of character generally. Lily substitutes for Woolf in the novel; the shock-receiving capacity that Woolf speaks of in the memoir is one that Lily possesses. We see, in both memoir and novel, the centrality for Woolf of the process of healing that is often involved in the making of a work of art. Thus Woolf and Lily share the journey of coming to terms with the loss of the mother figure, who is seen as a guiding force, a lighthouse, the values of a previous generation, and as God.

Human character and human existence had changed in 1910. Nietzsche, who died in 1900, had written of the transvaluation of values and the death of God. He had questioned and deconstructed the good/evil binary that makes up the foundations of moralities and asked what would be the cultural results if the bedrock of these values - the belief in a benevolent, all-knowing Presence - was no longer accepted as true, as existing. The practical consequences of Nietzsche's transvaluation and assertion of the death of God - the effects on daily life, mothers, daughters, dinners, stories, paintings - weave through Woolf's writing and thinking. Woolf's attempt to render this transformation in life, society, and human beings involves for her not just healing through expression, but also finding truth by making art.

Although the Sketch is a significant and thought-provoking document in the Woolf oeuvre, a book-length work on the memoir has not been published. Sustained discussion is largely confined to two books and ten journal articles, some of which are relevant to this thesis. Below, I provide an overview of this scholarship, which has been devoted mainly to "moments of being" (Woolf's phrase from the Sketch) and her "philosophy" of art in relation to life (also from the Sketch). However, the two journal articles and book that led me to adopt a psychoanalytic - specifically Freudian - framework for the interpretation of the

memoir will be discussed in depth later in this Introduction, when I begin to consider the applicability and justification of a Freudian approach to the memoir.

Among works that are tangentially relevant to - but have nevertheless informed - the thesis, Lorraine Sim's monograph dedicates a chapter to "positive" and "negative" (Sims' terms) "moments of being." Jane Goldman's consideration of the Sketch in her book focuses on Woolf's "philosophy." Daniel Albright's article finds passages in Woolf that resonate with her "philosophy" in a diary entry of 1923, in *The Years*, and in *Between the Acts* (12). Phyllis McCord points out two other passages in Woolf's diaries - from 1928 and 1933 - that are analogous (252), and notes the similarities between Woolf's "moments of being" and William Wordsworth's "spots of time," Walter Pater's "moments of vision," and James Joyce's "epiphanies" (250). Pericles Lewis discusses Woolf in relation to one of the few contemporary writers whom she embraced, Marcel Proust: "in both writers . . . we see, as [Erich] Auerbach suggested, the aim of 'synthesizing' experience, a concentration on the power of memory and consciousness to transform . . . moments of conflict into what Woolf called moments of being . . ." (86). Christopher Dahl concurs with Jeanne Schulkind, editor of the volume of Woolf's memoirs, that "moments of being" are "central to the development of Woolf's fiction" (175). He adds that Mark Spilka, in *Virginia Woolf's Quarrel with Grieving*, explores the ways in which Woolf's autobiographical writings in general shed light on her novels, especially *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* (176). Alex Zwerdling goes further in claiming that "the myriad connections (and distinctions) between Woolf's autobiographical and fictional writing remains a rich but separate subject, far too complex to develop here" (25).

This thesis, then, explores an essential question that has not arisen in scholarship on the memoir: how does Woolf's depiction of herself and other people in the memoir - especially her mother - respond to her statement that in 1910, human character changed? The first chapter of the thesis examines Woolf's concept of character as she develops and explores it in four of her essays: "Mr.

Bennett and Mrs. Brown," "Modern Fiction," "Phases of Fiction," and "Character in Fiction." Woolf is interested in understanding why the previous generation of novelists - Arnold Bennett's generation - approached character and what she calls "life" or "reality" (admitting she is being vague) in a way that is relatively unfruitful. She seeks to explore why her generation of writers - Lawrence, Forster, Joyce - are struggling with the concept of character and the depiction of life. In "Phases of Fiction," she conducts a historical survey of novelists that have been significant to her and have had considerable cultural impact. She tries to understand what these writers' aims have been and to what extent they have accomplished them, as well as their attitudes toward character and life. It is in "Character and Fiction" that she makes her statement about human character changing. Chapter One of the thesis explores Woolf's theoretical positions on character and life and relates these positions to her late reflections on these subjects in the Sketch.

The second chapter of the thesis is a close reading of the first thirty pages of "A Sketch of the Past" in the context of *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, her most representative novels. The interpretive frame of the chapter also intends to capture some of the influencing forces on Woolf, including Freud, Proust, and Dickens. The first thirty pages of the Sketch deal with the period from Woolf's first memories to the death of her mother and reflect on the process of memoir-writing more frequently than any other substantial section of the memoir. These thirty pages also show Woolf's "philosophy" more explicitly than any of her other writings (72); and how her views of people, life, and art evolve from her early life - her first memories, her experiences of childhood, and her relationship with her mother. Chapter Two of the thesis follows the flow of the memoir because there is a significant narrative in these thirty pages - though it seems happenstance and freely associative - in the way that memories are described. What comes before revealing them and what comes after is as important as the memories themselves. A close reading of this section of the memoir - including reflections on the process

of representing experience through language - shows the importance, perhaps the centrality, of Woolf's early childhood to her later life, writing, and thought.

The third chapter of the thesis argues for a close connection between the meditations on art, truth, and the mother figure in the Sketch and in *To The Lighthouse*. Chapter Three shows that for Woolf, the complexity of creating character comes in part from the difficulty that she had in describing her mother's character. As well, the centrality of her mother's character to her childhood seems to have shaped the importance of character for her in story-telling and in novels generally. The argument moves from, first, Woolf's conception of novel-writing and art as useful and necessary ways of representing character and reality to, second, her sense of the difficulty of achieving truth as a memoirist and novelist. For her as a writer, truth involves describing a character fully, if not completely, and also representing life accurately. This artistic project parallels the challenges that Lily faces in *To the Lighthouse*: of representing not only Mrs. Ramsay, but existence itself. In order to argue for the similar situations of Woolf and Lily, I point out the contiguities between Woolf's mother, Mrs. Stephen, as she is described in the memoir, and Mrs. Ramsay, in the novel. These similarities between Woolf and Lily include the inability to grieve the loss of a beloved older woman - for Woolf, her mother, who died when she was thirteen; for Lily, Mrs. Ramsay, a friend - and the way that writing, painting, art, representation can finally release this grieving. By comparing Woolf and Lily, we see the specific ways that for Woolf, the process of making art often involves mourning, a putting of words to trauma or shock, to the initially unspeakable. The chapter thus seeks to show that for Woolf, there is a necessary connection between trauma, writing, art, and truth - a connection that centrally involves character and story.

The theoretical framework for the thesis comes from Freud. Specifically, I am interpreting the first thirty pages of Woolf's memoir from a Freudian perspective. Why Freud? There are a number of reasons. As mentioned earlier in the Introduction, I came to Freud as an interpretive approach to the memoir in

part because of two journal articles, one by Virginia Hyman and one by LuAnn McCracken, and a book, by Elizabeth Abel. In her article, published in *The Psychoanalytic Review*, Hyman refers to Woolf's "notorious" tendency to distort memories and gives an example from the part of the Sketch which I am concentrating on: what Freud would call a screen memory of Woolf's father throwing her as a child into the ocean (32). Hyman provides another eye-witness account for this event that is different in significant respects from Woolf's. Hyman puts the issue explicitly in her first paragraph: "But the fact that [the Sketch] is a revision of earlier versions of [Woolf's] autobiography raises the question of whether a final version of a narrative has any greater or less validity than earlier ones" (24). At one point, Hyman goes so far as to say that Woolf's famous moments of being are more a construction from the present - a screen memory - than true to what actually happened: "the 'moment of being' is a highly imaginative, if not a consciously induced hallucinatory experience valued more for its present effect than its past authenticity" (28). Hyman finds Woolf's illusory construction of "shelter" (28) by writing the Sketch understandable, given the tremendous pressures that she faced - particularly from the German attack on England - during the writing of the memoir. Hyman goes on to describe another memory from the Sketch - a train-station - as "magnificently overdetermined" and "introducing the theme of sexual awakening which [Woolf] will develop from this point on in the narrative" (28). The Freudian vocabulary and themes are apparent in Hyman, though she does not make explicit the concept of screen memory. Perhaps she felt, writing in *The Psychoanalytic Review*, that such an acknowledgement would be redundant; however, she describes Woolf's process of creating screen memories thus: "Whatever may have been the original experience [Woolf had], the elaborate overlays [in the Sketch] suggest the ways it was supplemented by later ones and shaped to conform to her present needs" (28-29).

A Freudian approach is also the basis for LuAnn McCracken's article. While this thesis does not take an interpretive approach derived from psychoanalytic

object-relations theory, LuAnn McCracken acknowledges in her article the value of such an approach to describing Woolf's process of separating herself from her mother. As McCracken puts it, "Recent feminist psychoanalytic theorists have explored the repercussions of the mother-daughter bond for the creation of women's identity" (65). McCracken goes on to refer to object-relations theory specifically, and to quote Nancy Chodorow on the "difficulty the girl child has in forming a sense of separate identity" (65). Later in the essay, McCracken quotes Carol Gilligan's work with respect to the way that it considers "the implications of object-relations theory for women's moral development" (72).

The process of identity formation, McCracken shows, begins early in Woolf's writing career: in an earlier memoir called "Reminiscences" and in the novel, *The Voyage Out*. McCracken writes that "each creation [the two memoirs and this novel] reflects, among other things, Woolf's attempt to re-present and represent her separation from her mother and the ambivalence she feels about it" (59). By the time Woolf wrote the Sketch, however, McCracken argues, "her sense of self admits both identification with the central mother-figure and separation from her" (60). McCracken goes so far as to say that the Sketch "reflects Woolf's resolution of the problems of identity raised in the earlier texts ["Reminiscences" and *The Voyage Out*]" (60). With respect to screen memory, McCracken claims that in the Sketch, "in her creation of identities and imagining of scenes, she projects herself into her remembrances so completely that we never forget her presence" (64). Woolf is conscious of Freud and of Proust and is acknowledging the inescapability of the framing needs of the present remembering self in shaping the view of the past: the person here and now creates the past, apparently there and then.

Late in her essay, McCracken interprets Woolf's first memories from the Sketch in Freudian terms, giving an example of "a memory suggestive of the non-verbal, pre-Oedipal stage of connection with the mother" (73). Then, as in Hyman, there is an oblique reference to the concept of screen memory, but here as a

conscious, not unconscious, and artistic choice: with this first memory, "Factually, [Woolf] admits that [she and her mother] 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" (73). Another early memory - hearing the waves - is linked by McCracken to a child's experience of being "contained in her mother's womb" and represents "complete union with her mother" (73). In a long footnote, McCracken claims that "[m]other figures permeate Woolf's fiction" and quotes Ellen B. Rosenman as saying in her book that "'the desire to recover the mother, to fill the centre, informs artistic efforts throughout Woolf's works . . . as well as Woolf's own aesthetic experience'" (76-77). As well, McCracken's conclusion is worth quoting in full because it converges with and departs from the subject of this thesis in significant ways:

The writing of this last memoir . . . reflects Woolf's ability to re-establish 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 the 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 the love for the maternal Mrs. Ramsay when finally she is in no danger of being annihilated by her. (74)

I chose not to use object-relations theory, but to focus instead on the early, relatively unknown, Freud - the Freud of screen memories and dream interpretation - in part because of Woolf's assertion that human character changed in 1910, when Freud was doing his earlier work and was still relatively little-known. Also, I wanted to use some of the main ideas - though not the later, more precisely worked-out details - of Freudian theory, to parallel Woolf's likely knowledge of his work, so that in interpreting the memoir, I would be conscious of what Woolf would have been conscious of when she wrote and revised it. As well, extensive, elaborate, and subtle work on the connections between the later Freud and Woolf has already been carried out by Elizabeth Abel in *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*. The Foreword, by Catherine Stimpson, maps out some of the terrain which Woolf and Freud share: "Each was . . . a formidable architect and

carpenter of modernity [as well as] prophets of the instabilities and discontents of postmodernity" (ix). Stimpson goes on: "The issue of origins - of consciousness, culture, creativity - was to compel each of them. So did the meaning and nature of sexual difference" (ix). Stimpson takes up the relationship of Woolf to Melanie Klein: "Famously, [Woolf] urged women writers to think back through their mothers" and "as Abel demonstrates [in the book], [Woolf's] narratives about mothers resemble those of at least one psychoanalyst [Klein] . . . , whose ideas were ultimately to touch such feminists as Jessica Benjamin, Nancy Chodorow [who is discussed by McCracken in her article], and Jane Flax" (x). In Abel's Preface, she states that her book "examines and contextualizes . . . the historical moment Woolf shared with Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein" (xvi). Her first chapter considers "Woolf's lines of access to the psychoanalytic culture that emerged in London in the 1920s," but Abel declares that the book is "less concerned with influence than with intertextuality" (xvi). According to Abel, Woolf was familiar with debates within British psychoanalysis - and she read Freud - but "rather than addressing [such debates] specifically, she engages in her novels [we might add, "and in the late memoir"] *the set of terms* that generated the debates" (xvi, italics added). Woolf's personal connections to Freud are worth mentioning briefly: she was a close friend of Lytton Strachey, brother of Freud's chief translator into English, James Strachey; the Woolfs' Hogarth Press published the Strachey translations; Woolf's brother, Adrian, and his wife were analysts; and Woolf and her husband hosted Freud and his wife in London in 1939. Abel's "primary focus" is the decade of the 1920s in Woolf's career (xvi). Again, as with McCracken, Abel's project has influenced mine, but my focus is different, and quoting Abel's viewpoint more fully shows some of these congruities and points of divergence:

Reading across the discourses illuminates them both [Freud and Woolf]. By alerting us to certain recurrent but submerged narrative tensions in Woolf's texts, psychoanalysis helps make us the discerning readers she desired. Woolf's fiction, in turn, de-authorizes psychoanalysis, clarifying the narrative choices it makes, disclosing its fictionality. (xvi)

Abel quotes Peter Brooks to show connections between psychoanalysis and novel-writing; memoir-writing is also pertinent: "Psychoanalysis, after all, is primarily a narrative art, concerned with the recovery of memory and desire" (1). Abel makes this link between story and memory explicit when she says "Woolf's novels are thick with a variety of pasts" - each from a different character. Abel gives the example of the third section of *To the Lighthouse*, which provides several perspectives on the first section. By thus considering Abel's project at length here, I have been aiming to show first, how relevant Freud is to interpreting Woolf, and second - as elaborated below - that my use of Freud is quite different from hers, not least in that I apply his ideas to the Sketch, which receives little treatment in Abel's book. How then am I using Freud specifically in relation to Woolf?

