

“I MAKE IT REAL BY PUTTING IT INTO WORDS”: NEGOTIATING
THE SUBJECTIVE, MUTABLE, AND INTERPERSONAL IN
VIRGINIA WOOLF’S “A SKETCH OF THE PAST”

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ABSTRACT

Posthumously published in her autobiographical collection, *Moments of Being*, Virginia Woolf's unfinished essay, "A Sketch of the Past" is largely a meta-autobiography, as Woolf works through not only her formative memories, but the implications of representing those memories in a work of life writing. Integral to Woolf's memories and conception of the self are her transcendent "shocks" of experience, elsewhere called "moments of being." Nearly every scholarly essay on "A Sketch" engages with and attempts to define these shocks in relation to Woolf's writing practises. However, there has been no scholarly work published on the shock as it relates to the "memoir writer's difficulties" Woolf enumerates at the beginning of her essay (65). These difficulties can be grouped into three general categories: representation of subjectivity, the possible movement and change, and negotiation between the personal and interpersonal. Taking into consideration the unfinished nature of the text, it becomes not just a meta-autobiography, but also a text caught in the midst of creation, illuminating the relationship between learning about the self and the practise of representing that self in writing. Thus, in this paper I analyze "A Sketch" for its treatment of shocks and their relationship to autobiography. In conversation with other Woolf scholars, I attempt to detail the shock as a site of contention between unity and stasis and multiplicity and movement, two sets of oppositional states which underlie the majority of Woolf's reservations about the autobiographical genre. Ultimately, I demonstrate that the shock as represented in "A Sketch" incites the movement and interpersonal connection that are necessary to an understanding of multiple selves and the ever-changing world we are all unified within, and that are reflected in the continued research on Woolf's unfinished and ambiguous autobiographical text.

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“I make it real by putting it into words”: Negotiating the Subjective,
Mutable, and Interpersonal in Virginia Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past”

Posthumously published in her autobiographical collection, *Moments of Being*, Virginia Woolf’s unfinished essay, “A Sketch of the Past” is largely a meta-autobiography, as Woolf works through not only her formative memories, but the implications of representing those memories in a work of life writing. Integral to Woolf’s memories and conception of the self are her transcendent “shocks” of experience, elsewhere called “moments of being.” Nearly every scholarly essay on “A Sketch” engages with and attempts to define these shocks in relation to Woolf’s writing practises. However, there has been no scholarly work published on the shock as it relates to the “memoir writer’s difficulties” Woolf enumerates at the beginning of her essay (65). These difficulties can be grouped into three general categories: representation of subjectivity, the possible movement and change, and negotiation between the personal and interpersonal. Taking into consideration the unfinished nature of the text, it becomes not just a meta-autobiography, but also a text caught in the midst of creation, illuminating the relationship between learning about the self and the practise of representing that self in writing. Thus, in this paper I analyze “A Sketch” for its treatment of shocks and their relationship to autobiography. In conversation with other Woolf scholars, I attempt to detail the shock as a site of contention between unity and stasis and multiplicity and movement, two sets of oppositional states which underlie the majority of Woolf’s reservations about the autobiographical genre. Ultimately, I demonstrate that the shock as represented in “A Sketch” incites the movement and interpersonal connection that are necessary to an understanding of multiple selves and the ever-changing world we are all unified within, and that are reflected in the continued research on Woolf’s unfinished and ambiguous autobiographical text.

There is a small but significant body of literature discussing Virginia Woolf’s “sudden violent shock[s]” (Woolf 71) of transcendent experience and their connection to her practise of life writing. In his article “Feeling Shadows: Virginia Woolf’s Sensuous Pedagogy,” Benjamin D. Hagen argues that Woolf’s “shocks” are “pedagogical accidents,” meaning they are accidentally occurring experiences which facilitate teaching, learning, and creativity through her writing (266). In her article “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Ontoethics’ in Her Late Oeuvre,” Veronika Krajickova draws parallels between Woolf’s “personal philosophy” and Alfred North

Whitehead's "Philosophy of Organism," both of which rest on the foundational belief that the universe is a unified whole made of disparate parts which are discrete yet interdependent. Though Krajickova focusses on Woolf's late novels, she does also engage with "A Sketch," particularly by defining Woolf's shocks as representing a "holistic philosophy, or ontoethics, based on the ontological connections between human beings" (230). Also working with both Woolf's fictional and autobiographical writings, Stephen Howard's "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: Reflections on the Self in Virginia Woolf" contends that Woolf's shocks are vital memories in the construction of her adult identity, but that she cannot fully capture that identity within an autobiography. Alex Zwerdling is similarly engaged in a formal inquiry into Woolf's autobiographical work in his essay, "Mastering the Memoir: Woolf and the Family Legacy." He places Woolf's interiority, including her profound shocks, within the context of her life and family, reminding us of the ways her autobiographical writing is rooted in her family tradition. In conversation with these critical works, I offer my own reading of Woolf's shocks and their relation to her life writing.

