

“A Mixture of the Madonna and a Woman of the World”

Virginia Woolf’s Assessment of the Mother

In this essay, I explore Woolf’s complex depictions of her mother in two autobiographical pieces, “Reminiscences” and “A Sketch of the Past.” In my analysis, I proceed from the premise that Julia Stephen’s death when Virginia was a child of only thirteen was the primary trauma underlying Woolf’s subsequent emotional breakdowns. I consequently read Woolf’s writings that engage maternity as scriptotherapy. Judith Herman (1997) maintains that “the ‘action of telling a story’ in the safety of a protected relationship can actually produce a change in the abnormal processing of the traumatic memory. With this transformation of memory comes relief of many of the major symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. The physioneurosis induced by terror can apparently be reversed through the use of words” (183). Telling her story to her readers, Woolf endeavored to work through her trauma. In this way, Julia Duckworth Stephen was in many senses the source of Virginia Woolf’s artistic genius.

Throughout Virginia Woolf’s writings, readers encounter a quest for the maternal, a fraught exploration of who the mother is, and who and what she should be. Because Virginia’s mother, Julia Duckworth Stephen, died unexpectedly when Virginia was only thirteen, and because her surrogate mother, her half-sister Stella, died tragically only two years later, Virginia’s psychical need to probe motherhood, and daughterhood, was especially urgent. Moreover, Stella’s death at the age of twenty-eight further cast a pall upon maternity. At the time of her death Stella had been married a short time, and she had only recently learned that she would soon become a biological mother. Given Woolf’s tremulous relationship with those who mothered her, it is understandable that a number of Virginia Woolf’s writings evidence a rather compulsive consideration of motherhood.

Woolf's conception of motherhood is by no means simple. In her autobiographical "Reminiscences" and "A Sketch of the Past" and in her fictional *To the Lighthouse*, the mother looms large, as an idealized figure, as a lack, as a troublesome presence, as both impediment to and inspiration for art. As is well-documented, Woolf's first mental breakdown occurred shortly after the death of her mother in 1895. Nancy Chodorow (1978) identifies the early adolescent years as especially problematic for girls, as "a girl must confront her entanglement in familial relationships" before she can "fully develop extrafamilial commitments." She argues that the mother's "desire both to keep daughters close and to push them into adulthood" creates an aura of ambivalence, which, "in turn creates more anxiety in their daughters and provokes attempts by these daughters to break away.... [T]his spiral, laden as it is with ambivalence, leaves mother and daughter convinced that any separation between them will bring disaster to both" (135). Perhaps this explains why losing a mother for Woolf at this age was so devastating—she was unable to engage fully in this struggle and likely confronted the death with feelings of guilt, resentment, and even (guilty) relief. Commenting on Woolf's weak sense of self-identity in "Reminiscences," LuAnne McCracken (1990) claims that "for Woolf, the task of achieving a sense of her own identity was doubly problematic: she needed to achieve separation from the identity of her mother, yet the death of her mother at the crucial beginning of Woolf's adolescence ... meant that Woolf lost the figure from which her identity derived" (66).

Suzette Henke (2007) identifies Julia Duckworth Stephen's death as the primary trauma underlying Woolf's subsequent breakdowns, and "A Sketch of the Past" supports this claim. Given this possibility, one does not err in considering Virginia Woolf's writings about mothers as scriptotherapy, as attempts to come to terms with that which was unassimilable. Judith Herman (1997) maintains that "the 'action of telling a story' in the safety of a protected relationship can actually produce a change in the abnormal processing of the traumatic memory. With this transformation of memory comes relief of many of the major symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. The *physioneurosis* induced by terror can apparently be reversed through the use of words" (183). Telling her story to her readers, Woolf endeavored to work through her trauma.

In "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf articulates clearly and beautifully her own conception of writing as scriptotherapy:

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 human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (1985a: 72)

She avows that writing takes pain and injustice and assimilates them into a comprehensible order. But it does not stop there. Writing establishes human connection. Through telling her stories—both “literal” autobiography and “fictionalized” autobiography—Woolf realigned herself with others. Scriptotherapy enabled her to transform devastation into something salutary.