Both Freud and Woolf are interested in "the origin of conscious memories" (1995, 126). Woolf wonders to herself why what is remembered *is* remembered (70). The apparent lack of finish of the memoir - it is called a sketch - seems to indicate that Woolf is acknowledging the way that the unconscious renders memory. Woolf claims to follow the thread of the memories without arguing for a method in presenting them. Perhaps she intends a certain immediacy and forthrightness through this approach; perhaps it is a recognition that only chronology and free association should shape the memoir, allowing for a certain randomness in appearance. This technique follows psychoanalytic practice in the encouragement of the analysand to free associate.

As well, Woolf's memories can be seen as screens. Freud defines screen memory thus: "recollection . . . [ - ] whose value lies in the fact that it represents in the memory impressions and thoughts *of a later date* whose content is connected with its own by symbolic or similar links [ - ] may appropriately be called a screen memory" (123, italics added). Elsewhere, Freud makes the link between dreams and memories explicit, thus opening the possibility of applying what he says to dreams also to memories: "dreaming is another kind of remembering" (419). Thus, dreams are a subset of memory. We have to remember dreams in order for them

to enter waking consciousness if we are to discuss or analyze them. Freud forcibly points out that recollections do not emerge, or surface, but are constructed, formed by the exigencies of the present:

It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories at all *from* our childhood: memories *relating* to our childhood may be all that we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the **later periods** when the memories were aroused. In **these periods of arousal** the childhood memories did not, as people are accustomed to say, *emerge*; they were *formed* at that time. And a number of motives, with no concern for historical accuracy, had a part in forming them, as well as in the selection of the memories themselves. (126, boldface added, italics in original)

In a later work, he writes, "scenes from infancy are not reproduced during the [psychoanalytic] treatment as recollections[;] they are the products of *construction*" (419, italics added). Woolf's memoirs are a counterpoint to her official life of Roger Fry and a form of sanctuary during the war. These are the immediate pressures on the formation and expression of her memories. Woolf has her ego to preserve as a mode of survival, but she is also seeking to merge with the mother in these early pages of the memoir, and to give her life a certain unity as death threatens. Thus, Freud writes that "no dream [we might say "memory"] is prompted by motives other than egoistic ones" (160). Dreams and memories serve an adaptive function in preserving the ego. Thus, just as dreams are the guardian of sleep (167), memory is the guardian of ego identity, stability, continuity, unity and difference. Marcel Proust, the contemporary writer most admired by Woolf and perhaps the strongest literary influence on her, puts the matter this way, fusing the roles of sleep, forgetting, and memory:

. . . when I awoke in the middle of the night, not knowing where I was, I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence . . . , but then the memory . . . would come like a rope . . . to draw me out of the abyss of not-being, from which I never could have escaped by myself . . . [and] I would . . . gradually piece together the original components of my ego. (4)

The memories that Woolf begins the memoir with are her earliest, the first stirrings of consciousness with which she has now chosen to mark the beginning of her existence. From Freud's perspective, Woolf's memoir writing represents a "compulsion to repeat" that "overrides the pleasure principle" (605). I would say that there is a mixed pleasure in Woolf's setting down her memories: the satisfaction of coherence and continuity comes at the cost of repeating the grief at her mother's death. The wish to fuse with the mother is primal; thus Freud hypothesizes "a compulsion to repeat - something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides" (605). Woolf is driven to write about her mother in *To the Lighthouse*, but the centrality that she gives the figure of her mother in the memoir shows the extent to which she feels she - her ego, personality, character - has been shaped by her mother. Freud writes that "the dreams [we might say "memories"] of patients suffering from traumatic neuroses lead them back with . . . regularity to the situation in which the trauma occurred" (609). These dreams and memories are "endeavouring to master the stimulus [in this case, the death of the mother] retrospectively by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis" (609). Freud states that dreams which bring to memory the psychical traumas of childhood arise in obedience to the compulsion to repeat, "though it is true that in analysis that compulsion is supported by the wish (which is encouraged by 'suggestion') to conjure up what has been forgotten and repressed" (609). Woolf recognizes that her writing *To the Lighthouse* was a therapeutic activity, which she compares to psychoanalysis (81). Until Woolf wrote that novel, she states, her mother "obsessed" her (80). Freud compares obsessions to dreams and argues that the processes of condensation and displacement occur in both, processes which Woolf would surely admit were at play in the construction of her novel. In this sense, her novel is a dream, memory, and symptom of an obsession. This is a pathological view of her novel; it is obviously also a cathartic and healing form, both for writer and reader. Along similar lines, Freud speaks of the analysand's creation of situations or dramatizations - both of which occur in Woolf's novels and

memoirs. He writes of the roles of condensation and displacement in this constructive imaginative activity: "Condensation together with the transformation of thoughts into situations (dramatization) is the most important and peculiar characteristic of the dream work" (154). We may add: of the work of memoir- and novel-writing. He goes on: "Condensation and, above all, displacement are invariable characteristics of these other processes [phobias, obsessions, delusions] as well" (163). Thus, each element of the novel or memoir can be seen as a "dream element," which is representative of other signifying elements, and subject to condensation and displacement: "A dream element is, in the strictest sense of the word, the 'representative' of all this disparate material in the content of the dream" (163).

In writing about her mother, then, there is also an aspect of wish fulfilment involved for Woolf: she approaches her mother through empathic imagination and memory. Her memoir is parallel to a dream in this respect as well: as Freud puts it, "the dream situation represents as fulfilled a wish which is known to consciousness" (165). He continues: "The wish in such cases is either itself a repressed one and alien to consciousness, or it is intimately connected with repressed thoughts and is based upon them" (165). Thus, dreams are "disguised fulfilments of repressed wishes" and "the future which the dream shows us is not the one which will occur but the one which we should like to occur (165). Memories are the past that we "should like to" have had occur, and Woolf's construction of the memoir can be seen along these lines without such an interpretation being reductive. Rather, it is a sign of the richness of the "dream elements" that Woolf presents in the memoir and *To the Lighthouse* - the elements of memory - that deserve the scope and depth of consideration and interpretation that this thesis seeks to offer. Even a work of this length is not sufficient to understand Woolf's motives on an unconscious level, for example by finding traces of her sexuality and other repressed aspects of her self in the memories. That type of analysis is not part of the project here. My intention is to bring together certain texts of Woolf

that seem to illuminate each other and to ask questions about the difficulty of presenting a coherent self - or character - in the novel or memoir form. The analysis of the unconscious level asks: why those memories? I have asked instead: what do those memories mean? How are they enriched and signified by other writings of the author on related subjects?

The Sketch, then, is a work of art, philosophy, and biography. It draws on imagination, creates characters – including the character of the narrator (Woolf herself in one or multiple personae) – and meditates on this process of creation. It seeks to elucidate patterns in one's life and in one's experience of the world; and it represents a pattern itself, a way of coming to terms with and making sense of life.

## Chapter One: The Creation of Character

And now I will hazard a second assertion, which is more disputable perhaps, to the effect that in or about December 1910 human character changed. (2008, 38)

Woolf's statement is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, there is its tentativeness - she says "I will hazard" a "more disputable" assertion - and the leading phrase is "to the effect that," suggesting that this is not exactly what she wants to say. Second, the main clause leads us to ask several questions: what is human character? what does it mean to say that it changed? Why does Woolf say "human character" rather than just "character"? Clearly the adjective is redundant. I believe she wants to distinguish between mere characters in books and actual "human character," which points towards real human beings, so she fuses the concept of character with that of human beings. In "Character in Fiction," she acknowledges the difficulty of agreeing on a notion of character: ". . . this I find it very difficult to explain: what novelists mean when they talk about character" (2008, 39). She poses a similar issue in "A Sketch of the Past":

Here I come to one of the memoir writer's difficulties--one of the reasons why, though I read so many, so many are failures. They leave out the person to whom things happened. The reason is that it is so difficult to describe any human being. So they say: "This is what happened"; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened. And the events mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened. (65)

Later in the memoir, she says:

it is so difficult to give any account of the person to whom things happen. The person is evidently immensely complicated. . . . [P]eople write what they call "lives" of other people; that is, they collect a number of events, and leave the person to whom it happened unknown. (69)

In what sense, then, does human character change? Has it changed before and has it changed since? Partly such a statement must be attributed to Woolf's

flair for drama; she was giving a speech, after all, and she wanted to provoke. But she elaborates on what she means, and she means a great deal:

All human relations have shifted - those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910. (2008, 38)

We get a sense of how character changes historically from novelist to novelist in her "Phases of Fiction," which traces an idiosyncratic history of the novel out of chronological order. One of Woolf's underlying beliefs in that essay seems to be that the novel has the potential to reinvent itself each time it is written. It is the novelists - and the novels - that reinvent the form that are worth remembering - indeed that give us no choice but to remember them, because a novel that reinvents the novel successfully also reinvents character, since for Woolf, agreeing with Arnold Bennett, a novel stands or falls depending on its handling of character (2008, 37). In "Mrs Bennett and Mr Brown," she says, "[t]he novel is a very remarkable machine for the creation of human character, we are all agreed" and "[t]he foundation of good fiction is character-creating, and nothing else" (2008, 32). Thus,

one element remains constant in all novels, and that is the human element; they are about people, they excite in us the feelings that people excite in us in real life. The novel is the only form of art which seeks to make us believe that it is giving a full and truthful record of the life of a real person. (1967, 99)

Readers easily see characters in fiction as real people; and characters produce similar emotions in us as real human beings do. Thus, understanding our relationships to characters might importantly affect our understanding of the ways we relate to people. By examining Woolf's writings on character, this chapter considers Woolf's perspective on the question of how to understand human beings and human relationships.

In "Phases of Fiction," Woolf explores what character meant to writers as diverse as Defoe, Proust, and Dickens. She considers not only character but belief in characters and in the worlds they inhabit. She writes, "[t]o believe [in the world of the novel] seems the greatest of all pleasures" (1967, 58). It is important to hear this statement in the epistemological context of the first half of the twentieth century, in which Nietzsche's and Dostoevsky's meditations on a world without God are still resonating. Woolf's father invented the word "agnostic" and Woolf's mother lost her faith when her first husband died (1985, 91). A brief comment on Woolf's father's virtual absence from this thesis seems appropriate here. While he had a profound influence on her both intellectually and emotionally, and was a significant figure in the English culture of his time, he appears only briefly in the first thirty pages of the Sketch, which is the core of this project.

One can understand, then, why believing in the world of the novel is the greatest of pleasures. However, the word "pleasure" is a curious choice. Later, Woolf uses "satisfaction": "when we can believe *absolutely* our satisfaction is complete" (1967, 64, italics added). Reading a novel is a kind of religious experience: one leaves the world of the everyday for another, parallel - but not transcendent - reality. For the novel to be well-written (according to Bennett and to Woolf), the reader must believe in the people who inhabit that world - the human characters there. Matthew Arnold had already begun to mourn the loss of the absolute and transcendent, and there is a sense in which belief in the world of the novel - the world of form, the shaped, humanly created world of and work of art - is a substitute for a belief in God. The capacity to enter worlds of art or of fiction sometimes seems inversely related to one's capacity to engage the real world. But what is reality? Reality is not necessarily co-existence with the living, interacting with living human bodies and beings around us; it may just as easily be co-existence with the dead or the fictive, believing in the world of the work of art. Society privileges the living, but it is important to see this as a bias and not as a final truth.

How then has human character changed? Again, let us ask how Woolf is using the word "character." This varies depending on the place and time of the usage, but in "Character in Fiction," she calls attention to the connotation of the word that refers to personal morals: "everyone in this room is a judge of character," she says (2008, 38). She elaborates: "people have to acquire a good deal of skill in character-reading if they are to live a single year of life without disaster"(2008, 39). Here she brings out the practical need for reading character well. The common reader to whom most of her essays are addressed needs to read character well in daily life. Woolf means to avoid excessive complexity or abstraction in her use of the word "character" and so she gives the example of the changing character of a cook:

. . . the Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air, in and out of the drawing room, now to borrow the Daily Herald, now to ask advice about a hat. (2008, 38)

After discussing the cook, she draws a link between "human character" and the "human race" - "Do you ask for more solemn instances of the power of the human race to change?" (2008, 38) - and gives the examples of Clytemnestra and Carlyle's wife. There is a certain levity here: a cook, Clytemnestra, and Carlyle's wife. This tone may also explain why Woolf does not choose 1914 as a year that marks a shift in the conception of the human: World War I was perhaps too traumatic an event to bring up in the context of her present audience. Woolf gives female instances of change, which makes it clear to the reader that a large part of the shift in the conception of human character has to do with relations between the sexes. This focus on woman is borne out further by Woolf's choice of the character of "Mrs. Brown" as an ordinary woman whom it is the writer's task to describe. Mrs. Brown has different names in the Georgian age - as distinct from the Edwardian age, a shift that occurred in 1910, when one king succeeded the other. According to Woolf, Mrs. Brown is also called, among Woolf's contemporaries, Ulysses, Queen Victoria, and Prufrock (2008, 53). That is, Woolf's contemporary writers -

Joyce, Strachey, Eliot, Forster, and Lawrence - are all in pursuit of Mrs. Brown, of the person, the self, and are making bold attempts to capture her (2008, 54). The sexual tone of Woolf's description of this quest is not unintentional. However, the pursuit is not only of the human, but also of "life itself," for Mrs. Brown is an

old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what. But the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself. (2008, 54)

The human person has been enlarged to "life itself." This is a significant move: life becomes what Mrs. Brown makes of it; the person and life are one; subjectivity forms existence. She adds later that "Mrs Brown is eternal, Mrs Brown is human nature, Mrs Brown changes only on the surface" (2008, 47).