I will begin by clarifying, to the best of my ability, the terms "shock," "moments of being," and "moments of non-being." Hagen warns us that "It is difficult to read Woolf's term, moments of being, in a systematic way" (270). While this is true, there also seems to have been a conflation and overlapping of terms, contributing to their vagueness and difficulty. What I am calling "shocks" are what other scholars, including Hagen, have called "moments of being." Early in "A Sketch," Woolf describes a type of incident which she has had occasionally since her childhood: she experiences a "sudden violent shock" (71) or "blow" (72) in which she is so suddenly, violently, and viscerally overwhelmed by a particular feeling that she remembers that experience for the rest of her life. Rather than being an immediate emotional response to an external traumatic event, these shocks are seemingly random, completely subjective, and laden with realizations about herself and the world which Woolf then incorporates into her worldview. The first example she cites is fighting with her brother Thoby when they were children; as she raised her fist, about to hit him, "[she] felt: why hurt another person?" (71). She writes, "I dropped my hand instantly, and stood there, and let him beat me. I remember the feeling. It was a feeling of hopeless sadness. It was as if I became aware of something terrible; and of my own powerlessness. I slunk off alone, feeling horribly depressed" (71). It is not the external act of being hit by her brother which causes a visceral reaction in Woolf; it is the sudden realization of

her own actions and the futility of hurting another person that makes her “aware of something terrible” and alters her perspective of the world for the rest of her life. Such is the power of a shock.

Zwerdling aptly notes that while Jeanne Schulkind chose *Moments of Being* as the title for Woolf’s collected autobiographical works, “Woolf herself does not give the term such primacy” (183). Indeed, Woolf only refers to experiences of this profundity as shocks or blows, not “moments of being.”¹ Instead, she uses the phrase to describe a less transcendent but still significant mode of everyday conscious awareness. For instance, she describes a recent day “above the average in ‘being’” in which she “walked over Mount Misery and along the river,” noticing that the landscape “was coloured and shaded as I like—there were the willows, I remember, all plummy and soft green and purple against the blue” (Woolf 70). She also recalls “read[ing] Chaucer with pleasure” and beginning a new book, “the memoirs of Madame de la Fayette—which interested me” (70). These moments of being are held in contrast to moments of non-being, which Woolf describes as “the great part of every day [that] is not lived consciously” (70), the mundane routine activities that we take no significant notice of, the particulars of which are nearly immediately forgotten. Non-being is “the cotton wool of daily life” (72) which itself is “nondescript” (70), but which holds within it a series of separate, embedded moments of being which are more pleasant or distinct. Shocks are therefore completely separate from the “cotton wool of daily life” of non-being and qualitatively distinct from the moments of being embedded within it; they are “exceptional moments” which are present or future “revelation[s] of some order,” and “token[s] of some real thing behind appearances” (72). Having made a distinction between these conflated terms, we will better see how these shocks are not only formational for Woolf’s self-identity but also foundational for her relationship to and practise of autobiographical life writing.

¹ There are two exceptions to this, where Woolf blurs the distinction between shocks and moments of being. First, she describes two experiences which are characteristic of a shock or blow, but she introduces their description by writing: “What then has remained interesting? Again those moments of being” (78). Second, she later refers to “Many bright colours; many distinct sounds, some human beings, caricatures; comic; several violent moments of being” (79). Here, Woolf qualifies these specific moments of being as “violent,” lending to them a profundity and significance that is similar to a shock or blow.

Woolf's shocks are related to her practise of autobiography in the obvious sense that she dedicates much of the first part of "A Sketch" describing these shocks and their effects upon her as a young, burgeoning writer. In particular, she explicitly identifies three shocks from her time as a young girl at St. Ives as being the most formative.² The first is her sudden revelation of the futility of hurting another person during her fight with Thoby (Woolf 71). The second is a realization of unity as she looks at a flower and thinks, "'That is the whole' . . . it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower" (71). The third is a feeling of paralysis and "absolute despair" as she sees an apple tree during a nighttime walk and suddenly believes it to be connected with her neighbour's, Mr. Valpy's, suicide (71). She reflects on the variety of emotions brought on by these three different shocks, noting that "Two of these moments ended in a state of despair. The other ended, on the contrary, in a state of satisfaction" (71). Woolf differentiates the despairing shocks from the satisfying one, claiming that the overwhelming sense of dread and horror wrought by inflicting violence on her brother and knowing Valpy had committed suicide "held me powerless" (72). On the other hand, in the revelation of the flower Woolf "found a reason; and was thus able to deal with the sensation" (72); she was "not powerless," but "conscious—if only at a distance—that I should in time explain it" (72). For Woolf, then, it is not only the momentary experience of the shock which makes it so profound, but also how it incites a quest for knowledge, explanation, and understanding.

Woolf sees shocks as providing her with a momentary glimpse of a higher truth and uses writing to process and comprehend the feelings they produce. The combined experiences of her shocks have led her to adopt "what I might call a philosophy; . . . that behind the cotton wool is

² Woolf identifies a total of eight experiences which could be considered "shocks," though she elaborates most directly and significantly on the three listed in this paragraph. The others include: "the moment of the puddle in the path; when for no reason I could discover, everything suddenly became unreal" (78); the "moment when the idiot boy sprang up with his hand outstretched mewling, slit-eyed, red-rimmed; and without saying a word, with a sense of the horror in me, I poured into his hand a bag of Russian toffee" (78); "one memory of great beauty" while looking at a glass dome at sunset (92); her "feeling of transparency in words" while reading a poem (93); and "the blow, the second blow of death" after Stella's passing (124). Notably, these latter three moments all occur after significant tragedies—the glass dome and poem occurring after her mother's death, and the "second blow of death" occurring after Stella's.