I should be clear from the outset that, while her own desires as a motherless daughter entertain the Angel in the House as appealing, Woolf does not establish the Angel in the House as the ideal. Reiterated throughout her writings is the conviction that, although the desire for the mother’s absolute devotion is strong, integrity in mothering depends upon a protected inner life. Although it is undeniably romantic, the portrait of Julia Duckworth Stephen that emerges in Woolf’s autobiographical “Reminiscences” (1985b) is nonetheless deceptively complex. Begun before the birth of her sister Vanessa’s first child, Julian, “Reminiscences” was ostensibly undertaken for the benefit of her nephew, so that he would know not only his mother, but his grandparents and the world in which Vanessa had come of age. Given the precariousness of maternity in Woolf’s own experience, it is not surprising that creating a written legacy for Vanessa’s child was a priority.

In characterizing Vanessa, Woolf emphasizes that she was maternally-inclined from her youth: “...[T]he mother would ... feel tender joy within her, and some bright amusement too, for already her daughter promised to be honest and loving; already, as I have heard, she was able to care for the three little creatures who were younger than she was, teaching Thoby [Vanessa’s and Virginia’s brother] his letters, and giving up to him her bottle. I can imagine that she attached great importance to the way in which Thoby sat in his highchair, and appealed to Nurse to have him properly fastened there before he was allowed to eat his porridge. Her mother would smile silently at this” (1985b: 28). Endowing Vanessa with an innate nurturing instinct, Woolf bases her description in part upon what she imagines Julia Duckworth Stephen would have hoped for in a daughter. The use of the propositional “would” is significant in the passage, for it reveals memory as a creative enterprise and represents Woolf assessing her own identity through the eyes of her absent mother.

Because Julia's untimely death bequeathed to her daughter an incomplete memory, in remembering Virginia relies upon hearsay and the power of her own imagination. In essence, she creates a history for herself, and for her family. The above excerpt from "Reminiscences" illustrates well that Woolf is sketching a portrait not only of Vanessa, but of her mother. Indeed, much of the remainder of the piece dwells upon Julia. In that sense, "Reminiscences" attempts to capture in words what it means to mother in the Duckworth-Stephen family, and, by implication, what it means to perform the role of daughter.

The Julia of "Reminiscences" is, on a number of levels, quite a romanticized figure. Representative of a primal loss experienced at an inopportune and psychologically-detrimental time, Julia's death is the impetus for reflecting nostalgically upon a lost foundation that was mysterious and necessary, the crumbling of which threatened to destroy the household's tenuous connection to the external world. In Woolf's construction of her, Julia Duckworth was a figure of untouchable, heroic proportions:

[F]or you must conceive that she was not only the beautiful of women as her portraits will tell you, but also one of the most distinct.... She had been happy as few people are happy, for she passed like a princess in a pageant from her supremely beautiful youth to marriage and motherhood, without awakenment. If I read truly, indeed the atmosphere of her home flattered such dreams and cast over the figure of her bridegroom all the golden enchantments of Tennysonian sentiment. But it would need a clearer vision than mine to decide how far her husband, though now so obviously her inferior in all ways, was able then to satisfy noble and genuine passions in his wife. Perhaps she made satisfaction for herself, cloaking his deficiencies in her own superabundance. At any rate when he was dead she determined to consecrate those years as the golden ones; when as she phrased it perhaps, she had not known the sorrow and the crime of the world because she had lived with a man, stainless of his kind, exalted in a world of pure love and beauty. (1985b: 32)

With her repeated "perhaps," Woolf again highlights the imaginative leap she must take to write her mother's life, the inherent "gulf which lies between a middle-aged woman and her children" that was surely intensified by Julia's death but was present nonetheless during her life (1985b: 39). Casting Julia as a princess whose beauty cast a benevolent spell on husband and household, Woolf effectively establishes a lofty height from which her mother inevitably fell from bliss, with the results of that fall—the death of her beloved husband Herbert Duckworth—including Julia's subsequent marriage to Leslie Stephen and the children she bore to him. Once more, Woolf's inclination is to emphasize the separation of mother and child, in this case existing because the fruits of Julia's marriage to Leslie Stephen would inevitably be shadowed

by a more satisfying past with Herbert Duckworth that was shattered by his untimely death.