"The spirit we live by" provokes interpretation. The word "spirit" has an unusual, almost anomalous, quality in a largely secular writer and in an age which prided itself on its scientific accomplishments, particularly the findings of Darwin and Einstein. Woolf recognizes that hers is a great age of English literature but that its greatness is measured by its pursuit of a true description of human character and of "life itself." It is notable in this context that Proust's novel is "in pursuit of lost time." That is, something is lost: reality, time, the person, the love of the mother and father, God. Even before World War I, there was this sense of loss, Woolf believes. The other side of loss is pursuit. The difficulty of doing the work of mourning in human terms leads to the construction of works of art in which the mourning is enacted. This mourning is arguably never completed and so novels continue to be written; however, as Woolf said, writing *To the Lighthouse* kept the spirit of her mother from being with her every day (1985, 80-81). She says this elegiac process was comparable to undergoing psychoanalysis: the process of reliving and writing out memories and trauma while working on the novel had a healing effect.

"The spirit we live by" also has a suggestion of "zeitgeist." "[Mrs. Brown] is . . . the spirit we live by": describing her involves describing the times one lives in. This is what Joyce does in *Ulysses* and what Woolf does in *Mrs. Dalloway*: the person - the character - is an accretion of cultural history, of place and time. As Woolf puts it, "character is largely made up of surroundings and circumstances" (1967, 93). "The spirit we live by": usually one does not live "by" a spirit; one lives "by" certain values. Woolf is performing a subtle substitution here, using "spirit" to represent "values." The configuration of values constitutes the spirit, the zeitgeist. If one can use a single word to describe "the times" and its "values," its culture, perhaps spirit is the best one we have in English: or life, or reality. Woolf admits to vagueness here; and clearly the echo of "God" is present as an encompassing signifier, a representative of what is. However, for Woolf, the focus has moved entirely onto the human person. In the Renaissance, there was a rediscovery of the human - according to its ancient Greek and Roman conception - as central, however dependent on gods, but in the early twentieth century - Nietzsche and Hegel had seen it sooner - the shift had become complete: there is no God, only a spirit of the times.

Woolf's idea of the person is expressed most eloquently perhaps in *To the Lighthouse* - and in a way that echoes the findings of early psychoanalysis:

To everybody there was always this sense of unlimited resources, she supposed; one after another, she, Lily, Augustus Carmichael, must feel, our apparitions, the things you know us by, are childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. (96)

Similarly, in an essay, Woolf describes Dostoevsky's characters as "characters without any features at all. . . . [I]t is all dark, terrible and uncharted" (2008, 34). While we may question these generalizations about Dostoevsky's characters, Woolf is trying to create a sense that morality and identity are being interrogated; there seems to be no lighthouse. Indeed, Dostoevsky is famous for the idea that if God is dead, then everything is permitted. Clearly this conception

of the person and value is not productive: it is deconstructive, it dismantles presence, identity, and morality. Not a tight, discrete, highly functioning version of the self, of human character, it invites the possibility of insanity, of fragmented selves and personae, of schizophrenia. Woolf in this regard seems to have been echoing Hume, who was ridiculed in *To the Lighthouse* by Mr. Ramsay - but, interpreting psychoanalytically, Ramsay's deprecation only shows what a significant influence Hume has had on him. Hume can be said to have deconstructed the self and causality in a way that Woolf explores in novels and in her "Sketch of the Past." As in Proust, the past can never be captured. One can sketch it, even paint or sculpt it, but these are just representations of what has happened. Language inevitably distorts, as does memory. The notion of a continuous self had been disputed by Hume in a way that Woolf seems to endorse. A description of a character is thus a selective representation of a person, but one that draws on as much historio-geographical (time-space) data - "surroundings and circumstances," in Woolf's words - as is possible, in order to create as little distortion as possible. Similarly, the notion of a narrative is an imposition upon reality: a selection of a series of apparent causes and effects by putting them into a coherent story. This leads to the question of form - the form of the novel, of a story - and of how character plays into this form. Woolf was acutely aware of the way that certain writers - like Defoe - create a world in the novel that is meant superficially to reflect the real world. There is a solidity to such a fictive creation. However, it distorts: characters follow a certain trajectory that is often not apparent in the world. For Woolf, there are no conventional or facile ways available to begin, continue, or end a novel. *To the Lighthouse* ends with "I have had my vision." The reader realizes how hard-won this vision was. When did Lily have it: when she applied the final strokes of paint to finish the picture - or before that? It does not matter: she knows she has had it, and the novel ends. Woolf was deeply concerned that a novel should be as true to life as possible - there is a responsibility to aim for verisimilitude. The Edwardians, she said, failed to capture this "spirit we live by." They were materialists - and that was insufficient. The Georgians are

aiming to capture this spirit, but they too may fail. While Woolf describes this generational shift, she does not specify which changes in society – cultural values, technologies, institutions – led to which changes in novelistic techniques.

A related issue, which Woolf does consider, is: does a work of art have to meet certain conventions? Twentieth century visual art, literature, and music thoroughly explore this question. What matters - in my opinion, not perhaps Woolf's - is not to use this question as a condition for judging the success or failure of a work of art: but rather to see whether and how a novel engages the reader, as Woolf explores in "Phases of Fiction." It is not the feeling one has at the end of a novel that matters entirely; but also the experience of belief during the reading of the novel. She describes the "pleasure" and "satisfaction" of belief itself in the world of the novel. A work can be true to life in places, but not in others; this truth is one of the supreme criteria for belief. Is one then moved, does one identify with characters or even one character in the novel? This is what matters to Woolf. "Phases of Fiction" shows where some writers succeed and others fail; an incompleteness of ability among writers is part of the process of making fiction.

The question of whether human character changes also leads to the issue of whether a novelist writes for her time or a future time, or describes some ultimate, perhaps universal, reality. I think Woolf would take the first and second position. For example, Proust was popular in his time, as Tolstoy was in his. But did these writers capture some ahistorical truth about human nature or a truth that a future generation saw more than their contemporaries? These are difficult questions thoroughly to answer, but readers today are more likely to acknowledge the temporality and cultural relativity of human nature and its description. Certain writers seem more clearly untimely: famously and self-consciously, Nietzsche. Flaubert was a modernist, in a sense: he described life itself and the person in a way that others at his time were not doing, and thus influenced and anticipated Woolf and Joyce. He created a certain human reality through his description of character. Woolf would agree that typically people see reality in accustomed,

conventional ways; artists may see reality in ways that are to come, sometimes by drawing on ways that have been (Joyce's drawing on the ancient Greek myths, for example). Thus, when claiming that human character changed in 1910, Woolf means that the revolutions in character that had occurred earlier - we might say in Flaubert in fiction, in Hume and Nietzsche in philosophy, in Marx in politico-economic theory, in Darwin in biology, and so on - came to fruition, were represented by, the shift that occurred generationally between Edwardians and Georgians - in 1910, when one king succeeded the other; when the Post-Impressionist exhibition was held in London; when Tolstoy died - all these events such that a cook - any person - might do quite different things than she had done previously. That is, conditions had been established for such a shift in power relations, in behaviour, in possibility - both in action and imagination - that we might as well choose a year somewhat arbitrarily to mark this change.

Given how important character is for the novel, the difficult question is how can a novel represent life and yet hold together as a novel? When Woolf discusses Forster on the novel, she seems sympathetic both to his position against Henry James - and to James' position. According to Woolf, in *Aspects of the Novel*, "pattern," which is so central for James, "is recognized [by Forster] but savagely censured for her tendency to obscure the human features" (1967, 54). Woolf seems to lean more towards Forster in the following passage from "Phases of Fiction":

the most characteristic qualities of the novel - that it registers the slow growth and development of feeling, that it follows many lives and traces their unions and fortunes over a long stretch of time - are the very qualities that are most incompatible with design and order. (1967, 101)

"Design" and "order" may be taken here to be synonyms for "pattern." Similarly, if the human character is to be properly represented, s/he might appear somewhat unrecognizable, difficult to grasp, or as Woolf puts it, a "little pale and dishevelled":

[for the Georgians] so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth, the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition. Ulysses, Queen Victoria, Mr Prufrock - to give Mrs Brown some of the names she has made famous lately - is a little pale and dishevelled by the time her rescuers reach her. (2008, 53)

This is the price to be paid for representing truthfully. Characters in the Victorian and previous eras had been vivid and vital because of their simplicity: "After reading [Dostoevsky] how could any young novelist believe in 'characters' as the Victorians had painted them? For the undeniable vividness of so many of them is the result of their crudity" (2008, 34). As Woolf puts it elsewhere:

several young writers [her contemporaries] . . . attempt to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them, even if to do so they must discard most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist. (2008, 9)

Woolf makes an important concession to Arnold Bennett with his charge of unreality in character creation among the Georgians: "I am not going to deny that Mr Bennett has some reason when he complains that our Georgian writers are unable to make us believe that our characters are real" (2008, 51). Woolf is interested in all of these words and phrases: "make us"; "believe"; "characters" and "real." She is not sure how much a writer can make a reader do: "what after all is character . . . when we cease to believe what we are told about her and begin to search out her real meaning for ourselves?" (2008, 35)

Is the novel wide and large enough to capture life fully? Clearly not. Perhaps it can be said that novels can capture life to greater or lesser degrees, depending on the skill of a novelist. But is there a type of novel that is appropriate to the spirit of the times? In other words, many people wrote conventional novels in Woolf's time, as they do in ours. But the extent to which these may be considered works of art will depend on the extent to which they truthfully, accurately, represent life in our time. This is a delicate issue because - whose life? Each individual's life and subjectivity are different. Woolf acknowledges the variety

of human perception and taste when she declares that "there is nothing that people differ about more than the reality of characters, especially in contemporary books" (2008, 43). There needs to be a pattern to shape a novel if form involves an arousal and fulfilment of desire. If form does not, then any form will do: whether there is rising action, a climax, a denouement does not matter. There is a tension, then, between balancing the conventional expectations that have come about as a result of the history of the novel with a proximity to reality, especially when that reality is deemed to be fragmentary, without a clear beginning, middle, and end, full of ugliness and brutality, as well as beauty, humour and love. Thus the novel both reflects the range of life - life's incompleteness, its incapability of being summed up, captured - and the history and possibility of the form of the novel, which allows for a certain open-endedness in the experience of belief and desire. That is, each novelist can choose with each book s/he writes the degree to which s/he is going to follow conventions. Woolf's novels represent her choices. *The Waves* is unconventional in the extreme, *The Voyage Out* much more conventional. We may look at her novels and judge which seems to capture life most accurately and yet give the most satisfaction as a novel. In my opinion, the choice is between *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, and partly this will depend on one's temperament and mood. The former is a novel of the city, of politics, science, civilization, cultural history. The latter is a novel of intimacy between a husband and wife, of the family, of philosophy, of art. A reader need not choose which of these two novels is ultimately or absolutely better.

What one can assert is that in both novels and throughout her writing, Woolf recognizes the radical subjectivity of life and individuals, including people's positions on the question of character. At one point she says, "[t]o differ about character is to differ in the depths of the being" (2008, 35); and elsewhere, "[y]ou see one thing in character, I another" (2008, 43). Similarly, there is the variety of human response to the question of what is real: "I ask myself, what is reality? And

who are the judges of reality? A character may be real to Mr Bennett and quite unreal to me" (2008, 43) .

For Woolf, then, the purpose of the novel is to explore character and to enhance our understanding of human beings. She feels that novelists give their insights into life through the minds of characters: "all these great novelists have brought us to see whatever they wish us to see through some character" (2008, 43). Again, in "Character in Fiction" she writes, "I believe that all novels deal with character and that it is to express character that the form of the novel has been evolved" (2008, 42). In writing about *Aspects of the Novel*, she goes so far as to say, echoing Forster, that "human beings have their great chance in the novel" (1967, 53). There is a sense here that the novel is the only place where human beings have their "great chance." That is, it is only through narrative that a human life can gain dignity; the consciousness of history and personal story creates the possibility for heroism, even a quiet heroism in which one is the protagonist of one's own life, in which one participates in the - sometimes small, incremental, undramatic - process of self-creation. The novel insures this possibility by recording, documenting the history of a character's achievement or failure in self-creation, often by providing a cultural and normative context in which that character develops and is either successful in some sense or thwarted. The stories we have heard and read - including novels - underwrite the stories we tell about ourselves and others. Novels have the emotional - Woolf might say spiritual - role today that myths and religions did in the past. That is, stories create persons in order to orient us in space and time; stories communicate the accretions of space-time coordinates that constitute character, what Woolf calls "surroundings and circumstances." Mrs. Dalloway (the character) is not meant to be heroic in the sense that Leopold Bloom ironically is. She is merely the protagonist of a novel: she is interesting therefore in herself, not explicitly because of her connection to heroes of previous stories, like Ulysses. As Woolf puts it, "[f]or the character [in Woolf's time] is no longer fixed and part of the design; it is in itself of interest" (1967,

73). Mrs. Brown - the figure that Woolf creates - exists apart from her heroic precedents: she is only a woman on a train, but the "only" is inaccurate here if it is used reductively. The focus is no longer on the gods, but "only" on the human. This is not a complete break - especially if the gods are considered projections of human forces - but it is a radical shift in emphasis, a making new in secular terms. Proust's narrator is godlike - as is Woolf's usually - and creates the world of the novel by moving between varieties of consciousness. Woolf is clear that though the challenge of accurately creating character requires a godlike capacity, a great deal will be gained. She writes, "we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature. But it can only be reached if we are determined never, never to desert Mrs. Brown" (2008, 54). Thus, "[t]he capture of Mrs Brown is the title of the next chapter in the history of literature; and . . . that chapter will be one of the most important, the most illustrious, the most epoch-making of them all" (2008, 36).