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” (72). Though she is able to grasp a fleeting glimpse of this unity, the shock and its overwhelming emotions cannot be sustained; as quickly as Woolf is lifted out of the cotton wool, she is dropped back into it, left with only the memory of her profound subjective experience. Woolf identifies her desire to understand, “explain,” and reconcile these unique, fragmented experiences as the motivating force behind her writing: “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” (72). Through both autobiographical and fictional writing, Woolf turns her shocks into unified experiences existing in written language.

This is particularly significant for those shocks which left Woolf awash in feelings of “powerlessness” (72) and “despair” (71), as she exerts a level of mastery over these formerly uncontrollable emotions. The “pain” of the shock is removed once made whole through the writing process, suggesting that Woolf’s shocks and subsequent writings are connected. Hagen also takes up this relationship in his paper, arguing that shocks “teach Woolf to compose” her various fictional and autobiographical works (272). He elaborates further, saying she “learns to form arresting combinations because she sees the memorable, exceptional accidents of her life as the sudden coming together of random components into uncanny, unified wholes” (272). For Hagen, it is the intense feelings and visceral sensations which accompany Woolf’s shocks that prompt her to begin the intellectual exercise of making her experiences whole. For, without the subjective feelings of hopelessness, despair, or wonder which accompany a shock, Woolf would not be compelled to understand the experience or its significance to her conception of herself and the world around her.

Therefore, shocks are doubly vital to Woolf’s practise of autobiographical writing in that they are entirely subjective but deeply formative. One of the several qualms Woolf cites with the traditional autobiography—or “memoir,” to use her term—is that it “leav[es] out the person to whom things happened” (65) and focuses on content which can be externally validated, such as accolades, accomplishments, and historical events. Woolf’s shocks address this pitfall, as they exemplify the kinds of interior experiences happening to her, the person in question, that she finds largely missing from conventional autobiography. Moreover, the only way for Woolf’s

shocks to be known or recognized by others is through her writing, in this case, her autobiography. The writing process serves to unify Woolf's shocks and give her respite from their overwhelming emotions, but her autobiographical writing in particular serves to bring her subjective experiences into the interpersonal realm, producing a more genuine and honest account of her life experience than would a traditional autobiography. Woolf writes that "the events [in an autobiography] mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened" (65). Accessing and conveying that person is essential to representing the "immensely complicated" self. Without a genuine portrayal of that complexity, autobiography fails at representing life as it is experienced. Thus, Woolf's shocks are a means through which she can represent the complexity of her childhood experiences, her personal philosophy, and her self as a whole.

Woolf's insistence on a complex self and subjectivity unsettles the traditional autobiography's presumption of a unified and stable narrating self. Howard uses the metaphor of the looking-glass to articulate Woolf's hesitancy towards conventional autobiography, contending that "On a symbolic level, the fixed, stable, singular image that the looking-glass projects seems to represent traditional biography and autobiography, and Woolf's concerns about the multiple insufficiencies of these various modes" (48). He draws parallels to her fiction, in which mirrors are often used to represent the reflecting of one or more "alternative selves" which can never be represented wholly in a single reflection as one complete self (Howard 44). An image in a looking-glass provides one fragmentary view of the physical self which exists in its unique state only in stasis; as soon as the object of reflection or the mirror itself moves, the image changes. Here, Howard argues for the possibility of the autobiography as the linguistic equivalent of a reflection, as the "linguistic codification of self-image, a 'fixing' of oneself in language" (48-49). Just as with Woolf's shocks, any memory or self-description she puts into words is only true and sustainable if she herself and her writing both remain unchanged.

The stasis of the text is at odds with the reality of life and of the self, which are constantly in flux. Woolf writes that "somehow into that picture" of memory "must be brought, too, the sense of movement and change" (79). That is, if an autobiography is to accurately portray a life, then it must convey the mutability and animation of the human experience. She continues:

Nothing remained stable long. One must get the feeling of everything approaching and then disappearing, getting large, getting small, passing at different rates of speed past the little creature; one must get the feeling that made her press on, the little creature driven

on as she was by growth of her legs and arms, driven without her being able to stop it, or to change it, driven as a plant is driven up out of the earth, up until the stalk grows, the leaf grows, buds swell. (79)

This passage both explains and demonstrates the “movement and change” Woolf calls for in life writing. Woolf’s language and style in conveying this scene contribute to the feeling of perpetual and increasing movement, with verbs such as “passing,” “approaching,” and “driven” pushing the passage onward, guided by commas and semicolons and virtually unimpeded by full-stop punctuation. Yet, despite describing the kinetic nature of experience, she then asserts that this very quality “is what is indescribable” and is “what makes all images too static, for no sooner has one said it was so, than it was past and altered” (79). Even in recognizing and articulating the animation of lived experience, it cannot be fully and truly expressed, since putting the memory or experience into words immobilizes it, meaning it can no longer move and change with the living self who reads it. This, perhaps, is why putting shocks into words removes their power to hurt Woolf—transformed into an inert image, the shock is seemingly rendered impotent. For the autobiography, however, Woolf sees this fixity of human experience in language and its consequent denial of multiple selves as a daunting challenge.

