

A FISH IN A STREAM ON BODY AND MEMORY IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S "A SKETCH OF THE PAST"

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Abstract

This article examines the deadlocks foregrounded in recreating and reconstituting memory in Virginia Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past" from the body's perspective. "Body" is seen here as a category to reflect upon the meanings of women's marginality and resistance. Of particular interest are the hiatuses of memory in "Sketch," for recovering her own body and establishing a voice from within it constituted a conflicting and contradictory process, to which Virginia Woolf responded with unique narrative strategies. General and private perspectives merge, not only because of the troubles of not being personal when writing one's own life but because Woolf claims that leaving out "the person to whom things happen" is undesirable. Even though she may meet silence when including herself personally in her writings, silence is embraced as a constituent. I suggest that much in the same way Woolf juxtaposes temporalities and subjectivities in "Sketch," personality, impersonality, and their absence (or connectedness, which is another way of seeing it) are also juxtaposed in a kind of palimpsest that does not overlook corporeality but acknowledges it as essential.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; body; memory; women's embodiment; life-writing

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1 Stream of fragments

Virginia Woolf's unfinished "A Sketch of the Past" (1985) is a fragmentary text *par excellence*: in its material form, for it was assembled from various drafts in different stages of revision; in its literary form, written as it was in fits and starts, marked by constant interruptions, and expanding in digressions that juxtapose different literary genres, notably the diaristic and the essayistic; and in its content, for it rewrites the gaps left out by memory, juxtaposing them to the present. Its highly lacunar characteristic, far from being a problem, is what makes it powerful. Unlike a continuous text, ellipses and silences matter more in memories because they offer the chance of recreation and re-elaboration, and it is out of these hiatuses that Woolf writes her memories during the last two years of her life, from 1939 to 1940. The present besieged by WWII and the past of her affective geographies are juxtaposed in a text that illuminates her shaping as both a writer and a woman¹. In "Sketch"², fragments are never static but in a constant stream of reorganization, following the narrator's changes: "And further, this past is much affected by the present moment. What I write today I should not write in a year's time" (75). A far cry from an act of revision – a process which implies corrections, alterations, or amendments –, such reorganization of fragments in "Sketch" suggests instead that they are pieces apt to be freely, fluidly juxtaposed, whose meaning can be altered by arrangement and context.

This article examines the deadlocks foregrounded in recreating and reconstituting memory in Virginia Woolf's "Sketch" from the body's perspective. Of particular interest are the dilemmas derived from Woolf's social positions as woman and writer: the analyses that for a long time interpreted her literature as "bodiless", transcendent, and disconnected from history; and the conflicts she posed herself between personality and impersonality – a most problematic modernist ideal for women, that ultimately led them to put the literary tradition in check, as well as its prerogatives of *what* can be narrated and *how*.

"Body" is seen here as a category to reflect upon the meanings of women's marginality and resistance, for historically, the concept of "body" has been attached to that of "woman". Even though the brutality imposed on women's bodies demands them to be doubly imprisoned, inside themselves and inside the house, it is nevertheless possible to exercise acts of transgression, reconstructing one's own body and voice, even if only in a text.

From this viewpoint, Woolf's life-writing is part of a tradition of women's autobiographical texts that fascinated her: literary forms still peripheric to the canon, such as letters, diaries, memoirs. The censorship and inhibition surrounding these writings were one of her most urgent themes, as exposed by Hermione Lee (1987, 13-16), who sees Woolf's feminism as fundamentally literary and bound to the desire to find new forms for women's unnarrated lives. When she begins writing "Sketch" in August 1939, Woolf writes in her diary: "I have been thinking about Censors. How these visionary figures admonish us" (1984, 229). Although all writers may be conscious of these coercive figures, they

hinder an open discourse about themselves for women. Elizabeth Abel suggests that this is something mainly related to women's bodies: "There, in the center of Woolf's life-writing, is not the artist's unifying line, but her *body*, sandwiched between two grindstones" (2014, 57; emphasis added).