## Chapter Two: The Presence of Memory

This chapter is a close reading of the first thirty pages of the memoir. These pages extend from Woolf's first memories to those of her life until she is thirteen, when her mother dies. Chapter Two aims to follow the flow of this part of the memoir because Woolf seems intentional about the way she wants the memoir's contents to take shape. Thus, she begins with a desire to avoid a method in memoir-writing and relies on the sort of free association that Freud developed as a technique of psychoanalysis. It seems artificial and distorting to break up this narrative drive because what Woolf says before and after each memory is as important as the memory itself. Woolf's framing of each memory says much about her sense of its value to her, both at the time she had the experience and at present. Similarly, what Woolf says about the process of remembering and creating scenes and characters provides a strong basis for comparison with her thoughts on character creation in her earlier essays.

. . . So without stopping to choose my way, in the sure and certain knowledge that it will find itself - or if not it will not matter - I begin: the first memory. This was of red and purple flowers on a black ground - my mother's dress; and she was sitting either in a train or in an omnibus, and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close; and can still see purple and red and blue, I think, against the black . . . (64)

Woolf is not choosing a method; she does not have time to go into the merits and faults of different ways of writing a memoir; she will begin instead and her method will be the one that develops. She begins with her first memory: of colours, shapes, and her connection with her mother. One chapter of this thesis has already dealt with the centrality of her mother in her life; the first memory, which suggests enclosure and surrounding by her mother, echoes that centrality, that sense of absorption in the mother figure from which Woolf, like Lily in *To the Lighthouse*, had to struggle to break free. The black ground is suggestive: of a black hole, a void, nothingness: death, a force that sucks one towards and into it.

The next memory she calls "the most important of all my memories": "If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills - then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory"(64). Here there is a subtle elision of the memory of the mother - displacing her from her natural centrality, and asserting and inserting instead a memory of solitude: lying half asleep, half awake, in bed and hearing the waves breaking behind a yellow blind, its cord and "little acorn" moving across the floor (65). She felt "it is almost impossible that I should be here" and experienced "the purest ecstasy I can conceive"(65). This memory is also womblike in her hearing the surrounding crashing of the ocean. The "little acorn" of the blind, being dragged across the floor with the wind, suggests a grounding, a concrete element, a small piece of reality entering and taking one outside the womb - an external referent that feels arbitrary and temporary, affected by current weather conditions (the wind) and not eternal, like the waves on the beach. Woolf is situated in time and space by the memory of the "acorn," which also suggests a certain rootedness, being within nature as growth, as organic, not as impersonal force. Then there is a moment of self-consciousness, of stepping back:

I could spend hours trying to write that as it should be written, in order to give the feeling which is even at this moment very strong in me. But I should fail (unless I had some wonderful luck); I dare say I should only succeed in having the luck if I had begun by describing Virginia herself. (65)

Woolf is emphasizing the contingency, the arbitrariness to a certain degree, of the words she has chosen to describe her first memory. She shows her perfectionism, her rigour, in using the word "should." There is also a Proustian and Freudian suggestion in the idea that "even at this [present] moment," the past emotion "is very strong in me." Then she makes a curious move: declaring - though she "dare[s] say" it - that she "should" only succeed in "having the luck" to describe accurately, truthfully, if she begins by describing her character, her self, first. Why would this give her more luck? Perhaps it would show us the frame, the perspective, from which she is describing the experience, and in that way, bring us

somehow closer to its reality, by creating a platform of the person to whom something happened from which to view what happened.

In a slightly later version of the first memory, she recalls crows: "the rooks cawing is part of the waves breaking . . . and I lay there . . . drawing in such ecstasy as I cannot describe" (66). She had also used the word "drawing" to refer to the wind in the blinds as it draws its acorn across the floor; and in the later passage, there is the suggestion of drawing breath in accordance with the movement of the waves and the cawing of the rooks. She knows she is alive, she feels connected to sight and sound - which "make equal parts of these first impressions" (66) - and she has a feeling of ecstasy. It is perhaps a feeling of union, a feeling of awareness of the reality and life of things, which her adult self then interprets as ecstatic, because as an adult, this feeling of union is affirming, celebratory, and thrilling.

It is curious that her first memories are of St. Ives; this suggests a certain yearning and idealization. The family would go to St. Ives in the summer to take a break from London. The first memory Woolf has with her mother seems to involve going back to London. London becomes a kind of reality principle in the writing of the memoir because Woolf was "sick of writing Roger's life" (64) and in her wilful focus on St. Ives - and by not elaborating on the memory of a return to London - she shows that memoir writing for her was a kind of relaxation, involving a nostalgia perhaps that she was going to allow herself to dip into.

Her next memory "still makes me feel warm; . . . smelling so many smells at once; and all making a whole that even now makes me stop" (66). Smell and temperature have been added to sight and sound. "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" (66). This is reminiscent of a passage in *To the Lighthouse* of a vessel that is being rubbed into rapture, almost to bursting; but in the novel it does burst and floods the

floor of the mind with ecstasy (100). Rapture suggests being rapt, held in place, enraptured, wrapped up; not ecstasy - not the height of orgasm or joy - but a kind of Proustian capture and bliss: "Those moments - in the nursery, on the road to the beach - can still be more real than the present moment" (67).

At this point, she speculates on the dreamlike quality of memory, in which the reality that surrounds one seems to continue beyond one's control: "I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there . . . as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen" (67). She wonders whether things that we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence. This is formulated in metaphysical terms, but there seems to be a parallel with body memory in psychoanalysis. Woolf does not elaborate.

She does, however, describe the shame of looking in the mirror and explores how this reaction might derive from childhood. Such looking was too indulgent, it was "against our tomboy code" (68) and - although she does not admit this directly - she enjoyed seeing herself so much that it made her feel guilty, so she could only do it when she was alone (68). "My natural love for beauty was checked by some ancestral dread," she says, attributing the source of that guilt to her father, who was Spartan, ascetic, puritanical (68). She explains the difficulty of memoir writing and biography by using the looking glass incident: in this instance, she has tried to explain her shame, but "I do not suppose that I have got at the truth" - though she has no motive for lying. How much harder it must be, she says, for biographers to explain human motivation; thus, she says biographers "leave the person to whom [events] happened unknown" (69). The looking glass fear is also associated with her half-brother Gerald feeling her "private parts"; and with a terrible face that she imagined or dreamed appearing in the mirror (69). It is easy to see why Gerald and this face would be associated in her relationship to mirrors.

She then reflects on memory: "the things one does not remember are as important [as those we do]; perhaps they are more important" (69). She asks a difficult psychological question: why does one forget so many things that must have been - "one would have thought" - more memorable than what is remembered? (70) She gives as an example remembering the hum of bees in the garden but forgetting being thrown naked by her father into the sea. It is possible that the hum of bees in the garden is a conflation of several memories - perhaps of repeated occurrences - while being thrown into the water happened only once and was therefore more forgettable. Shame and repression may also have played a role in making the second memory hard to recall. Perhaps Woolf also wants to acknowledge the maternal connection to the ocean and the womb, rather than any paternal connection.

She goes on to talk about the nature of making connections arising from shocks in lived experience. "It seemed to me that [an] apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr. Valpy's suicide [and] . . . I was quite unable to deal with the pain of discovering that people hurt each other, that a man I had seen had killed himself" (71). She finds the truth, the reality, of something by putting it into words: a shock is a sign of some real thing behind appearances. Shocks lead her to reality, to truth, to a revelation of some order. "It is only by putting [the shock] into words that I make it whole," she says (72). The parallel with the popular description of psychoanalysis as "the talking cure" is apparent. Symptoms, like shocks, are signs that point to unconscious, repressed memories and experiences. Woolf's ability to connect diverse events and objects is remarkable - and important to her capacity as a writer. In the above "moment of being," she believes an apple tree is connected to a suicide. She does not explain what the connection is. This openness is part of her talent: she connects different aspects that seem arbitrary, contingent; she recognizes that the unconscious has a pattern-making power, that it connects things and presents them to consciousness as if making an attempt to understand them. We somehow feel a connection between an apple tree and a

suicide, but that relationship needs to be teased out: a tree can be used for hanging; an apple was what Eve gave to Adam, which led to their expulsion from paradise, so that eating the apple was a suicide. The apple tree suggests growth, fullness, vitality, and the suicide, death. But these connections are left to the reader to find; Woolf is poetic and surrealist in this sense.

Her return always to an idea of the whole is part of her gift as well. Before mentioning the suicide, she says she saw "a ring [that] enclosed what was [a] flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower. 'That is the whole,' I said" (71). This sense of enclosure echoes her description of the way her mother surrounded her life as a child, and even later when she was "obsessed" by her mother (80). Her mother's presence is the ring; Woolf is the flower. That is the whole, one could say: mother and child. *To the Lighthouse* begins with Mrs. Ramsay and her son; the novel ends with Lily painting mother and son, which as a subject has a long history in Christian art. In the passage in the memoir, Woolf sees the flower as part of the earth, as connected, and both as part of a whole; she generalizes from hurting her brother and his hurting her to seeing how people hurt each other, and she no longer wants to participate in that whole process of mutual damaging. By putting an event into words, "I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me"; thus, she sees a context, an explanation, causes, effects, and understands the purpose of something within a larger frame (72). She describes this putting of different pieces together as "a great delight," "perhaps . . . the strongest pleasure known to me . . . 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" (72). She believes that "[b]ehind the cotton wool [which represents accumulated moments of nonbeing] is hidden a pattern" (72). The pattern is one of interpretation; that is, to use the part-whole analogy, moments of being are "embedded" in moments of nonbeing. In this sense, the essence - the meaningful core - is the centre. But Woolf also uses the idea of the whole – including what surrounds - as what is important. This

movement from detail to whole, from core to surroundings, characterizes the dialectic of Woolf's thought and writing. Neither is privileged finally; both are significant, depending on one's vantage point.

Moments of being are tokens of an overall pattern. The pattern is one that is created by the interpreter, the writer, by explaining how this event, this thing, relates to the whole. The relationship to the whole - making the relationship clear by showing its nature - is what Woolf is calling pattern-making. Thus she can say "Hamlet" or a "Beethoven quartet" is the truth about "this vast mass that we call the world": that is, Shakespeare and Beethoven have looked at tokens of life - events, shocks - and involved them in a pattern - which in the literary case may be a character, scene, or play and in the musical case, melody, movement, quartet - thus making a work of art (72). There are more mystical parts of her philosophy: for example, she asserts that "the whole world is a work of art" (72). I believe she means that the events of the world, the shocks that the world gives rise to, can be contextualized within a work of art to make them whole; thus potentially, the whole world is a work of art, the world constitutes the subject and the materials for a work of art. Woolf would admit that our experience of life is not as a whole, but would presumably claim that works of art make life seem whole. In this way, life and the world are reflected, re-presented, within the work of art in a way that helps us find patterns in the work of art, in life, and in the world. This pattern-making ability, giving meaning, constructing a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, is a particularly human activity, given to artists and non-artists alike. Woolf goes on to say "we are parts of the work of art" (72). She may mean that human beings - like the world - are also materials and subjects for art. Human beings make up the world; as she puts it, "all human beings are connected with this [pattern]" (72). This claim has two senses: we are pattern-making and we are parts of the patterns that other people make up about us.

Woolf then says, "there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God" (72). Partly she means that it is impossible to

describe a person completely; and in this sense, not only is there no Shakespeare, but she and I - all individuals, all selves - are fictions. "We are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself" (72). Here she is taking liberty with language in order to achieve poetic resonance. What does it mean to say "we are the words"? We make the words, but we are also part of the words that others use to describe us; thus, I tell stories about my sister and she tells stories about me. "We are the music." Similarly, we shape the music; as a composer, as a pianist, I make music, but this music is made from the materials of my life, which includes human beings and experiences. Thus, we make up the music, where "make up" is used in both an active and passive sense: we create music, but music is created of us. "We are the thing itself." How is this clause going beyond the previous two? That is, we understand the transition from words to music, but now we have "the thing itself." What does Woolf mean? She has just mentioned God, as well as Hamlet and a quartet: she believes in the reality of works of art more than in the reality of their creators. She trusts the dance, not the dancer; she experiences the play, not the playwright, the music, not the composer. Let us look at the "we" of this final clause: "we are the thing itself." The "we" here is human beings: she is saying that we are the stuff of literature, of music, of life - where life includes both literature, music and the world, what is, reality. Here there is a conflation of several terms that Woolf leaves ambiguous but that should be parsed. "The world" is a term for what contains moments of being and moments of nonbeing. By interpreting moments of being - which may be painful or beautiful - by explaining them, we come to some reality, some truth, which - in great artists - takes the form of lasting works of art, like a play or a quartet. We are the things that we write about: we are the materials from which art is formed; we are part of the world, we create and experience shocks; our lives are the materials - the reality - from which truth is found. This leads to a distinction that Woolf does not make, but which I believe is useful: reality is the stuff of daily life, moments of being and nonbeing; truth is the interpretation, the explanation of this reality. In great art, truth is found in

substantial amounts - that is why it is great art. But people can find their own truths each week, each month, each year, as they live.