We cannot discuss movement, change, and stasis without discussing temporality, especially as it relates here to multiple selves and autobiography. Much of the disparity between one’s multiple selves has to do with the effects of time, which is why Woolf draws attention to her present writing self, “I now,” and her past remembered self, “I then” (75), which affect one another as well as her future selves: “this past is much affected by the present moment. What I write today I should not write in a year’s time” (75). In other words, Woolf’s remembering self is always changing, moment to moment, and these changes in perspective not only affect how she presently interacts with the world but how she remembers and interprets memories from her past. She is constantly in motion, thus changing the “reflection” of the past in the metaphorical looking-glass. Each time she looks into that mirror of the past, she will see its reflection differently from the perspective of a new, altered self, and therefore will write differently of it as well. The changing of the self and its perception over time is central to Woolf’s reservations about autobiography, which is static; if what she writes today about her life experiences differs from what she would have written in the past or would write in the future, how could she write an autobiography which remains truthful over time? If her temporal self is perpetually changing,

it seems that the only way to approach an autobiography which reflects that self is to be constantly changing and revising it over time, never considering it “finished” under the hand of an authoritative, unified self.

In his essay “Mastering the Memoir,” Zwerdling discusses how Woolf’s narrative style facilitates an open perspective existing across time, connecting the many potential versions of “I now” and “I then.” He writes: “Woolf tried to keep her consciousness here, so that the two selves—what she calls ‘I now, I then’ . . . —would be able to carry on a continuous conversation across the decades” (Zwerdling 181). In acknowledging her multiple selves and the fleeting perspective of her present, narrating self, Woolf makes clear the dynamic relationship between her past and present, and the ever-changing ways in which her present self will perceive her past. Knowing this, the reader is primed to view Woolf’s “I now” as a temporary, contingent self that will become an “I then” as time progresses. In this way, it is not the events of Woolf’s life which take primacy, but the relationship she has to those events presently, and how her future present selves may be informed by everything that she has, and continues, to write. Woolf establishes a “conversation” between her past and present selves in “A Sketch,” thus introducing movement and animation to a text that would traditionally remain static. Moreover, by animating her relationship with her multiple selves, Woolf ensures that her life narrative will never be fully fixed, as a continuous stream of “I thens” and “I nows” proliferate as time passes, and they will always be in conversation with one another.

Movement is clearly a central aspect of life and life writing for Woolf, yet so are her shocks, which are linked to stasis through the writing process. However, they are also integral to the movement and change Woolf envisions. As discussed above, the shocks act as the impetus for Woolf’s writing, which makes them an instigating force for her artistic expression: “I prove this, [the omnipresent effect of shocks] 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” (Woolf 73). On a more fundamental level, the shocks themselves are dynamic as they lift Woolf’s consciousness out of the cotton wool of daily life: “It proves that one’s life is not confined to one’s body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions. Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool” (73). Once she is back in the cotton wool, she must take action and put the experience into words, lest the powerful emotions

wrought by her shock remain unexplained and continue to pursue and distress her. Further, though the shocks are rendered static once contained in language, they continue to inform the many present selves, both of Woolf and her readers, who encounter them recurrently.

Hagen's theory of Woolf's shocks as "pedagogical accidents" not only applies to Woolf's self-edification, but to the teaching and learning which occurs between herself and her readers. They take up the "double task" of teaching Woolf "how to write her life otherwise and of teaching her potential readers the shapes and intensities of their own selves and lives" (Hagen 267). These accidental moments of revelation, once ensconced in and communicated through language, become tools for teaching readers other ways of looking at the world and understanding their own experiences. Is this not, at least in some small part, why we read autobiography? Granted, we often are interested primarily in the life of the author, but along the way, we discover how they perceived the self and the wider world, and this inevitably informs our own personal perspectives. In reading "A Sketch," perhaps we find that we too have had shocks in our lives and now have the language with which to define and understand them; or perhaps we are inspired to reflect upon the "certain background rods or conceptions" which operate in our own lives. In any case, reading about Woolf's shocks inspires action; an animated experience turned to static image once again begins to move as the reader integrates it into their own consciousness and ever-changing perspective. Even if autobiographical writing is not itself in motion, it can at the very least inspire motion in those it touches.

Here, we come to perhaps the most pervasive category of difficulty for the life writer—connecting and representing the personal and interpersonal. Woolf struggles with these challenges throughout "A Sketch," given that she prioritizes subjectivity and narratives of the interior. Her shocks, for instance, are so fundamental to her self-identity and self-narrative, yet they are phenomena which only she has experienced. Shocks "leave no readable sign," and "[o]nly the individual memoirist has access to them" (Zwerdling 184). Yet, no life is lived entirely in isolation or without external influence, so autobiography cannot deny the interpersonal realm. It is easiest and most ethical to discuss, from the writer's perspective, how other people's actions have affected them. It becomes much more difficult, however, when this inquiry extends to speculating about the thoughts, motivations, and interior lives of others. We brush up against an ethical issue: how, if we are unable to escape our own subjective perspective

and enter another's, are we justified in speaking on their behalf, or characterizing them in a certain light? How, exactly, should autobiography move between the personal and interpersonal?