The portrait that Woolf presents of Julia Stephen differs dramatically from that of Julia Duckworth. This Julia does not exist so fully in fantasy, for "she bade herself face the truth and realize in all its aspects the fact that joy was to be endured as well as sorrow. She rose to the heights, wide-eyed and nobly free from all illusion or sentiment, her second love shining pure as starlight; the rosy mists of the first rapture dispelled forever" (1985b: 33). In this marriage, Woolf maintains, Julia became all that she was meant to be, prompt, practical, and demanding, a woman whose social activism and devotion to her husband left her little time to dally with her young ones, an idea reiterated in "A Sketch of the Past" (Woolf, 1985a). Whatever Julia's relation to her Stephen children, it is clear that Virginia did not find her as warm toward them as she was to the Duckworth children: "Four children were born to her; there were four others already, older, demanding other care; she taught us, was their companion, and soothed, cheered, inspired, nursed, deceived your grandfather; and any one coming for help found her invincibly upright in her place, with time to give, earnest consideration, and the most practical sympathy" (1985b: 34). According to Woolf, far too much of her mother's time was spent coddling Leslie Stephen and feeding his ever-fragile ego—he demanded more of her than her children did—and, when she was not doting on Leslie, she busied herself in administering to the needs of the less fortunate in the community. Hence, while the Julia Stephen we are introduced to here was philanthropic, she was neither affectionate nor especially nurturing toward the children she bore to Leslie Stephen, and Woolf was surely trying to come to terms with this.

Yet her mother continued to exist to some extent in the realm of fantasy, a presence in her absence, a desire: "The dead, so people say, are forgotten, or they should rather say, that life has for the most part little significance to any of us. But now and again on more occasions than I can number, in bed at night, or in the street, or as I come into the room, there she is; beautiful, emphatic, with her familiar phrase and her laugh; closer than any of the living are, lighting our random lives as with a burning torch, infinitely noble and delightful to her children" (40). The "Oriental period of gloom" that Julia's death brought with it put into relief the relative idyllic existence of the family when her mother was alive (40). A section of "Reminiscences" dealing with the years following Julia's death focuses largely on Stella, who fulfilled the maternal role in the Stephen household following Julia's death, and it is here that Woolf more fully reveals the potential perils of living in the shadow of Julia Duckworth Stephen through exploring the potential for maternal engulfment.

Stella Duckworth was consumed by her mother's virtues:

She exaggerated her own deficiency, and, living in close companionship with her mother, was always contrasting their differences,

and imputing to herself an inferiority which led her from the first to live in her mother's shade. Your grandmother was, I have said, ruthless in her ways, and quite indifferent, if she saw good, to any amount of personal suffering. It was characteristic of her to feel that her daughter was, as she expressed it, part of herself, and as a slower and less efficient part she did not scruple to treat her with the severity with which she would have treated her own failings, or to offer her up as freely as she would have offered herself.... As a child, then, Stella was suppressed, and learned early to look upon her mother as a person of divine power and divine intelligence.... Stella was always the divine handmaid, feeding her mother's vivid flame, rejoicing in the service, and making it the central duty of her life.... Stella and her coming out, and her success and her lovers, excited many instincts long dormant in her mother; she liked young men, she enjoyed their confidences, she was intensely amused by the play and intrigue of the thing; only, as she complained, Stella would insist upon going home, long before the night was over, for fear lest she should be tired.... [A]ll her triumphs were mere frippery on the surface of this constant preoccupation with her mother. It was beautiful, almost excessive; for it had something of the morbid nature of an affection between two people too closely allied for the proper amount of reflection to take place between them. (1985b: 41-43).

Woolf critiques Julia's style of mothering Stella as detrimental to the child's individuation. To Stella, Julia was both ruthless and unempathetic, hardly qualities one would generally wish in a mother. Woolf suggests as a potential consequence Stella's failure to separate herself from the woman who bore her; she remained in what Julia Kristeva refers to as the *chora*, the alluring symbiotic realm that threatens to devour the older child. While Woolf attributes much of the blame for this union to Stella—she supposes that her mother would have deemed it “too close to be wholesome”—her critique of the relationship implicates motherhood in a potential bind (43). Woolf appears in this essay and in others to desire the freedom and ability to “think back through our mothers,” but here doing so denies the daughter an identity of her own. She also poses the possibility of an unwholesome, incestuous economy between mother and daughter, which has both individual and social implications. “Reminiscences” exposes Julia Duckworth Stephen as a model who was impossible to emulate perfectly but who inspired in her eldest daughter a desperate and destructive desire to become the Mother.

After Julia's death, Stella transferred her selflessness to a “quite unqualified self-surrender to ... [Leslie Stephen's] needs,” again attempting to walk in her mother's footsteps (1985b: 44-45). Maintaining a Juliaesque distance, Stella administered to the needs of the traumatized, numb family that was traipsing

about in "the sultry and opaque life which as not felt, had nothing real in it, and yet swam about us, and choked us and blinded us" (45). Meanwhile, the maternal role that Stella adopted led Leslie Stephen to develop an unhealthy dependence on her, to the extent that he initially opposed her engagement to Jack Hills and later expected the couple to adhere to an over-hasty commitment they had made to continue to live at Hyde Park Gate with the family. Stella's death was yet another maternal blow suffered by the Stephen siblings that forced Virginia's elder sister Vanessa to adopt the caregiving role first performed by Julia and then by Stella.