Woolf goes on to wonder about what "background conception" affects people's choices (73). "This intuition of mine [that shapes shocks into patterns]- it is so instinctive that it seems given to me, not made by me - has certainly given its scale to my life ever since I saw the flower in the bed by the front door at St. Ives" (72). She says that each person lives from some background - she does not say "unconscious" - conception that affects one every day; hers is that there is a pattern hidden behind the cotton wool. Her connection with the flower and her sense that it is part of a whole suggests that pattern-making is a contextualizing power: it is the ability to see how one thing connects to the whole. "That is the whole," she said in front of the flower. Woolf writes that the moment of saying "That is the whole" shaped her life thereafter. Let us look at the parts of the sentence in which she says this: "I saw" - the sight led to an insight; "the flower" - a growing, living being, a thing of beauty; "in the bed" - which suggests rest, peace, tranquility, belonging; "by the front door" - the beginning of something, an opening; "at St. Ives" - a place associated with summer, calm, a break, a holiday, rest - not part of London life (72). She says her intuition "seems" given to her, not made by her: she acknowledges here that it is made by her, it is an interpretive act, though it seems in a sense a gift from outside, a part of her nature that is not deliberate or chosen by her. Unaware (as we are) of whether there is a biological basis - for example, a chromosome - that gives one the ability easily to see parts in relation to wholes, she can only say that she perhaps has this tendency, that it is "instinctive" or "intuitive."

This tendency is what makes her a writer, she feels: the desire to explain, to connect the part to the whole, to put the parts together, as Mrs. Ramsay does with her knitting. "I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else" (73). There are several aspects to this statement: she seems hopeful in believing that whereas "running a shop" or learning another practical

skill might be forgotten by history, by writing, her words are recorded and thus passed on to future generations (73). As well, writing is necessary for her on a personal basis: writing grounds her. We may be grateful as recipients of her words in a way that we would not be had she run a shop. Thus, the psychological necessity and value of her writing her memoirs has become apparent over time - the echo of her writing spreading out around the world and into the twenty-first century - in a way that she could not have known at the time. What was necessary for her is also helpful and perhaps necessary to her readers. On some level she perceives this: that she as one person, Virginia Woolf, is not important and - like Shakespeare and Beethoven - lives and dies, soon does not exist. But her words go on, endure; the play, not the playwright, the memoir, not the writer, lasts.

Woolf then begins a sketch of a first character. Part of the charm of her portrait comes from its Dickensian quality, as she acknowledges: that she remembers Mr. Wolstenholme from a child's perspective and never afterwards, so she sees him always in the same way. There is a lovely irony to her statement - which she knows is false to an adult, but is true for a child: "he had only one characteristic" (73). She shows the self-consciousness of her character-drawing by adding at one point her intention - "[b]y way of shading him a little" (73) - to give him roundness and pathos, so that he is no longer a caricature. She makes an odd statement after describing a second person very briefly: "The character of Mr. Gibbs also seems to me complete and amuses me very much" (74). She can be taken to mean that this is the extent to which she remembers Mr. Gibbs - the extent to which he demonstrated his character to the young Virginia - so that these memories are all that she can use to describe him: thus he has been described completely. She gives an even shorter portrait of C.B. Clarke and then says of the three men, "But how real they were! How we laughed at them! What an immense part they played in our lives!"(74) The three exclamation points express the most emotion Woolf has shown in the memoir so far. Even one exclamation point was rare until now. Suddenly we have three: that is, the reality of these individuals is

emphatic - their vividness, their peculiarity, the force of the impression they made, and how large a part they played in the life of the Stephen family.

There is a suggestion that although after many years, details of another person's life are lost, the feeling of his or her vividness remains; the feeling of the extent to which he or she has shaped one, influenced one, been a part of one's life, continues. In this sense, each of these characters reflects the depth of feeling Woolf has for her mother, for, as with these men, the memoir shows how little she really knew of her mother. Woolf admits this limited knowledge. Yet - or therefore - the presence of such a person has a greater impact on a subconscious, non-linguistic level.

The laughter that Woolf refers to suggests lightness as a possible way to describe character: laughing comes from not seeing a person as fully human, not tragically or even dramatically, but as material for humour, for amusement. Woolf would outgrow this perception and create characters with a great deal of pathos - characters like Septimus Smith, Mrs. Ramsay, Peter Walsh. Yet there is some levity in the description of many characters in her novels. Even Septimus - with his apparently profound statements - like "Men must not cut down trees" (35) - becomes a figure to be amused by; certainly Rezia, with her penchant for high drama, and Mr. Ramsay, with his enormous ego, are to be smiled at. While there is pathos to all three of these characters, we see through the memoir Woolf's tendency in childhood to create a cartoon of a person for the sake of humour and entertainment.

She then describes another character - Justine Nonon - and says, "I remember her as if she were a completely real person, with nothing left out, like the three old men" (74). There is a double meaning here: there is a sense in which, to a child, all that one knows of someone is all that there is. The "as if," however, implies that these little pieces of knowledge - "our apparitions, the things you know us by" - "are simply childish" and "beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is

unfathomably deep," as she writes in *To the Lighthouse* (96). The memoir suggests that even the girl, Virginia Stephen, recognizes that there is a whole person behind what one knows: that she is only seeing the tip of the iceberg. The person comes and goes and has an entire separate life which children are vaguely aware of; yet even a few brief encounters with an adult can be so real and memorable that they stay with one all one's life.

For Woolf, when people continue to live beyond one's childhood acquaintance with them, their characters become manifestly incomplete to one - impossible to describe fully and therefore infinite and unknown. However, because certain people are not available to us as adults, by disappearing through loss of contact while one is a child, there is an illusion - which Woolf lightly perpetuates - that all that a child knows of a person is all that there is to know. "The same thing applies to places," she says: "I cannot see Kensington Gardens as I saw it as a child because I saw it only two days ago" (75). Thus it is as if the successive experiences of a person or place become like layers of cotton wool, obscuring the vividness one has as a child in experiencing them. Moments of being that occurred in childhood can later become moments of nonbeing, as we develop fixed ideas and roles in our relationships with people and places. For example, in terms of places, London and St. Ives make up the two "ways" in Woolf's memoir, like the Guermantes and Meseglise ways in Proust, and she says that in her childhood, St. Ives was preferable in that "nonbeing made up a great proportion of our time in London" (77). She then describes two moments of being: one involves a puddle that she felt she could not step across, after which "the whole world became unreal" (78). Again there is a relationship with the whole. The second moment involves a feeling of "dumb horror" and "hopeless sadness" that she feels later in a bath, remembering what had happened with an "idiot boy" earlier that day (78). She describes this feeling as a "collapse," "as if I were passive under some sledgehammer blow; exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning that had heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected, with nothing to ward it off"

(78). In *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, there are moments of ecstasy that are moments of being for two of the characters: Mrs. Ramsay (99-100) and Septimus Smith (31). There is an excess of meaning, particularly for Septimus: there are so many signifiers, one does not know what to do; one feels overwhelmed, trapped, paralyzed. Woolf then tells of how at night as a child, she and her sister Vanessa would tell stories of a family named Dilke, being impressed by their wealth. These seem to be stories with characters at their core: Miss Rosalba, Clemont, Mrs. Dilke are all named in the seven lines in which Woolf mentions this late-night storytelling, which was partly used as a way to ward off Woolf's childhood fears - by hearing the comfort of someone else's voice and not imagining the fire with its flickers having a life of its own.

As if reinforcing this implicit point about the importance of people in her childhood, Woolf in the next section says that "among the innumerable things left out in my sketch I have left out the most important - those instincts, affections, passions, attachments - there is no single word for them, for they changed month by month - which bound me, I suppose, from the first moment of consciousness to other people" (79-80). She later describes "the consciousness of other groups impinging upon ourselves; public opinion; what other people say and think" - all of which are not described in biographies, or "very superficially" (80). She calls these social forces "invisible presences" and gives the example of her mother, who "obsessed" her every day until Woolf had written *To The Lighthouse* (80). She says, as a memoir writer, "I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but [I] cannot describe the stream" (80). She aims to apply language to previously unconscious, invisible presences in her life. This seems an almost impossible task; yet she is ambitious and hopeful. The speed with which she wrote *To the Lighthouse* - likened to bubbles rushing out of a pipe, such was "the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind" (81) - shows how unconscious the writing of the novel had been for her. Language was being used in rapid free association to connect with and draw out what was unconscious.

Later in the memoir, Woolf emphasizes the importance of people and her mother in the world of her childhood by using the word "crowded" twice. A usage like the following is typical: the girl Virginia was clearly absorbed in "the common life of the family, very merry, very stirring, crowded with people; and she [Woolf's mother] was the centre; it was herself" (84).

After talking about the ease with which she wrote *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf goes on to claim that her first memory is of her mother's lap (81), contradicting what she had said about the memory of the waves and the acorn. There is also a Proustian memory of longing for the mother to come up at bedtime: "[t]hen she told me to think of all the lovely things I could imagine. Rainbows and bells . . ." (82). This statement tells us something of Woolf's passion for beauty and loveliness, as does her question: "how did I first become conscious of what was already there - her astonishing beauty?" (82) In describing her mother's beauty, Woolf speculates, "[p]erhaps I never became conscious of it; I think I accepted her beauty as the natural quality that a mother had by virtue of being our mother. It was part of her calling. I do not think that I separated her face from that general being; or from her whole body" (82). Again, there is the distinction and relationship between the part and the whole. In remembering the emotional tone of their connection and her mother's way of being, Woolf says her mother "looked very sad when she was not talking," as when she was reading; that Woolf was "struck by the gravity of her face"; that "behind the active," there was "the sad, the silent" (82-83). In describing her mother as younger, at Little Holland House, she envisions her mother and her aunts talking "with foreign emphatic gestures . . . to the eminent men (afterwards to be made fun of by Lytton [Strachey]); rulers of India, statesmen, poets, painters" (87). We see the motif of Woolf's making fun of men of power, from the three men of Woolf's childhood to these "eminent men." At one point, Woolf describes what a series of people might be wearing, and one sees how these sartorial details show character and add colour to the scenes of

her imagination: "Tennyson in his wideawake; Watts in his smock frock; Ellen Terry dressed as a boy; Garibaldi in his red shirt . . ." (87).

Woolf is intrigued by the limitations of human knowledge, including her limited knowledge of her mother. Learning and knowing - including the search for lost time that is the memoir - are related to desire, and Woolf's inquiry into her mother extends to Julia Cameron's romantic life. She says that her mother was nineteen and in Venice when she "met Herbert Duckworth; fell head over ears in love with him, he with her, and so they married. That is all I know, perhaps all that anyone now knows, of the most important thing that ever happened to her" (89). Woolf is fascinated by the idea that we know so little about even the people whom we are closest to. However, she wants to avoid idealizing in recalling, as when she describes Herbert Duckworth; she wants truth, not distortion. "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" (89). Woolf says that there is very little that she knows about the four happy years in which her mother was married to Herbert; thus she tells what she knows in a paragraph of ten lines. Woolf heard about "the complete collapse" into which her mother fell when her husband died, so that (according to Woolf's half-sister) "she used to lie upon his grave at Orchardleigh. As she was undemonstrative that seems a superlative expression of her grief" (90). Similarly, Kitty Maxse, a family friend, remembers only one instance of Woolf's mother describing her time with Herbert: Julia said that "I have been as happy and unhappy as it is possible for a human being to be" (89). Woolf is absorbed by what people say and think about people - how people live in the minds of other people, as though impressions and things that people have said give off vibrations that one carries in one's body throughout life. In the memoir, Kitty, Leslie Stephen (Woolf's father), and Stella (Woolf's half-sister) all give descriptions of Julia that Woolf records.

Woolf imaginatively reconstructs certain scenes involving her mother. She says her mother lost her faith after her husband died (90) and describes the

contradictions in her mother's personality. For example, a Miss Robins says "she was a mixture of the Madonna and a woman of the world" (90). Woolf then tells a remarkable anecdote, putting herself into the mind of her mother as a widow, putting together what others have said of her, and painting a scene in which the widow Julia visits Leslie and his wife; and the next day Leslie's wife dies suddenly. A few years later, Leslie and Julia are married - the beautiful widow to the "gaunt bearded widower," Woolf says, in a phrase that she repeats, simplifying her father's character in Dickensian style (91).

Woolf describes her mother's death at different points in the memoir, as if writing one long involved scene would be overdramatic and traumatic. She also relates two moments of being that occur after her mother's death, one at a train station in the brilliance of a sunset, the other in which "poetry was coming true" (93). In the latter moment, there evolves a transparency between words and life, so that one "seems to foretell [the words] as if they developed what one is already feeling" (93). After Woolf's mother dies, unreality is related to silence, an exile from language: "It was not merely dull; it was unreal. A finger seemed laid on one's lips" (93). She repeats: "the silence was stifling. A finger was laid on our lips" (94). "The grown up world into which I would dash for a moment and pick off some joke or little scene and dash back again upstairs to the nursery was ended" (94). This is the world of the four characters - three men and one woman - that Woolf had earlier mentioned.