Woolf is acutely aware of these questions concerning movement between the personal and interpersonal, and they underlie many of the "memoir writer's difficulties" (65) she addresses throughout her essay. This third general category of difficulty has three key aspects: first, she says that she does not know how far she "differ[s] from other people" (65) and so she cannot accurately place her experiences in relation to others'. Next, she writes that "The person is evidently immensely complicated" (69), referring not only to others but also to herself. She explains that in some cases, she cannot fully explain her own feelings and reactions to certain events and has "only been able to discover some possible reasons; there may be others; I do not suppose that I have got at the truth" (69). If it is difficult to understand and explain her own interiority, then untangling the complexity of another person's is simply not feasible. This is especially true given that internal experiences are influenced by external ones, and it is often difficult to delineate the causes of certain subjective states or feelings. This is brought to the fore in the last major difficulty Woolf raises: the "invisible presences" by which "the 'subject of this memoir' is tugged this way and that every day of his life . . . Consider what immense forces society brings to play upon each of us, how that society changes from decade to decade; and also from class to class" (80). These "invisible presences"—societal expectations, family pressures, and prevailing ideologies—undoubtedly influence our lives and identities, and shape how we see both ourselves and others. Woolf continues: "well, if we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile life-writing becomes" (80). Parts of the self can be identified and analyzed, but the intangible forces which guide it through the interpersonal world cannot: "I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream" (80). Not only are these forces invisible, but they are elusive, mutable, and indefinable, constantly changing over time and place. The self and society's invisible presences are together in constant change and movement, but without being able to see and explain both of these aspects of a life, it feels disingenuous to call this practise "life writing." These three difficulties of the memoir writer surface continually throughout "A Sketch," suggesting that Woolf is attempting to illustrate the relationship between the personal and interpersonal in autobiographical writing, with a particular focus on how both domains are integral to representing the human experience.

In the first six pages of “A Sketch,” Woolf explicitly sets a boundary between her interior self and the interiority of those around her. She writes: “This leads me to think that my—I would say 'our' if I knew enough about Vanessa, Thoby and Adrian—but how little we know even about brothers and sisters—this leads me to think that my natural love for beauty was checked by some ancestral dread” (Woolf 68). Here, Woolf reflects on the possible cause of her tenuous relationship with feminine beauty, namely, her family’s reputation for producing remarkably beautiful women which is at odds with the shame she feels insofar as that beauty is connected with her own body. Woolf recognizes the temptation to speak on behalf of her siblings and conflate their feelings about beauty with her own, since they share a family and upbringing. However, she interjects to clarify that she could do so only if she knew enough about her siblings’ thoughts and experiences. To be more specific, we know very little of how the invisible presences which surround us all will affect others differently than they do to ourselves. The familial expectation to confidently embody and identify with a specific form of ancestral beauty is one such invisible presence, and Woolf has discovered how it moved and shaped her interior life but cannot know how exactly it affected her siblings. Even if she could, their feelings would shift and change as they move across time and space. A glimpse into another person’s subjectivity would reveal only what is true for their present self, amounting to the same type of static reflection that cannot contain within it the whole self. So, then, Woolf finds that the memoir writer’s difficulty of accurately representing the interiority of others cannot be satisfactorily resolved; nor should it, as Woolf reminds us that our ideas of what others experience are mediated through our own subjectivity.

Using a metaphor from her childhood, Woolf describes how she as an individual constructs a representation of others’ internal experiences. She reflects on a conversation she had with her father after one of her much-enjoyed fishing trips, an experience she characterizes with dynamic language: “the line thrilled in one’s fingers . . . how can I convey the excitement?—there was a little leaping tug; then another; up one hauled; up through the water at length came the white twisting fish; and was slapped on the floor” (134). She writes that while packing up after one fishing trip, her father tells her “Next time if you are going to fish I shan’t come; I don’t like to see fish caught but you can go if you like” (135). Woolf recognizes that her father was leaving the decision entirely up to her, and so she felt “no grudge” against him when she gradually lost her passion for fishing over time. Rather, her “I now” sees this formative moment

as a lesson in how she is able to use her own experiences to understand others'. She writes, "But from the memory of my own passion I am still able to construct an idea of the sporting passion. It is one of those invaluable seeds, from which, since it is impossible to have every experience fully, one can grow something that represents other people's experiences" (135). Through this metaphor, Woolf demonstrates the complexity of representing others: we can never know another's experiences fully, but we may gain an idea of them, though only through the "seeds" of experience planting and germinating within our own subjectivities.

To best understand the challenges and realities of representing others within autobiography, we must consider not only Woolf's direct statements on the matter, but also her practise. Though the first part of "A Sketch" is rooted in Woolf's subjective experiences, private memories, personal philosophies, and her "shocks," she spends the majority of the text focusing on her family, particularly her parents' characters, her siblings, and the family household dynamics during her childhood and young adult years. As the text progresses, the dominant presence of her own interiority begins to recede, until the events and descriptions of others become foregrounded. For example, near the beginning of the text, Woolf recalls her early childhood at St. Ives through the descriptions of her own impressions and feelings: "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. 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" (64). This passage is considerably more poetic, descriptive, and interior than the prose appearing near the end of "A Sketch." Here, Woolf describes a typical morning in Hyde Park Gate: "Our day would begin with family breakfast at 8.30. Adrian bolted his, and whichever of us, Vanessa or myself, was down would see him off. Standing at the front door, we would wave a hand till he had disappeared behind the bulging wall of the Martins' house. This hand waving was a relic left us by Stella—a flutter of the dead hand which lay beneath the surface of family life" (147). This latter passage is more specific, matter-of-fact, and omniscient than the first, suggesting that the narrative perspective has shifted slightly from a point deep within Woolf's interior to one situated closer to the exterior world.