2 The body and the fish

In one of the passages from "Sketch," immediately after a series of epistemological considerations about writing biographies, Virginia Woolf begins to write at length about the prevalence of her mother in her life, even though her mother died when she was only thirteen years old. In this fantastic leap from an impersonal discourse to a personal one, she declares. "I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream" (80).

Such acknowledgment of powerlessness may strike as odd, for the Woolf that was writing then was almost sixty and confident of her skills. Perplexity gives way to reflection when we remember other abundant instances in her literature when images of fishes and fisherwomen evoke similar impossibilities of narrating. In "Sketch," the fish image emerges after Woolf comments that in any person's life there are "invisible presences," "magnets" that tug us "this way to be like that; or repel us the other and make us different from that": they tug the "subject of this memoir" this way and that throughout their lives, but paradoxically they are also what "keep him in position" (80). Nevertheless, these invisible presences are, in her opinion, precisely what is left out of most autobiographical writings, which concentrate on the *succession of events* rather than on the person to whom the events happened, rendering it useless to write lives. In her case, more than any other, even the war, it is her mother's influence that dominates her life. Or else, it is that which *immobilizes* her in what she perceives as a constant and fruitless search for words to describe the stream in which she is.

Of all Woolfian characters, perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are the most autobiographical, so it is hardly surprising that the writing of *To the Lighthouse* is of central importance in "Sketch." Woolf explains they were based upon her parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen, in a process she considers to be analog to that of psychoanalysis: "I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients" (80-81). One of the many striking passages about Mrs. Ramsay brings a trout to the foreground.

It could not last, she knew, but at the moment her eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and their feelings, without effort like a light stealing under water so that its ripples and the reeds in it and the minnows balancing themselves, and the sudden silent trout are all lit up hanging, trembling. So she saw them; she heard them; but whatever they said had also this quality, as if what they said was like the movement of a trout when, at the

same time, one can see the ripple and the gravel, something to the right, something to the left; and the whole is held together; for whereas in active life she would be netting and separating one thing from another; she would be saying she liked the Waverly novels or had not read them; she would be urging herself forward; now she said nothing. (*To the Lighthouse*, ch. 17)

Mrs. Ramsay's eyes, which "unveil" people's interiority, go underwater and illuminate the "sudden silent trout" with whom people's voices are compared. Unlike the fish in "Sketch," however, for whom all speed is transferred to the stream around it, the trout in *To the Lighthouse* is associated not with immobilization but with movement. The differences end there. Although the trout represents speech ("whatever they said had also this quality, as if what they said was like the movement of a trout"), it is not its own, but that of others. Under the eyes of Mrs. Ramsay's, there is only silence for the trout itself: just like the Virginia-fish in "Sketch," words are an impossibility.

In Virginia Woolf's imagery, fish are commonly associated with the body. Fish are abundantly compared with human beings. In *Between the Acts* (1941), Lucy, observing carps in a pond, says: "Ourselves' (...). Fish had faith, she reasoned; (...) seeing in that vision beauty, power, and glory in ourselves" (*Between* section 33). Fish are seen as humans, but, perhaps unlike these, they are endowed with faith at a time when civility collapsed during the war. However, in "The Sun and the Fish" (written in 1927), they are seen as very distinct from human beings, for they are free from all burden: theirs is a "perfect existence," "they neither work nor weep." "The most majestic of human evolutions seems feeble and fluctuating compared with theirs," says Woolf ("The Sun" 2016), so that there may be no question that fish belong to a higher instance of existence. But more importantly, her claims that "the fish themselves seem to have been shaped deliberately and slipped into the world only to be themselves" and that "in their shape is their reason" seem to point to a release from the body's burden. Fish need not please anyone; they were made to be themselves. They are free because their shape is their very reason for existing: the body of the fish just *is*.