Then, by way of showing the scope of her loss at her mother's death, Woolf articulates the extremity of her pleasure at her mother's approval of her, which reveals how much the existence of her self depended on her mother. Woolf was as if brought into being by her mother, both in an obvious biological, but also a cultural, sense. Her pleasure, her validation "was like being a violin and being played upon," as when she found that her mother had sent a story of hers to a family friend: it was so imaginative, her mother had said (95). The analogy of the violin suggests that Woolf was acutely sensitive to her mother's approbation, which

seems to have been the purpose of her existence: a violin exists to be played. She further describes how "soothing" and "exciting" it was to choose what jewels her mother was to wear to dinner or to walk to dinner arm-in-arm with her (95). Woolf's relationship to her mother suggests an intense eroticism, as if the erotic and the sense of beauty was born in Woolf with her mother.

It is an eroticism that is preserved in Woolf's prose. Her fiction writing aims to represent both moments of being and of nonbeing, but is highly sensuous and conscious of several dimensions: of rhythm - one thinks of the crashing of the waves in her earliest memory; of beauty - one recalls the entrance into eros and culture that her mother initiates in her; and of details, both as themselves and as parts of a whole, in a movement that recalls her sense of herself as both part of and separate from her mother. The passage on Woolf's "philosophy" becomes a window into the way Woolf constructs and, in a sense, justifies her life and her work: writing as a technique (like psychoanalysis) of processing the shocks that one experiences, and writing as creation of a world. This part of the memoir, then, from Woolf's earliest memories to the death of her mother - and including reflections on the process of representing experience through language - shows the importance, perhaps the centrality, of Woolf's early childhood to her later life, writing, and thought.

### Chapter Three: The Art of Truth

This chapter of the thesis extends the last chapter's close reading of the memoir by showing the connection between the first thirty pages of the Sketch and aspects of *To the Lighthouse*. Specifically, I argue for the similarity between Woolf's project in writing the memoir and Lily's in completing her painting and between representations of the characters of Mrs. Stephen and Mrs. Ramsay, respectively. The purpose of this comparison is to show that Woolf was struggling to achieve a certain individuality in her relationship with her mother prior to the writing of the memoir. This struggle involves the process of grieving and healing through the creation of a work of art. By looking at details of both the novel and the memoir, parallels in character and theme are immediately perceptible and each text is enhanced by the reading of the other. Thus, it is almost as though the memoir is a later alteration to a previous text, the novel. The novel was a necessary process to get at the depth of those early childhood memories and shows how the workings of the unconscious and the conscious mind are altering lived experiences to produce new meanings - connections, significations, avoidances. We might also ask: what is gained in writing a complex story, a novel, to deal with one's relationship to one's mother? What about the form of this work makes it perhaps more truthful, though less empirically accurate, than the later memoir? This chapter explores such questions, considering the themes or truths of the novel to be no more or less definitive than those of the memoir, but rather as extensions and extrapolations of the source material that shaped the memoir.

Firstly, both the memoir and novel consider the process of describing and representing a shock - in words and in paint, respectively. As Chapter One of the thesis has shown, Woolf's concept of character is an integral part of her "philosophy," which relates to her views on life and art. Character formation occurs in "moments of being," which may be violent or harmonious (1985, 71). Woolf uses the word "shock" to refer to a violent experience or trauma. Woolf writes in her

memoir: "The shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I feel that I have had a blow; . . . it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of real things behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole . . ." (72). Woolf believes in the power of language to recreate life, to make life whole, to put parts together in a way that gives satisfaction: ". . . it gives me a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps it is the strongest pleasure known to me" (1985, 72). A similar idea of stitching together the separated fragments of life appears in *To the Lighthouse*, where deadness in life appears corpselike, as moments of nonbeing, which then require effort to weave together - like the knitting that Mrs. Ramsay works on. Lily is creating a painting that will help her to articulate and put together the separate pieces of her life, the fragments of existence that the death of Mrs. Ramsay has left behind: "And [Lily] wanted to say not one thing but everything. Little words that broke up the thought and dismembered it said nothing. 'About life; about death; about Mrs. Ramsay' - no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody" (265). There is in Woolf both great optimism and pessimism about the power of language and of art. At times, there is rapture and triumph, and at other times, failure and desolation. The attempt to represent, however, makes life meaningful and worth living.

As shown in both novel and memoir, when one has a shock and experiences trauma, the most effective way to understand and move past it is by describing it. Writing to heal by capturing truth sometimes feels like the most useful thing one can do. As Woolf puts it (as quoted previously): "There is a pattern [of truth] hid behind the cotton wool [of everyday nonbeing]. And this conception affects me every day. I prove this, now, by spending the morning writing, when I might be walking, running a shop, or learning to do something that will be useful if war comes. I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else" (73). Writing provides an access to truth. Writing and re-writing can produce art, which can convey truth, like "*Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet" (72).

This idea - of the value of representation - appears in *To the Lighthouse*, as well: "like everything else this strange morning the words became symbols, wrote themselves all over the grey-green walls. If only she could put them together, she felt, write them out in some sentence, then she would have got at the truth of things" (219). There is here an echo of the passage in which Mr. Ramsay seeks another letter of the alphabet (54) - there lies truth, beyond us most of the time; we usually live in nonbeing, but truth is within reach. Grey in the passage just quoted is a symbol of ambiguity but also blockage, the absence of feeling. Green suggests life, lushness, possibility: it is as if there is a potential for affirmation within the numbness. Beyond the blow that life sometimes gives us, there is the sublimation and transformation of the shock, its alchemy, into a vital power, which art can render marvellously. At one point, Lily hears Mr. Ramsay's words, which echo from the first section of the book, when Mrs. Ramsay was still alive: "We perish each alone." But now the words are separated: "Perished. Alone. The grey-green light on the wall opposite. The empty places. Such were some of the parts, but how bring them together?" (220) Mrs. Ramsay is described in Part One as a "wedge-shaped core of darkness"(95); here she haunts the empty places - present in her absence.

Another passage in the Sketch gives the sense of truth that art can evoke, and this power of art is depicted in the novel. In childhood, Woolf once suddenly felt that the poetry that she was reading "was coming true. Nor does that give the feeling. It matches what I have sometimes felt when I write. The pen gets on the scent" (93). One gets on "the right track," to use a contemporary idiom; the hunt for the truth quickens. When art is able to capture truth, it endures. Perhaps its endurance is a sign that truth is present. Lily passes by the poet Mr. Carmichael and wants to ask him what meaning there is in existence. "That would have been his answer, presumably - how "you" and "I" and "she" pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint" (267). In the passage about the shock-receiving capacity of writers, we see that this is similar to Woolf's own view: great

art, such as produced by Shakespeare and Beethoven, lasts. On a deeper level, it does not matter whether the artwork is seen or not; the attempt has been made to reach truth, to get to the letter R, to put the severed parts together, and this attempt gives meaning to the artist's life. As Lily feels in the final passage of the book: her current painting "would be hung in attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again" (309-310). And when she completes the work: ". . . Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision" (310).

In the novel, making art that seeks to capture truth at times seems ridiculous, futile. The comic absurdity of trying to reach R - which is, ironically, the first letter of Mr. Ramsay's name - is apparent in Part One of *To the Lighthouse*. The name "Ramsay" suggests a ramming of saying, a forcing into language. Mr. Ramsay cannot see how his situation resembles that of the skeptical philosopher Hume, who Ramsay is chuckling over because Hume was so fat that he got stuck in a bog, which, like quicksand, causes one to sink further the more one moves to get out. There is a tragicomedy to the artist's striving and Woolf expresses this in a passage describing Lily trying to come to terms with Mrs. Ramsay: "Here was Lily, at forty-four [Woolf's age, writing the novel], wasting her time, unable to do a thing, standing there, playing at painting, playing at the one thing she did not play at, and it was all Mrs. Ramsay's fault. She was dead. The step where she used to sit was empty. She was dead" (224). One might say the words many times, but the feeling does not sink in. Language is inadequate to experience. The work of art in this passage is a work of serious play - it is the most serious thing an artist can do, but the artist must be open with it, somehow playful, supple. Art-making is not a rigid, linear process; its creation relies on openness and flow. In blaming Mrs. Ramsay, Lily is rendered childish - no longer childlike, but smaller, diminished. The futility of creation is highlighted: making art is in danger of becoming trivial, foolish, comical. Indeed its very seriousness - as in Mr. Ramsay's struggle to reach R - renders it silly when it becomes more an act of ego, of getting ahead of other

philosophers, rather than of getting at truth. In a similar way, there is a striving "to the lighthouse"; the journey of the novel is the search for guidance, for light in the darkness, for land where there was once only water. In this sense, the lighthouse becomes a symbol of the God of Genesis: the power to separate light from darkness, water from land; the ability to make distinctions and to see clearly.

Mrs. Ramsay, though not an artist, has the capacity to knit together, to bring the parts of life together into a whole, and this makes her godlike in Lily's eyes. Mrs. Ramsay creates whole experiences, harmonizes disparate elements, so that scenes stay in one's memory - seem to generate and point toward what is true in life, just as great artists do. The following long passage gives this sensation:

When she thought of herself and Charles throwing ducks and drakes and of the whole scene on the beach, it seemed to depend somehow upon Mrs. Ramsay sitting under the rock, with a pad on her knee, writing letters. . . . That woman sitting there writing under the rock resolved everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags; she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite (she and Charles squabbling, sparring had been silly and spiteful) something - this scene on the beach for example, this moment of friendship and liking - which survived after all these years complete, so that she [Lily] dipped into it to re-fashion her memory of him, and there it stayed in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art. (239-40)

"She brought together this and that and then this" - Mrs. Ramsay is often described as contributing, providing, giving (224). The similarity between memory and art is made explicit in this passage: memories resurface after many years because they seem to have a message for us, some truth. Mrs. Ramsay helps one to appreciate likeness and connection, to transcend difference and "irritations." She helps one go beyond ego, to see affinity. She is often described as doing some creative act - here writing, at other times knitting - while other things are

going on, as though a scene depends on her shaping it - another aspect of her godlike power.

By considering similarities between Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Stephen, we gain a fuller understanding of both women and the challenges for art (specifically painting and writing) in representing people and truth. Mrs. Ramsay is arguably the most complex character in Woolf's fiction (with the possible exception of Mrs. Dalloway), and Woolf's mother was likely the most influential person in Woolf's early life. In the Sketch, Woolf emphasizes the godlike centrality of her mother to her childhood. Similarly, Mrs. Ramsay is the focal point of Part One of *To the Lighthouse*. Both characters are wives to difficult intellectuals and both are mothers to many children. The deaths of both women - partway through the novel and early in Woolf's life - have a lasting impact and lead the artists, Lily and Woolf, to reflect on and make sense of these mother figures. The loss is so great, it is comparable to the death of God, of a stable set of values belonging to a particular generation and which Victorian society represented for the Georgians - Woolf's generation. *Mrs. Dalloway* ends with "For there she was" (296): an assertion of past being. Woolf uses the same phrase in the Sketch to describe the presence of her mother (note the use of "certainly" as the first word): "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 . . ." (81). The cathedral image reinforces this sense of hallowed space, of the divine. There is an irony to the simplicity of "there she was" that is parallel to the earlier-quoted "She was dead": in the former case, a person seems so immediate, but is so unknown. "[I]t is so difficult to describe any human being," Woolf writes in the memoir (65). As quoted earlier, Mrs. Ramsay feels, when she is alone, that "one after another, she, Lily, Augustus Carmichael, our apparitions, the things you know us by, are simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep, but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by" (96). Similarly, at one point late in the novel, Lily cries out for Mrs. Ramsay and "there she sat" in

memory (300), somehow unavailable, inscrutable, distant - yet there. Woolf says that as a child, time alone with her mother was always being interrupted (83); her mother was available for only brief moments. The mother is like the God of monotheism: present, but absent, unknowable, but all-knowing. In another passage, Woolf ascribes the godlike power to create to her mother, not only in a biological capacity, but also in terms of the culture around the Stephen family: "She was keeping . . . the panoply of life - that which we all lived in common - in being" (83). Mrs. Stephen, like Mrs. Ramsay, seems to populate spaces, bring social life into being: "[w]hen I think of her spontaneously she is always in a room full of people" (83). Lily also feels the "extraordinary power that Mrs. Ramsay had *over* one. Do this, she said, and one did it" (262, italics added). According to the memoir, Mrs. Stephen might say to Virginia, "'Go and take the crumb out of [her father's] beard' . . . and off I trot" (83). This command recalls Genesis: let there be light, God said, and there was light. The word "over" (in the passage from the novel) is suggestive: a power from above. There is also a sense of Mrs. Stephen filling a space, creating a certain ambiance: "And of course, she was central. I suspect the word 'central' gets closest to the general feeling I had of living so completely in her atmosphere that one never got far enough away from her to see her as a person. . . . She was the whole thing; Talland House was full of her; Hyde Park Gate was full of her" (83). It seems impossible for Woolf to overstate how important her mother was to her childhood.

In the same way that God rests on the seventh day of Creation, Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Stephen deeply appreciate time alone. "'Oh the torture of never being left alone!' was one of [Mrs. Stephen's] sayings" (90). Similarly, "[Mrs. Ramsay] was glad, Lily thought, to rest in silence, uncommunicative . . ." (256). In one of the most sexually expressive scenes of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay has time alone with the beam of the lighthouse while she is knitting (100): the pleasure, the ecstasy of solitary creative work, parallels the delight that Woolf feels while writing: she describes in the Sketch "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" (72). Partly what makes character so difficult to describe for Woolf is the encompassing capacity of individuals, their remarkable versatility. Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Stephen both seem to be comfortable alone and in company - at one time, each is a "wedge-shaped core of darkness" or a "centre of complete emptiness" (266) and at another, a fount of vitality.