There are several possible reasons for this shift, the most obvious being a move away from writing about early childhood memories to memories of adolescence. Children do tend to

be steeped more in their interior worlds, and then as they grow and develop, interact and become more integrated with the exterior world and the society around them. Woolf writes that in her childhood memories, “I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation . . . Later we add to feelings much that makes them more complex; and therefore less strong; or if not less strong, less isolated, less complete” (67). As we age and become more a part of the world around us rather than worlds in ourselves, the way in which we render our experiences naturally becomes more externalized and therefore “less isolated.” There is more external information to account for in Woolf’s memory of Hyde Park Gate than in her memory of St. Ives, because it accounts for the time of day, a family routine, and the significance of a missing family member—Woolf’s sister, Stella. Whereas her earlier memory consists only of sensory experiences occurring in that contemporaneous moment: the sound of waves breaking in a metrical pattern and the splash of ocean water, all filtered through the yellow blinds of the nursery. The gradual externalization of the narrative perspective could also be related to the series of traumatic events Woolf relates, and perhaps relives, throughout the text. In her early memories, her mother and sister Stella are still alive and well, but halfway through the text, Woolf reflects on the personal impact of these deaths on her young adolescent self:

My mother’s death had been a latent sorrow—at thirteen one could not master it, envisage it, deal with it. But Stella’s death two years later fell on a different substance; a mind stuff and being stuff that was extraordinarily unprotected, unformed, unshielded, apprehensive, receptive, anticipatory. . . . the blow, the second blow of death, struck on me; tremulous, filmy eyed as I was, with my wings still creased, sitting there on the edge of my broken chrysalis. (124)

The presence of grief looming large over Woolf’s teenage self would not only have affected the perspective of her “I then,” but also of her “I now.” The shift to a more externally focused narrative may serve as a defense for Woolf. Indeed, telling her story through a less internalized lens effectively distances herself from the pain and grief she would have experienced in the months and years after her mother and sister’s deaths. Regardless of the reasons motivating it, Woolf is evidently grappling with the relationship between her interior self and the external events of her family life, continually negotiating how that relationship emerges in the text.

The fact that Woolf devotes so much of the text to her family members and society is not necessarily a deflection away from writing herself, even if grief is present in the changing

perspective from which she narrates. For, even in the moments where she writes lengthy descriptions of other figures in her life, an interjection of personal interpretation always prefaces or follows. For instance, she caricaturizes three people she remembers from childhood: Mr. Wolstenholme, the old, bearded, round-cheeked man who “spurted” plum juice through his nose and onto his grey moustache (73); C. B. Clarke, the “old botanist” who had an eighty-year-old aunt “who went for a walking tour in the New Forest (74); and Mr. Gibbs, the bald, tidy man who gave Woolf and her sister Vanessa two ermine pelts and showed them Retzsch drawings (74). Woolf prefaces these character sketches by saying that the foreground of her childhood was populated by people, and these three people in particular are to her “caricatures,” “very simple,” and “immensely alive” because they died while she was a child (73). Their deaths ensured that the impression they made upon Woolf was whole and unchanging; they will forever exist in her mind as she remembers them. Later in the text, Woolf takes on a more somber tone as she describes her father: “The fact remains that at the age of sixty-five he was a man in prison, isolated. He had so ignored, or disguised his own feelings that he had no idea of what he was; and no idea of what other people were. Hence the horror and the terror of those violent displays of rage. There was something blind, animal, savage in them” (146). She follows this paragraph with the claim “From it all I gathered one obstinate and enduring conception; that nothing is so much to be dreaded as egotism. Nothing so cruelly hurts the person himself; nothing so wounds those who are forced into contact with it” (146-47). Both of these vastly different descriptions of people in Woolf’s life are bracketed by her own personal context. For the three men, she precedes their sketches with an explanation for why she is representing them a certain way, while for her father, she follows his character description with a lesson she learned by way of observing the very faults outlined in that character sketch. Woolf’s interjections of personal context and commentary remind the reader that, ultimately, all individuals in the text are being rendered through Woolf’s perception.