For Woolf, getting hold of her own body and establishing a voice from within it constituted a process marked by adversities and contradictions, to which she responded with unique narrative strategies. Teresa Fulker (1995) states that "critics who – with good reason – have foregrounded Woolf's anxiety about and distance from the corporeal have neglected ways in which she shows, both in her fiction and non-fiction, the experience of the body to be crucial to the construction of consciousness" (5). Woolf did so by creating two types of bodies for her female characters (and also for herself, as will be discussed later), according to Molly Hite (2000, par 2). One, the social body, constrained by the rules of Victorian society. The other one, an intimate, reserved body, is associated with physical sensations.³ In Hite's view, this "modernist female body" was one of Woolf's most significant contributions because it enabled her to create "passionate and sensual" female characters that experienced their sensuality privately, without passionate interactions with other bodies. Thus, Woolf could safely represent

female eroticism without embroiling it “in the societal consequences that had shaped the romance plot” (Hite, par 3).

The exclusion of the social body from romance plots probably contributed to the view that Virginia Woolf focused on aspects of interiority and consciousness at the expense of physical, material, or corporeal representations – an idea supported by her nephew and biographer Quentin Bell (1972, 6), who claimed she “regarded sex (...) with incomprehension; there was, both in her personality and her art, a disconcertingly aetherial quality”. Woolf’s own division of writers in “Modern Fiction” (2016) as “materialists” and “spiritual,” with a defense of the latter, also led to claims that her literature despised the materiality and the body. Fulker calls attention to such an argument, pointing out that in that essay, Woolf regards James Joyce as the epitome of Modernism, an author extremely centered on bodily (aggressive) experiences and functions. Thus, she argues that for as much as Woolf held conflicting views about Joyce, she recognizes in his writing “a variant of the same goals that she herself was aiming for,” namely the desire of conveying character without emphasizing only the material aspects of life. Fulker points out then that for Woolf “the spiritual” clearly is not disconnected from the body but closely connected with it. Although the very images of the essay insist on the word “mind” and therefore suggest bodily disconnection, they also emphasize the experience of physical sensations *by this same mind* (“a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel,” “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms”), thus proposing an intrinsic connection between reality and the sensorial self. For Woolf, the spiritual is intimately connected to corporeality, as it may be observed in her essay “On Being Ill”: “with a few exceptions, literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear,” but “all day, all night the body intervenes” (“On Being Ill” 2016). This connectedness between physicality and spirituality can also be seen in “Sketch,” when, for example, Woolf describes her first memory. The body (the sensations of ecstasy) and the subject (“Virginia herself”) are inseparable; therefore, sensations can only be described if they include the individual who is feeling them.

It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive. 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. (“Sketch” 64-65)

It is worth noticing that the body that Woolf describes in both passages is the private one, protected, secure, created to enable access to physical experiences,

rather than the social body, in sight, and subject to exploitation. Only with the first it is possible to experiment strong bodily sensations without suffering from social retaliation.

The bodily split experienced by women has gained prominence in critical theory since at least the 1950s, with the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949. Beauvoir acknowledges that "to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world" (Beauvoir 1974, 39). The self is corporeal; the body constitutes the self. Women are not, and cannot, be free – socially bound to sexuality and the very nature of their bodies (whether it is embodied in the purity of maternity or the stereotype of the "evil seducer"): "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (xvii). Gilda de Mello e Souza, for instance, observes that women have "an attributed life" by men, and its meaning "is extrinsic and not immanent" (Chauí 2020, 13, loose translation from the original text in Portuguese)⁴. Very early, the discovery of a girl's own body is met with an awareness that she is not only a subject but an object for the male gaze. The bodily split leads to a consciousness, or mind, split.

Her breasts show through her sweater or blouse, *and this body that the little girl identified with self appears to her as flesh*; it is an object that others look at and see (...). The little girl becomes an object and she sees herself as an object; she discovers this new aspect of her being with surprise: it seems to her that she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to exist outside. (Beauvoir 48, emphasis added).