After the death of the mother figure, the artist struggles, childless, to find her own centre. "Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!" [Lily] repeated. She owed it all to her" (241). Like a child calling for help, Lily yearns for the closeness of the mother - to offer the child guidance, to absorb her within the abundance of her love. The journey of the third part of the novel is for Lily to a lighthouse of art that reveals the lineaments of truth: a beacon of light, some solid ground, a point to navigate by. Art has this grounding value for Lily, as it does for Woolf.

There are smaller resonances between the characters of Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Stephen. By recognizing these affinities, the reader gets a sense of the importance for Woolf that certain details had in expressing the character of the mother figure, such that Woolf not only includes them in *To The Lighthouse*, but also in the Sketch, written about fifteen years later. For example, there is the way that both Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Stephen decide to marry. The tone in these passages is speculative, both in the novel and in the memoir. The suggestion is that the usually omniscient narrator of the novel, as well as Woolf in the memoir, are giving such a significant moment - accepting marriage - its privacy, respecting its intimacy. "I will marry you, [Mrs. Ramsay] *might* have said, with her hand in his; but no more" (295, italics added). The reconstruction of the scene with Woolf's mother also relies on imagination because, of course, it was before Woolf's birth: "Then one night when he had given up all thought of it . . . , she followed him to the door and said 'I will try to be a good wife to you'" (91). Perhaps Woolf is quoting her father's recollection.

There is another scene in *To The Lighthouse* which has its later echo in the memoir. Mrs. Ramsay comes back from her visits to the poor in the village, just as Mrs. Stephen did. On one of these occasions, Virginia notices her mother's downcast eyes, which silently convey a death: ". . . she half turned from us and lowered her eyes. From that indescribably sad gesture I knew that Philips, the man who had been crushed on the line and whom she had been visiting, was dead" (82). There is a strikingly similar mention of Lily's remembrance of "the shape of a woman, peaceful and silent, with downcast eyes" (264). The more distant echo here is of depictions of the Virgin Mary by Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael. Lily "had thought . . . eyes that are closing in pain have looked on you. You have been with them there" (291). Here is the perception that a ministering angel - radiant, transcendent (I have mentioned the divine element to both mothers) - has temporarily filled a "stuffy little bedroom . . . with beauty" (291). Though dying, "eyes that are closing in pain" have experienced a loveliness that is redemptive, grace-filled. This ability to perceive beauty is as close as Woolf comes, through the aesthetic, to a religious experience. True beauty shows the capacity to recover from shock, to transfigure melancholy into music, trauma into art. This process redeems life, if anything does; offers a kind of grace that comes at the end. The last words of the novel are "I have had my vision," which clearly refer to Woolf, as well as to Lily: the vision of the mother figure before she died, the vision that informed the work of art that is now complete. It is also a vision of the radiant effect of a personality on existence, a vision both of character and of life.

There are several other resonances that, in their repetition - appearing in both *To The Lighthouse* and the Sketch - reveal their importance for Woolf. One is the proximity in both texts of "cricket" and "knitting" (which also sound similar, though they are gendered separately) (294) (84). Another is that both Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Stephen go to town with their baskets, the former with Charles Tansley and the latter with Arthur Davies. (There is assonance between "Charles" and "Arthur," as well as rhythmic alliteration in "Tansley" and "Davies.") As well,

Woolf allows that both women may not be universally liked: with Mrs. Ramsay, "[i]t was perhaps her masterfulness, her positiveness, something matter-of-fact in her. She was so direct. . . . There must have been people . . . who thought her too sure, too drastic" (290). Woolf similarly describes her mother as "very quick; very direct . . . . She could be sharp; she disliked affectation" (82).

Both Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Stephen are idealized when they die. When Mrs. Stephen dies, a heavy solemnity descends, as if a shadow had fallen or Eden left behind (its gates, in the following passage, "shut for ever"): "the merry, various family life which she had held in being shut for ever. In its place a dark cloud settled over us; we seemed to sit all together cooped up, sad, solemn, unreal, under a haze of heavy emotion" (93). This emotion distorted reality, so that Woolf's mother was only remembered as beautiful. The distortion Woolf calls a great tragedy: distance from the full truth of a person: "The tragedy of her death was not that it made one . . . unhappy. It was that it made her unreal; and us solemn, and self-conscious. . . . Many foolish and sentimental ideas came into being" (85). Woolf inherits her mother's distrust and dislike of sentiment: Mrs. Stephen's agnosticism and loss of faith are mentioned in the Sketch (90-91) and we are reminded of Mrs. Ramsay's impatience at herself for making a statement about a God whom she thought she did not believe in (98). Thus, Woolf wants to get at the truth of her mother's character. This artistic scrupulousness has to do with the importance of describing what one sees, hears, tastes - the rigour of full, accurate, complete representation despite the brevity of life, the limitations of time. Woolf wants to return to how she felt at the time of her mother's life because then Mrs. Stephen was "not so rubbed out and featureless, not so dominated by the beauty of her own face, as she has since become - and inevitably. For what reality can remain real of a person who died forty-four years ago . . ." (85). Woolf seeks to describe her mother in all her detail and a passage in *To The Lighthouse* presents the dangers, the snares, that hagiography brings, from the time of a loved one's

death to the present. The passage is worth quoting at length because it shows the difficulty of encompassing character:

She was astonishingly beautiful, as William said. But beauty was not everything. Beauty had this penalty - it came too readily, came too completely. It stilled life - froze it. One forgot the little agitations; the flush, the pallor, some queer distortion, some light or shadow which made the face unrecognisable for a moment and yet added a quality one saw for ever after. It was simpler to smooth all that out under the cover of beauty. But what was the look [Mrs. Ramsay] had, Lily wondered, when she clapped her deer-stalker's hat on her head, or ran across the grass, or scolded Kennedy, the gardener? (264)

The detail captures the essence of the character: a look when one puts a hat on. The idea of a deer-stalker's hat suggests that the truth is being hunted through memory - which is also Woolf's pursuit as a memoirist. The work of *To the Lighthouse* and the Sketch is to unfreeze an image, yet this is the great challenge of representation, both for Lily and Woolf, as "[n]othing remained stable long. That is what is indescribable, that is what makes all images too static, for no sooner has one said this was so, than it was past and altered" (1985, 79). Yet Mrs. Ramsay has this capacity: of pressing certain scenes into the memory, of creating lasting impressions - as mentioned earlier, a godlike power also given to the artist in finishing a painting, a novel:

This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying, "Life stand still here"; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) - this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape [another reference to Genesis]; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said (241).

The state of frozen solemnity makes it impossible to grieve. For a while, it is a state that Woolf and Lily share. Woolf says that until she wrote *To The Lighthouse*, she had thought of her mother every day; after it was written, she thought of her much less often (80). Before this release, there is a state of

numbness: "For really, what did [Lily] feel, come back all these years and Mrs. Ramsay dead? Nothing, nothing - nothing that she could express at all" (217). In the Sketch, Woolf writes, "I said to myself as I have often done at moments of crisis ever since, 'I feel nothing whatever'" (92). Here the word "whatever" suggests that there is a protective measure, a defense mechanism, coming into play that is preventing the ego from being overwhelmed. One may continue along this frozen path but eventually reach a point where one feels something is unfinished, incomplete, unresolved. Lily realizes that she had never finished a painting that she had begun ten years previously, when she was last with the Ramsays, when Mrs. Ramsay had been alive. An image, a vision, a representation of a person - a view of Mrs. Ramsay - had begun to be formed, but had been aborted, in a sense, with that person's death, which was a tearing away, a trauma. Lily resolves: "She had never finished that picture. She would paint that picture now. It had been knocking about in her mind all these years" (220). Woolf gives a similar account: "until I was in [my] forties . . . the presence of my mother obsessed me" (80). However, when the novel was completed, "I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. . . . I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest" (81). "Laid it to rest" has the sound of a burial. Expression is key, as it is for Lily, but it requires perception, especially sight. In the following passage, seeing is represented by spectacles: Lily is able to see through Mrs. Ramsay's eyes, an ability that helps Lily appreciate Charles Tansley as she had never been able to do - and helps her understand Mrs. Ramsay. The scene begins with a question: What is floating in the ocean? Thus, what is floating in memory, in consciousness, in the unconscious?

'Is it a boat? Is it a cask?' Mrs. Ramsay said. And she began hunting round for her spectacles. And she sat, having found them, silent, looking out to sea. And Lily, painting steadily, felt as if a door had opened, and one went in and stood gazing about in a high cathedral-like place, very dark, very solemn. Shouts came from a world far away. Steamers vanished in stalks of smoke on the horizon. Charles threw stones and sent them skipping. (255)

The word "solemn" recalls the atmosphere around Woolf as a child soon after her mother's death - the opposite of the "merry" world Mrs. Stephen had created, the "far away" lost world of youth and joy. The smoke suggests the ineffability, almost the futility, of Lily's task - representing not only Mrs. Ramsay, but anything; seeing reality, telling the truth. Tansley's skipping of stones evokes the light-hearted world that is lost, but the skipping - coming at the end of this passage - suggests the possible return of such a world through memory and representation. There is also a parallel between the "haze of heavy emotion" after Woolf's mother's death in the passage quoted earlier and the "smoke on the horizon" here.

A literary philosopher such as Woolf may feel skeptical that language or representation will take one very far in representing reality. Yet one still has to go through language to begin healing one's traumas, to achieve perhaps the redemptive beauty of truth. Woolf in her Sketch acknowledges the difficulty of representation, and this challenge is already there in the novel, both comically in Mr. Ramsay's noble yet egotistical attempt to reach R, and seriously, sincerely in Lily's attempt to understand Mrs. Ramsay intimately (and thus truly): "Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, This is knowledge? Aren't things spoilt then, Mrs. Ramsay may have asked (it seemed to have happened so often, this silence by her side) by saying them? Aren't we more expressive thus?" (256) Woolf is asking, through Lily, whether knowledge is spoiled through language and representation; whether truth is better perceived in silence. We have seen this alternation between optimism and pessimism before in Woolf's views on language and art.

Certainly truthful description is difficult, but it can be accomplished - and if it is, it can be liberating, ecstatic. In order to be free of a person, such as one's mother, the healing path is to allow oneself to be possessed (Woolf's word is "obsessed") by her; then to reconstruct her; then to release her. This process has a ritualistic, incantatory quality in the novel. Lily repeats what Mrs. Ramsay has

said, like a mantra or a spell, to have access to Mrs. Ramsay's vision of life: "Is it a boat? Is it a cork?" she would say, Lily repeated, turning back, reluctantly again, to her canvas" (254-5). How can the artist get into a character to such an extent that the artist says truly what the character would say - so that there is no distance between imagination and reality, so that the poetry comes true? Woolf seeks this intimate knowledge of the other: "If I turn to my mother, how difficult it is to single her out as she really was; to imagine what she was thinking, to put a single sentence into her mouth!" (87) An alternative to seeing from the inside is seeing from multiple perspectives, from the outside - "fifty pairs of eyes" gaining the omniscience that the narrator has in *To The Lighthouse* (294). This fullness of representation is the goal of art and the achievement of the successful artist: "If one could give a sense of my mother's personality one would have to be an artist. It would be as difficult to do that, as it should be done, as to paint a Cezanne" (85).

There is a sense in which Woolf's mother is the paradigmatic character for her: the difficulty of describing her extends to all human beings - and Woolf seems to have realized this early. As well, a character, a person, is a metonym for reality, the real world, the other. One must represent - paint, tell stories - for the sake of preserving one's sanity, for healing, truth, freedom, wholeness. Rarely - as with Shakespeare or Beethoven - human beings are able to achieve representation both beautifully and truthfully.

## Conclusion

"I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else." (1985, 73)

This thesis supports one primary claim and, in doing so, explores two questions. The claim: it is in large part because of the importance of Woolf's relationship to the character of her mother that, for her, character is central to the value of fiction. The questions: What is the nature of Woolf's exploration in writing "A Sketch of the Past," and how does Woolf's description of herself and other people in the memoir take into consideration her statement that in 1910, human character changed? The focus of the thesis has been on the possibility of representing character - which becomes in Woolf's essays a metaphor for reality - and thus, of capturing truth, however momentarily, both in the memoir (and in the process of remembering, therefore) and in the finished work of art (such as a novel).

The thesis thus analyzes the Sketch as a meditation on character and memory. Another key element of the memoir is its understanding of the healing process and the self-creation involved in life-writing or in making great art. In Woolf's description of her "philosophy," she shows the essential process at work in her transformation of the character of her mother from real life into fiction and memoir. Woolf describes first the shock-receiving capacity that writers - and by implication, artists in general - must have, and how it gives her the greatest pleasure she knows ("rapture") to "put the severed parts [of a shattering, shocking experience] together," thus "discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together" (72). By finding words for this event, by giving it a pattern, she feels, she makes the event real; by making a shape or form that suits the event, "I make it whole" and mend what was broken (72). For example, the death of her mother was an extreme shock. It took decades for Woolf unconsciously to put the parts of the character of her mother together -

as well as the parts of her self that needed to heal sufficiently so as to be able to give representation to these aspects of her mother's life and character. This understanding for Woolf included appreciating - coming to terms with - the meaning, significance, resonance of her mother's life for her own life, her mother's self for her own self. In *To the Lighthouse*, this meaning was expressed, her mother and her self represented, in Mrs. Ramsay and Lily. In that novel, readers also witness the long period of time in which a person - in this case, an artist - comes to terms with the meaning of a loss, as well as the struggles involved in the process of representing. For Woolf, there was healing or unconscious processing involved in the writing of the novel (in 1926), as also in the writing of the memoir (in 1939). Thus Woolf herself is enacting what she attributes to Shakespeare and Beethoven: she is finding a pattern in chaos - in "the world" - by making sense, making words, out of a shocking event. For Woolf, a great play or piece of music is a distillation of the materials of reality, which involves "human beings," "the world." But there is "no Shakespeare," no God, no Woolf, and "we are the thing itself": that is, all entities break down, are not permanent; yet there is an essential unity between subject and object, a oneness, that is not divine, but is, has being, through a perception of pattern that artworks enable us to experience. There is no Mrs. Ramsay or Mrs. Stephen either, except the pattern that momentarily constitutes them in memory, art, fiction. However, Woolf believes that if the healing - whole-making - creative process is pursued assiduously enough by the artist, this pattern contains and shows - represents - some truth.