Woolf’s practise of life writing also reveals another complexity of the relationship between self and others: that life writing functions as a conduit connecting the interior self and the exterior world. Significantly, just as stasis leads to movement with Woolf’s shocks, so too these subjective experiences incite interpersonal connection. On a fundamental level, her personal philosophy is founded on the idea of interpersonal connection, where each individual is a part of a cosmic work of art, a hidden pattern existing “behind the cotton wool of daily life”

(Woolf 72). Krajickova calls this hybrid ontological and ethical philosophy Woolf's "ontoethics, based on the ontological connections between human beings" (230). The central metaphor of Woolf's ontoethics, the unifying pattern, is a "conceptual field of potentiality and interconnection where concepts, ideas, thoughts, and material elements intersect and shape each other's identity" (Krajickova 232). That is, it is a place where everything and everyone is connected in a unified whole, within which its disparate parts communicate with and influence one another. Woolf's ontoethics envisions a hidden truth of the world within which unity and motion coexist. However, we exist in the world of appearances, within the cotton wool; therefore, our unity as a collective becomes less apparent, and our connection to others must be facilitated through art, wherein images of this unity are expressed and perceived. As Krajickova notes, "Woolf urges us to realize that 'we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.' Moreover, this implies that Woolf did not believe in a transcendental divinity who directs our destiny, nor in self-conscious artists who produce works of genius, but that she was aware of the creative potential in every individual and their actions" (232). Woolf's ontoethics, the "background rods" with which she structures her life, relies on not only the interconnectedness of all people, but on the creative acts each person performs to the effect of creating the unified work of art that is life. For Woolf, transforming her shocks into unified images through language is also an expression of the unity she feels with other people. Her autobiographical writing, then, demonstrates that the relationship between the personal and interpersonal is not confined to a stasis in radical subjectivity, but is rather an expression of and invitation for connection.

Here we return to Hagen's "pedagogical accidents." We have already seen how Woolf's "shocks" function as impetuses for such accidental learning, but "A Sketch" as a whole is undoubtedly also a pedagogical accident, albeit on a much larger scale. Contained within the essay are accounts of small revelatory shocks which incite learning both in Woolf and in her readers; therefore, the essay itself is the medium through which those pedagogical moments are expressed and received. However, given the history of the manuscript and the circumstances under which it entered the public sphere, the work itself is also an "accident" that has led to sustained teaching, learning, and inquiry.

As a posthumously published work that was left unfinished, with its author's intentions ambiguous and which was preserved against her instructions, "A Sketch" is an example of what I will call an "accidental text." It is quite different from texts that survive by chance, such as a

private diary discovered centuries after its composition, because the manuscripts and typescripts strongly suggest there is clear intentionality in the text. Woolf wrote “A Sketch” with the intention for publication of some kind. Woolf’s reflections on process within the text itself indicate that she is attempting to find “a form for these notes” (75), suggesting that she did not consider “A Sketch” to have reached its final form, but that she was indeed working towards one. The fact that the text was published in this unfinished form is what makes it an accidental text—it is not that Woolf did not intend for others to read it, but that others read a premature version of the work. Woolf’s death prevented her from both finishing her work and from protecting the unfinished version from public readership. Woolf did ask her husband to burn all of her papers after her death, but she did not explicitly single out “A Sketch,” one of many works in progress. Furthermore, given Woolf’s mental state at the time of writing her suicide letter, it is unclear whether she truly would have wanted her papers to be destroyed at all if she were not in the midst of extreme psychological distress. Under these circumstances, it was neither intentional on the part of Woolf nor a betrayal on the part of her husband that “A Sketch” was preserved and eventually published. Rather, it exists as a text that was never supposed to be read as it has been—a pedagogical accident from which much can be learned about Woolf’s engagement with autobiography, the self, and closure.

In her article “Autobiography and the Problem of Finish,” Hannah Sullivan discusses the concept of completion in autobiographical writing. She provides two definitions of “finish”: first, “to come to the end of” or “to provide with an ending” (301). This definition is “imperfective” in that it allows the writing form to “[find] space for the quotidian and even the mundane, for doubt, ambivalence, and changes of mind” (301). The second definition of finish is “to perfect finally or in detail,” and “to put the final and completing touches to a thing” (301). This definition, by contrast, privileges perfection and clarity in the narrative in the form of epiphany—“in principle, it can be finished with a final brilliant stroke” (301). Interestingly, Sullivan characterizes diary writers as following the logic of the first definition, while autobiographical writers follow the second. This is, of course, because diary entries are written day-by-day, and are often loosely connected but are not in service of some larger narrative or design. The end of the last entry in the diary remains the end of the diary until the next entry is written; thus, the diary is in a perpetual state of imperfect finish—it could be considered complete, but also has the potential to be continued. The autobiography, on the other hand, is

held to the standard of long-form narratives, wherein the story is as whole, complete, and perfect as possible, often leaving no room for further additions lest the integrity of the story be dissolved. This prevailing logic succeeds in fiction writing, but not in life writing; for, “the perceived narrative of a life is always reshaped by continued living” (Sullivan 301). As we have seen in Woolf’s own attitudes, a work claiming to both summarize a life and retain integrity as a unified narrative simply is not possible, even once that life has reached its end.

Based on Sullivan’s definitions, “A Sketch” seems to be unfinished in both senses of the word. It is left without an intentional ending, either by Woolf bringing it to a close by deliberately stopping her writing or by wrapping up the narrative in an epiphanic moment. “A Sketch” began initially as a narrative marked by past memories told through Woolf’s present self, but later takes on more of a diary format as Woolf begins to use dates as headings to mark her periods of composition. This first appears 23 pages into the text and continues through to the last “entry,” which spans pages 81 to 97 of the text. Perhaps this shift in format reflects Woolf’s anxiety about closure; perhaps she knew, whether consciously or subconsciously, that a traditional autobiography or “retrospective memoir,” as Sullivan puts it (310), would pose more difficulties than would a series of diary entries. Indeed, the series of memoir writer’s difficulties upon which she elaborates seem more applicable to autobiographies than diaries, particularly those difficulties which pertain to wholeness, unity, and completeness. The anxiety of perfect completion which hangs over autobiography does not apply to the imperfect completion of a diary. This has significant bearing on Woolf’s choice to change the style of composition partway through “A Sketch.” Sullivan argues that this shift is a deliberate way of “evading closure and certainty at a structural level” (308) while simultaneously serving to connect the present moment of writing to the memory in question. The shift to diary entries is Woolf’s structural method of conveying the incomplete, non-linear, and subjective nature of her autobiography.