The female body is socially constructed and imagined by male's discourse – "she is simply what men decrees" (Beauvoir 1974, xvii). However, and problematically, this is a discourse that is not solely enunciated by men but also by women, for they "interiorize it and may enunciate it as a female discourse" (Chauí, 13)⁵. Woolf brings it to center stage with the famous image of the Angel in the House in the 1931 essay "Professions for Women." (2016)

One of the main difficulties she had to face to become a writer, according to her, was killing the Angel – the prototype of the Victorian feminine ideal that whispers to women: "Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure." Woolf confesses: "I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. (...) Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found (...), you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own." ("Professions"). It is noteworthy here that the Angel is killed *by the throat*, which symbolizes the human voice. Its angelical discourse, which does its best to shape and conform the female body to its parameters, is a male discourse, "not only because it speaks about women from the outside but because its very condition of existing is women's *silence*" (Chauí, 13, emphasis added). To break

free from muteness, a woman needs to claim back her own body subjectively – and with it, her own voice.

The task proved to be especially challenging for Woolf. She asks to be imagined as a kind of fisherwoman who throws a line to the unconscious depths and is suddenly awakened from her creative trance when her imagination collides with “something hard”:

To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of-- what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. She could write no more. The trance was over. Her imagination could work no longer. (“Professions”)

Later in “Professions for Women,” she will state: “You have won rooms of your own in the house hitherto exclusively owned by men. (...) You are earning your five hundred pounds a year. But this freedom is only a beginning – the room is your own, but it is still bare” (Woolf 2016). But how can the room “be still empty” if it was *won*, in the house “hitherto owned by men”? Woolf was beginning to suggest, two years after writing the emblematic *A Room of One's Own* (2016), that “having a room of one's own and five hundred pounds a year” – her central thesis in that essay – is still not enough. The room needs to be able to *house* the desiring trajectories of female bodies, so as to enable them to engender a discourse of their own. Or, in other words, so that they can dissociate their own discourse from the extrinsic one that they inherited, thus escaping the bodily split.

Most significantly, the silencing of the narrator in the three examples above – the Virginia-fish in “Sketch”, the fisherwoman in “Professions for Women,” and the trout in *To the Lighthouse* – befalls with the emergence of the mother's figure, be it fictionalized (as in *To the Lighthouse*) or based on her real mother, Julia Stephen. The similarities between Julia and the Angel in the House, whom Woolf associates with the impossibility of writing, are striking. When in “Sketch” she describes the house where her mother spent a fair amount of her days before getting married, Little Holland House, Woolf explains that “she was taught there to take such part as girls did then in the lives of distinguished men; to pour out tea; to hand them their strawberries and cream; to listen devoutly, reverently to their wisdom” (“Sketch” 88) Throughout her childhood and adolescence, the influence of the Angel upon herself, in the figure of her mother, was prevalent.

Certainly there she was, in the very centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood; there she was from the very first. (...) She was the whole thing; Talland House was full of her; Hyde Park Gate was full of her. (...) 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 (“Sketch” 81, 83)

Despite all the pain her mother's death ensued, it also brought about an initial suspension of the Angel, thus making it possible for Woolf to progressively start creating a body for herself, taking the reins of her sensorial perceptions and elaborating a voice. Take this description of her going to the train station to pick up her brother Thoby shortly after Julia's death:

It was sunset, and the great glass dome at the end of the station was blazing with light. It was glowing yellow and red and the iron girders made a pattern across it. I walked along the platform gazing with rapture at this magnificent blaze of colour, and the train slowly steamed into the station. It impressed and exalted me. It was so vast and so fiery red. The contrast of that blaze of magnificent light with the shrouded and curtained rooms at Hyde Park Gate was so intense. Also it was partly that my mother's death unveiled and intensified; made me suddenly develop perceptions, as if a burning glass had been laid over what was shaded and dormant. Of course this quickening was spasmodic. But it was surprising—as if something were becoming visible without any effort. ("Sketch" 93)