In the memoir, Woolf is attempting several projects. She is creating herself as a character who has agency over her own life; she seeks a refuge from the destruction around her - the German attack on England. She seems to make sense of her life from its beginnings: she wants to see life steadily and whole, as Matthew Arnold put it. She is trying to retain her sanity. By describing her mother in such careful detail, Woolf is attempting to find some security in the feeling of warmth and protection that her mother had provided, as well as some stimulation

in the vitality of the world that Mrs. Stephen, godlike, had set in motion and maintained as long as she was alive. This world of Woolf's childhood becomes a metaphor for the world that Woolf created during the course of her life - she mothered her books into being, she created the terms of her life to the extent that she could. German fascism threatened to destroy that life, had brought a certain emptiness to existence that was an echo of the emptiness that followed in the wake of Mrs. Stephen's death. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily experiences this grief deeply but numbly after Mrs. Ramsay's death. By creating works of fiction, Woolf has been able, like Lily, to get at some truth about the world, about life, and thus exorcise the ghosts that had kept her life within a certain sphere. Perhaps the value of these ghosts is to lead one on to exorcise them by healing and by creating works of art: the ghosts - the intrusions of others - force a certain catharsis or they inhabit us and we lead our lives under their influence or guidance. It is a question of living our life more according to our terms or to the ghosts'.

Thus, Woolf's mother exerted a powerful influence on Woolf, shaping - as this thesis aimed to show - Woolf's idea of the importance of character in novels, stories, and in life - forming her sense of the value of people and human relationships. This influence, of course, continues even after the ghost is exorcised, but now a novel has been produced - *To the Lighthouse* - in which the past has been represented, in which existence has been brought together with a certain formality, taking the reader on emotional journeys that the author had experienced in the presence of the characters she describes.

The thesis shows how Woolf's statement about the change in human character that came into effect around 1910 influenced the shape of the memoir; how the reflections on character in the memoir come from her 1924 assertion - however tentative - that human character had changed. Part of this shift in the nature of character has to do with its formlessness, its lack of identity - its constitution from its actions, from what happens to it, as much as what it chooses. This character is also a creative, willing agent within communities of life, just as

Woolf's mother and she herself were. The character of the self takes its existence, its shape, from the characters of other selves. Thus, in writing out the nature of one's character as a result of what has happened to one - which is the same as writing one's life - one must necessarily write of other characters, as Woolf does in the memoir. An implicit theme of the thesis is that this writing of one's life, this telling of the stories of one's life and placing of oneself as a character within life, is a necessary part of gaining agency. This agency includes the very act of describing, representing life - especially one's own life - to oneself and to others, as well as the coming-into-being of the self as a political agent, a citizen. In the face of crisis - in Woolf's time, World War II - the self may need to shape the stories that it tells about reality and about itself - in order for it to act. That is, the personal becomes the basis for the political. We write ourselves into the script of the political theatre by situating ourselves within communities - beginning in Woolf's case with her mother and the characters of her childhood. This creation of the historical context of our lives through storytelling can be a basis for engaged citizenship.

Thus, writing creates the character of the self. Woolf's other work goes far to show how the self can dissolve, can become one with the world, one with others, as happens at certain moments to Septimus Smith and Mrs. Ramsay. But the memoir enables a certain character named Virginia Woolf to exist by creating this continuity of the self through time and space. Woolf knows that this continuity as identity is an invention, but perhaps a necessary one in the modern world. Also necessary is a feeling of community between self and world. In Woolf's case, it is the community that she shares with the objects in the nursery in her first memory, her connection with these things; but then it quickly moves to her communion with her mother. There are also encounters with the other characters Woolf mentions in the memoir, and a clear sense of a perceiving child - a sense that she says Dickens helps create and which leads to the vividness of his characters. The child is also a member of the family community: Woolf mentions her sister, brothers, father, and half-siblings in the memoir. Finally, at the broadest human level, one

is part of the community of participants in culture, one who creates or watches plays like *Hamlet*, creates or hears music for string quartet. The modern conception of self, then, is a kind of armour that protects one from the lack of distinction between this body, on the one hand, and people, the world, on the other hand. The memoir allows the writer to reclaim the self on the writer's terms: this is who I am, where I came from, what happened to me, what shaped me.

Thus, the thesis is about the emergence of the self in place and time. What is the nature of one's self? What does this self have in common with other selves? How and why is this self different? This emergence of the self - described by an influential twentieth-century novelist who was passionately interested all her life in questions concerning the nature of character, of the person - appears in the form of a memoir. The self emerges here in relation to another character, the mother of the self, so that there is a curious birthing process that does not end with the physiological delivery of the child, but ends tragically with the mother's death when the child is thirteen. Yet the birthing or forming is still not complete because Woolf claims to have thought of her mother every day until she wrote *To the Lighthouse* in her forties. Even then there is more work to do, more influence to account for, as we see Woolf's mother occupying a position of such prominence in the memoir. The thesis has argued that the character of Woolf's mother made such a strong impression on her that the concept of character was one she contemplated and wrote about her whole life, in essays and in fiction.

The memoir shows the emergence of Woolf's personality and can be seen as Woolf's "portrait of the artist," a response to Joyce. "A Sketch of the Past" was the title Woolf chose; yet it could also be "A Sketch of My Self" - or the word "self" could be replaced with "person" or "character." The character of the self emerges, then, in relation to the character of the mother here: but it could be in relation to any other character. In this case, it is the mother, and often that is so; but the struggle to become a distinct self could be carried out in relation to the father, as well, as *To the Lighthouse* eminently shows. Indeed, in the memoir, Woolf might

be showing that character is essentially an interpersonal formation and experience, both psychologically and morally. In psychological terms, the self forms under the influence of others, often the primary caregivers, who are usually the mother and father. In moral terms, a character may only be judged by other people, other characters.

The first thirty pages of the memoir, then, reflect upon the nature of the emergence of the self as a child, person, character, agent, individual: Woolf's "moments of being" as a child represent turning points in perspective or action. Yet all of the past in the memoir has been remembered, and in that sense, as Freud points out, is shaped and indeed created according to the exigencies of the present - and, we may add, according to the labyrinthine personality of the accreted self: the self that has formed between the time of the event that is remembered and the moment of the remembering. This self, with its conscious and unconscious dimensions, shapes the telling of the past. Woolf, aware of this sculpting power of memory, aims only to provide a "sketch." The work of memory can never be completed: there is not enough time. For Woolf, there was pressure from the present to add more to the descriptions of her mother already given in *To the Lighthouse*. I have argued that the thrust of this pressure came from the war, from a sense of imminent death, which, if one has the inclination and ability, leads one to try to see one's life from the beginning to the end - and if one is a writer, to describe it in words. The method of writing mattered relatively little. Honesty was key, as it could not be a feature of the official biography of Roger Fry that Woolf was writing at the time. Formlessness was more authentic, Woolf felt, than form - except for the frame of the strictly chronological, which Woolf breaks anyway by making digressions that reflect on a number of issues, such as psychoanalysis or the nature of memoir writing.

Under what conditions does character need to be delineated and when does it not? What is the nature of this delineation? In an essay, Woolf describes the childlike charm of Dickens' characters as being a result of their simplicity - they

were clearly delineated. Yet proximity of knowledge lends complexity: thus Woolf was privy to intimacy with her mother and later developed an articulacy that might have been partly in response to the pain of loss - an articulacy that led her to believe her mother was, in a sense, indescribable. She was unknowable in a comprehensive way. She existed as a ghost, as a presence, both when she was alive - as Woolf had so little time with her - and when she was dead. I have argued that this presence represents the holy and its loss, its absence: the inability to relate to something that has been acknowledged as sacred. There is only the memory of the sacred - of love and closeness - and writing the details of these memories: sights, sounds, scenes. Thus, as with Mrs. Brown, the mother becomes a symbol of existence itself: mysterious, capable of description, but a representation that always falls short, whether in language or in another medium (painting, for example). The notion of character becomes one with that character's life and that character's influence on one's own life: thus of life itself as a formation of multiple characters and scenes in which those characters interact. Woolf can and does attempt to describe such scenes, but some essential aspect - Mrs. Brown, the signified, the other - may only briefly be captured, if at all; and here Woolf may have been influenced by contemporary explorations in phenomenology and analytic philosophy that recognize the limits and limitations of language. The Sketch, then, is of the past, but also of the self, of life now. It is a curiously self-aware construction whose writer would admit to its nature as a reverie, a dream, an unreliable memory, a *bildungsroman*, a novel.

The thesis has argued for the centrality of the concept of character in Woolf's thought and writing, its connection to her memory of the character of her mother, and its role as a symbol or sign that re-presents life itself, so that the memoir is a meditation on existence that takes a very personal, intimate form, one that acknowledges the role of the unconscious and its development in the person and one that reflects on its construction. The Sketch provides us with a way forward in the remembering of our own lives, giving us potential agency over the

formation of our selves, and opening up the possibility of transforming us from readers of others' memoirs to writers of our own.

One of the aims of the thesis has been to show how rich the Sketch is and to open up future work on it. There are many areas that the thesis has not explored and that may be fruitful paths for research. One such path would be to analyze the Sketch in terms of object relations theory. With its early focus on the mother, the text invites interpretation according to the ideas of Woolf's contemporaries, such as Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott, as well as later theorists. While Woolf's process of becoming a writer can be seen in Oedipal terms - carving out a place for herself in the generation following that of her father, who was a famous biographer - Woolf's *agon* with respect to her mother (paralleling Lily's with Mrs. Ramsay) can be explored further than is done here through object relations theory in tandem with orthodox Freudian analysis.

A second future project would be to show that Woolf's work on character - on describing human personalities in all their particularity - parallels the work of Freud. I have gestured in this direction in the Introduction, showing that Woolf was conscious of some psychoanalytic issues in the interpretation of memories and of dreams. The first chapter of the thesis showed how Woolf is explicitly positioning herself and her generation of writers in relation to previous writers with respect to the description of character, life, reality: writers like Defoe, Dickens, Dostoevsky. In other essays of Woolf's that there was no space to consider, she writes on nearer contemporaries: Proust, Joyce, Forster, Lawrence. The quest for Mrs. Brown was there in all of these writers, she claims, in a manner that was different from the purposes of the Edwardians and of prior novelists. To what extent the Georgians were successful in catching Mrs. Brown is a provocative but perhaps erroneous question: what matters is the pursuit, the attempt to represent.

A third direction for research would be to explore how life writing - describing the conscious and unconscious dimensions of one's personal history - can create

an active and applied sense of belonging within particular human communities. The thesis has not explored the ethical dimension of character in Woolf, but has focused on the aesthetic and human: characters as they appear in fiction (plays, novels) and in real life (where they are called "people").

By looking first at Woolf's use of "character" and "human character," then the elements and sequence of the first thirty pages of the memoir, and finally the connections between one of Woolf's major novels and the memoir, the thesis has shown a certain unity between different periods of her life: 1910, 1924 (when Woolf made the claim about "human character"), 1926 (when Woolf was working on *To the Lighthouse*) and 1939-41 (when she wrote and revised the part of the memoir that the thesis considers). Roughly, the use of character is related to Woolf's exploration of the human person, from the time of her childhood - as described in the memoir, when she and her sister told stories and jokes about the adults they knew - until her death, with the memoir uncompleted. In other words, Woolf's whole life involved an ongoing awareness of and reflection on character that may have become conscious of itself when her mother died, since at that point, she began to consider what her mother's character meant to her. Woolf's late rumination on moments of being and nonbeing throughout her life gives her existence a certain continuity that would have been comforting under threat of annihilation. She did not know whether her work would endure; yet she felt she had to write. The very act of gathering memories in chronological order gave her life a continuity and her self a certain shape, which she needed. She would have been aware of the inaccuracy and contrivance involved in the process, the conscious construction of a character named "Virginia Woolf" who existed from the first memory of the waves and the "acorn" until now. But this was the cost of writing a memoir: a certain distortion, the creation of an identity or continuity that exists in the act of gathering memories together and putting them in order. Woolf's life's work involved the description and redescription of reality, life, character, just as she is doing in the late memoir. What I hoped to show in the thesis was the

ambition and range of its achievement: she draws on the history of literature, philosophy, religion, psychoanalysis and her lifetime of reading to question and create as an artistic philosopher would. Her accomplishment is unusual and is beginning to be seen - in the light of her personal writings, such as memoirs, diaries, letters - as having a scope that puts her in the company of Proust and Freud, as powerful creative thinkers of the early twentieth century. Her project was similar to theirs: mapping consciousness, existence, being, and she was as assiduous and ambitious as they were.

It is not by comparison with other writers, perhaps, that she would like to be remembered, but according to how one understands her on her own terms. The thesis has looked at some of her essays, major fiction, and memoirs to get a sense of these terms. Since her death, conceptual insights from her writing have perhaps been slower to emerge than with influential philosophers, partly because she was not direct, not a theorist. There is much that is implicit in her writing that gains in value by being interpreted in relation to various of her texts, in all of their particularity, in order to find some perspective on her larger projects. That perspective has been emerging, like a spider web that can be seen only from certain angles, as a result of the connections found by the vast number of readers that have been drawn to her writing. This thesis offers another reading within that community of interpretation.

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