Because “A Sketch” is an accidental text, it is crucial to acknowledge in further detail the aspects of the work which are indeed intentional. It lacks a clear and purposeful ending, but it also shows hallmarks of a work which was written with care, purpose, and intention. The adoption of a diary-like format is significant but is only one example of many. Another primary indication of intention within the manuscript is revision. Many words and phrases have been crossed out of the handwritten manuscript, either during or after initial composition. Additionally, Woolf produced a typescript of the text which included several changes and

significant additions. The typescript shows evidence of extensive editing and revisions, with corrections being made over the type using an ink pen. Sullivan sees the intention of Woolf's revisions lying not necessarily in relation to a final product, but rather in the process of writing about her life. She describes revision in autobiography as an "auto-generating" practise (320), as an illustration of the perpetual "oscillating relationship between subject and object" which accompanies the practise of writing about oneself (319). Therefore, revision can be a sign of progression towards finishing, but does not imply that the text is or will ever be finished. Rather, to use Woolf's terms, it reflects the internal process of the "I now" reckoning with the "I then," negotiating what to present and how to present it.

However, it is precisely because of its incomplete and fragmentary nature that "A Sketch" remains such a rich pedagogical site. The ambiguities Woolf leaves unaddressed in the text open possibilities for rich and varied interpretation, speculation, research, and theorization. Woolf's revisions of "A Sketch" are auto-generative for her own narrative and self-understanding, but also generate points of inquiry for her readers: what is the relationship between revision and completion in life writing? How does writing about the past change how Woolf perceives it in the present and how she views her past self? How do revision and incompleteness reflect the movement and change necessary in understanding our own subjectivities?

As Hagen astutely argues, Woolf's pedagogical richness comes from her shocks and their ability to spur creativity and connections with others. What distinguishes "A Sketch" from the rest of her works is its unfinished state and resultant unique capacity for pedagogy. There are two clear types of pedagogy at work in this text: learning about the self through shocks, memories, and philosophical beliefs, and learning about the practise of autobiography through an examination of the memoir writer's difficulties and successes. Learning about the self inevitably influences the theory and practise of writing about that self, and this is reflected in the ideas of multiplicity and movement present in the text. Woolf's ontoethics are predicated on the multiple, dynamic, and mutable nature of the self and its relation to the wider interpersonal world, and this philosophy extends to the text's form; it is in an unfinished and partially-revised state and shifts from a retrospective autobiographical narrative to a diary format, demonstrating a shift in Woolf's perception and representation of her self and a life over time.

The beginning of the text, in describing two main ideas—Woolf’s ontoethics and her difficulties with life writing—seems to promise an eventual clarity surrounding what Woolf deems the ideal autobiography. From the descriptions of her shocks and their ability to incite dynamic creative power, Woolf seemed on the trajectory towards reconceptualizing autobiography from a unified narrative of a person’s life presented as an object to an account of personal, subjective experience predicated on the fluid and dynamic nature of past, present, and future selves. Perhaps Woolf would have ultimately concluded that, as Sullivan suggests, an autobiography can never truly be finished. Yet, because the text was left incomplete accidentally and not intentionally, we are left only with these fragments of Woolf’s thoughts and seeds of her possible conclusions. With “A Sketch,” not only do we need to do the typical interpretive work of a Woolf text, but we are invited to speculate further what Woolf would have written, had she been able to finish the text. Regardless of what the text’s final state may have been, its status as an accidental pedagogical tool has enabled a sustained individual and collaborative inquiry which perpetuates the movement and interpersonal connection necessary to understanding the self and the larger world.

Having considered Woolf’s shocks in relation to her practise of autobiographical writing as demonstrated in “A Sketch of the Past,” it is now clear that shocks incite the movement and interpersonal connection necessary to understanding our own subjectivities, the reality of multiple selves, and the interconnected and ever-changing world we are all unified within. Woolf’s personal philosophy, or ontoethics, illustrates the simultaneous interior and interpersonal aspects of the human experience. The autobiographical writing within which these revelations exist acts as a pedagogical tool, prompting readers to consider how they may view and express their own experiences. Though Woolf did not publish “A Sketch,” nor intend it as a treatise on life writing, it does provide valuable insight into the challenges and pitfalls troubling the genre’s conventions. Life writing will always require a navigation of representing the subjective self, allowing for movement and change, and maintaining a balanced relationship between the personal and interpersonal, and Woolf both recognizes and works with these challenges in her own writing. As Woolf’s readers, we too can take up her invitation to think of our lives in these terms, and perhaps in the future, be moved to add our own dynamic creations to the unified work of art that is life.

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