In that sense, with her role model and behavior, Julia Stephen, to a certain extent, also represented for Woolf the demand for tolerating both the aggressive bouts of a volatile father and the abuses of her two half-brothers. The physical humiliation that she underwent, resulting mostly from Gerald's assault when Woolf was a little girl, was for the first time exposed in so many words by Woolf in "Sketch," who associated it with the shame she still felt of staring herself in the looking glass.

There was a small looking-glass in the hall at Talland House. (...) By standing on tiptoe I could see my face in the glass. When I was six or seven perhaps, I got into the habit of looking at my face in the glass. But I only did this if I was sure that I was alone. I was ashamed of it. A strong feeling of guilt seemed naturally attached to it. But why was this so? (67-68)

After musing on the many reasons that could account for that shame, Woolf says:

I must have been ashamed or afraid of my own body. Another memory, also of the hall, may help to explain this. There was a slab outside the dining room door for standing dishes upon. Once when I was very small Gerald Duckworth lifted me onto this, and as I sat there he began to explore my body. (...) I remember resenting, disliking it—what is the word for so dumb and mixed a feeling? It must have been strong, since I still recall it. (69)

This maybe explains her shocking observation of being able to experiment ecstasies and raptures, as *long as they were not felt in her own body*.

Yet this did not prevent me from feeling ecstasies and raptures spontaneously and intensely and without any shame or the least sense of guilt, so long as they were disconnected with my own body. (68)

It is fair to suppose, then, that she was able to have such experiences not in her social body, but only in her private body, the one she constructed for herself – and that she later transferred this peculiar kind of corporeality to her female characters. Therefore, the intense physical sensations that they experiment do not embroil Woolf in any social consequences – a process she often described as “modesty.” Aware as she was of the female body’s vulnerability in society, proved by her own disastrous experiences, she knew that an exposed woman is a woman subjected to rebuke and exploitation. At a very early age, Virginia Woolf probably produced a bodily division between the body that is free to feel pleasurable sensations and the social body, from which she must be “disconnected” in order to protect herself. The shame she feels, she says, “(...) proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25th January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago; and had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past.” (“Sketch” 69) It is no surprise, then, that the fish in “Sketch” is at a loss of words to describe the stream.

In part, such shame accounts for Woolf’s ambivalence towards women’s writings (Hite, par 21). Despite her claims for a female literary production freed from social and private constraints, she exhorts women to strip themselves of all “sentimentalism” and direct personal experiences, in terms that contradictorily correspond to the modernist ideal of impersonality – an ideal with which she struggled unsuccessfully, for it reined in her own female discourse. “The woman writer will be able to concentrate upon her vision without distraction from outside. The aloofness that was once within reach of genius and originality is only now coming within reach of ordinary women”, says Woolf in “Women and Fiction” (1929). “Women’s gift will be trained and strengthened. The novel will cease to be the dumping ground for the personal emotions.” Woolf’s “thinking back through our mothers,” then, coexists in an ambivalent way with the idea that women’s writings were in certain aspects still inferior to men’s (Hite, par. 13) – regardless of the reasons for it, for historically women were restrained in their artistic and intellectual pursuits to give birth to the whole humanity, as she observes in *A Room of One’s Own*. Judith Shakespeare, the Renaissance woman born with the same genius as her much famous brother William, is a revenant that will return again and again in Woolf’s works, under different masks. Split between two bodily versions – that which was created by a male ideal of femininity and that represents a risk for herself, and that which houses all her creativity and emotions, Judith, in the end, is led to disgrace and suicide: “who shall measure the heat and violence of a poet’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body?” On the other hand, Woolf, also split herself, could not come to clear theoretical terms when she postulated her literary ideal for women’s writings, entangled as she was in a literary tradition that held that all things personal, confessional, or emotional denoted inferior artistic talent and subjected women to ridicule and despise. Woolf’s declarations of feeling “fear” and “shame” when exposing emotions such as self-pity, sentimentalism, or vanity, traditionally associated with femininity, were all too frequent. These were not what she expected from herself or other women.⁶

However, in her own literature, Woolf *includes* herself in variable degrees. Her writings do not observe the ideal of impersonality defended by some influential modernist circles of her time. Therefore, her life floods her essays, novels, or short stories, shaping their style, giving them a face: her brother Thoby's death, her illnesses, her friends, her parents, her husband, her sister, her childhood, her mother's death. "In fact I sometimes think only autobiography is literature – novels are what we peel off, and come at last to the core, which is only you and me", she confesses in a letter to Hugh Walpole on December 28th, 1932 (*Letters* 2016). Maybe this is due to the fact that for women, the aesthetic and intellectual ideal of "neutrality" is an impossibility, since the neutral place is already taken: it is a place which women do not belong to, for it is the place of the center, not that of the margins. Thus, the demand, especially from Black women (for theirs is a double marginal condition), for the acknowledgment of personal and subjective discourses, "since we all speak from a specific time and place, from a specific history and reality, and therefore there are no neutral discourses" (Kilomba 58).

When analyzing modernism's "other" – women – in *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen notes that, in the debate begun at the end of the 19th century, "woman (Madame Bovary) is positioned as reader of inferior literature – subjective, emotional and passive – while man (Flaubert) emerges as writer of genuine, authentic literature-objective, ironic, and in control of his aesthetic means" (1986, 47, emphasis added). On impersonality, Huyssen observes that modernity engendered the conditions to create a specific kind of subjectivity (represented by the Cartesian *cogito*, the epistemological subject in Kant, the bourgeois entrepreneur, and the modern scientist) and, after that, was progressively hollowing out that same subjectivity, rendering its representation problematic. This is naturally a process quite different for men and women.

Given the fundamentally differing social and psychological constitution and validation of male and female subjectivity in modern bourgeois society, the difficulty of saying "I" must of necessity be different for a woman writer, who may not find "impassibilité" and the concomitant reification of self in the aesthetic product quite as attractive and compelling an ideal as the male writer. The male, after all, can easily deny his own subjectivity for the benefit of a higher aesthetic goal, as long as he can take it for granted on an experiential level in everyday life. (Huyssen 46)

The rebuke of the *Trivialliteratur* – considered subjective, personal, dramatic, and "easy" – has always been one of the fundamental traits of a modernist aesthetic that wished to distance itself from daily banalities. While the "great art" remained a male prerogative, according to Huyssen, mass culture was frequently associated with women (not coincidentally at a time when women were massively entering society as citizens, consumers, and workers). The aesthetic ideals of modernity, and everything that comes with them, would then serve more to exclude differences and protect dominant positions.

3 Conclusion

The questions of modernism's impersonality ideal resurface amidst the crisis raised by memory's reconstitution in "Sketch," where the epistemological considerations made about life-writing often lead to personal narratives. General and private perspectives merge, not only because of the troubles of not being personal when writing one's own life but because Woolf claims that leaving out "the person to whom things happen" is undesirable. Even though she may meet silence when including herself personally in her writings, silence is embraced as a constituent. More importantly, recognizing the constraints that society imposes on subjects does not prevent her from acknowledging that there is also something beyond subjectivities, that escapes the dichotomy of personality and impersonality. Albeit this is a reflection she carried out throughout all her works, in "Sketch" it represents a particular instance that is not inconsistent with her arguments for both narrating "the lives of the obscures" and recognizing the role of the material reality in art, even though it may seem to be. I suggest that much in the same way Woolf juxtaposes temporalities and subjectivities in "Sketch," personality, impersonality, and their absence (or connectedness, which is another way of seeing it) are also juxtaposed in a kind of palimpsest that does not overlook corporeality but acknowledges it as essential.

For Woolf, there is undoubtedly something of absolute in us, that despises qualifications.⁷ It is paradoxically what disintegrates us as constructed subjectivities and connects us both to one another and the whole we are part of, indifferentiable; it is what enables Lucy in *Between the Acts* to observe the carps in the pond and say, "Ourselves." It is what makes Woolf as a child look at a flower bed and say, "That is the whole": "and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower" ("Sketch" 71). This she considers "reality" in "Sketch", and seeing that reality behind the daily cotton wool is what makes her write.

I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing 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; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. (...) we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. ("Sketch" 72)

In “Sketch”, silences and hiatuses are places of elaboration from memory. “These then are some of my first memories. But of course as an account of my life they are misleading, because the things one does not remember are as important; perhaps they are more important” (69). Woolf appropriates of the gaps left out by her continually changing memory to choose the version that best suits herself as an artist.

Perhaps we were going to St Ives; more probably, for from the light it must have been evening, we were coming back to London. But it is more convenient artistically to suppose that we were going to St Ives, for that will lead to my other memory, which also seems to be my first memory, and in fact it is the most important of all my memories. (“Sketch” 64)

With this gesture, she reaffirms the power of creation (“life’s forces,” as she sometimes called it) in a moment of progressive ruin of the world that had formed her: her houses, her beloved London, her readership, her publisher, her dear ones. Letting go of both the authority of the narrator and the control of her narration (“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”, 64), Virginia Woolf offers herself to us in pieces, which she uses to mark her way through a text she does not know. She does not solve the problems of representation she proposes to herself (the tortuous paths between personal and impersonal; fact and fiction; body and spirituality). She does not solve the crisis of representing herself, but instead sees a continuous stream between the hiatuses left out by these categories, and does the best she can to advance amidst it.

Notes

1. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud observed that “writing was in its origin the voice of an absent person; and the dwelling-house was a substitute for the mother’s womb, the first lodging, for which in all likelihood man still longs, and in which he was safe and felt at ease” (Freud, S. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trad. James Strachey. Hogarth Press, 1930, p. 18). Our subjectivity is constituted within language – it is language that enables us to exist as singular individuals, or, as Benveniste put it, “it is in and through language that man constitutes himself as *subject*” (Benveniste, E. *Subjectivity in Language. Problems in General Linguistics*. University of Miami Press, 1971, p. 224).
2. All further mentions of “A Sketch of the Past” will be named “Sketch”.
3. This sensory body seems to echo that of the “primary experiences” described by Judith Butler in the preface to *Bodies that Matter*: a body that is simply capable of sensations. For a broad discussion of how Woolf created this body for her characters, especially in her novels, see Molly Hite’s article “Virginia Woolf’s Two Bodies”.
4. Original: “Ou como escreve Gilda Rocha de Mello e Souza, as mulheres têm uma vida atribuída, cujo sentido é extrínseco e não imanente. Em suma, os homens são cultura e história; as mulheres estão na cultura e na história.” The emphases are from the original. All further citations from this text will be loosely translated by me from the original text in Portuguese.

5. Original: “Este [o discurso masculino] não é um discurso proferido somente por homens, pois culturalmente as mulheres o interiorizam e podem proferi-lo como um discurso de mulheres.”
6. On March 18, 1920, she writes in her diary about the second Memoir Club meeting, when members from the Bloomsbury Group got together to read some of their autobiographical writings: “Leonard was objective & triumphant; I subjective & most unpleasantly discomfit. (...) What possessed me to lay bare my soul!” (D2, p. 26). For a lengthy commentary on this event, see Hermione Lee’s biography of Woolf.
7. I am freely citing *Jacob’s Room*: “There is something absolute in us which despises qualification.”

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