What we have in "Reminiscences" depiction of the mother, then, is a precarious combination of romance and brute reality. Both Julia and Stella are at times painted in the most flattering of terms, but when one reads more closely, the limitations of the mother-daughter relationship are disclosed. Julia was beautiful and aloof, maintaining a distance between herself and the Stephen progeny, but she also allowed an unhealthily-close dynamic to develop between herself and Stella. One wonders if Woolf presents this accurately, or if the mythic dimension of the Duckworth years and Julia's detachment from Virginia led her to read the relationship between her half-sister and mother the way she does. Whatever the case, in this piece motherhood is a highly contentious institution, desirable and potentially nurturing, but prone to inflict scars, irreparable disappointment, and trauma.

Recorded some two decades later, the memories of Julia Stephen presented in "A Sketch of the Past" are much more sensorial than those of "Reminiscences." Woolf cites two sensory-charged memories as her first:

[My first memory] was of red and purple flowers on a black ground—my mother's dress; and she was sitting either in a train or in an omnibus, and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close; and can still see purple and red and blue, I think, against the black; they must have been anemones, I suppose. Perhaps we were going to St. Ives; more probably 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. . . . If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl 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. 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. (1985a: 64-65)

I quote at length to capture the connection and the potency of the two recollections and to communicate the contagious ecstasy in Woolf's articulation of these exquisite memories. As in "Reminiscences," Woolf unabashedly admits that her memories are to some extent fabricated—in actuality Julia and Virginia were not likely on their way to St. Ives, but it is "convenient" to say so for the sake of making an aesthetically-pleasing transition from one incident to the next. Likewise, Woolf concedes that in the period when she heard the lapping waves her ability to perceive her world was challenged, as she had "the feeling of lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow" (1985a: 65). Her artistic rendition of the memory surely heightens the experience; memory is a construct of the imagination.

In both first memories the experience of the mother is central. Unlike in "Reminiscences," where Julia's distance dominates, in this text Woolf relates being on her mother's lap, near her breasts, basking in the visual sensation that was Mother. When coupled with this depiction of young Virginia being cradled, her description of the sea is equally maternal—the waters evoke the amniotic waters of the womb and the blind's acorn recalls the maternal heartbeat. The feeling of lying in a grape and seeing things dimly likewise recalls the womb. She looks back on this period as womblike; the fantasy of symbiosis enthralls. Later she recalls an image of her mother at St. Ives on the nursery balcony in a virginal, white dressing gown, surrounded by flowers. The mother-child bond is idealized to the extent that the father is written out of existence; the mother exists solely for her children.

Thus, "A Sketch of the Past" merges the comforts of St. Ives with the security of union with the mother. Visually, it is recollected in terms that are definitively feminine: "If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver, and green.... I should make a picture that was globular; semitransparent. I should make a picture of curved petals; of shells; of things that were semi-transparent. I should make curved shapes...." (1985a: 66). Even an incident that apparently happened years after the first two is recalled in terms of sensory experience that threatens to rupture "some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that [she] stopped, smelt; looked" (66). Again, the womb figures prominently. Because these intense memories bombard her so, because they can feel "more real than the present moment," Woolf fancies that perhaps "things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence" (67). If they were, she could indeed reconnect physically with her mother, which is the urgent, foundational desire that underlies "A Sketch of the Past."

But, alas, the womb is not impenetrable; the rupture of the fragile membrane eventually proves irreparable. "A Sketch of the Past" also captures the traumas that infected Woolf's life: sexual abuse by her half-brothers George and Gerald, Julia Stephen's maternal distance and later death, the deaths of Stella and her father, and the bombings of World War II that threatened her daily existence

as she was composing this piece. Woolf describes Julia's unexpected death in terms of a lamentable loss of innocence: "How immense must be the force of life which turns a baby, who can just distinguish a blot of blue and purple on a background, into the child who thirteen years later can feel all that I felt on May 5th, 1895—now almost exactly to a day, forty-four years ago—when my mother died" (1985a: 79). The suddenness with which her mother was taken from her, and the fact that this happened as Virginia was on the cusp of puberty, renders at times impossible the task of narrativizing that which is bound in the traumatized psyche and therefore beyond words.

It is significant that Woolf identifies in "A Sketch of the Past" the process of writing *To the Lighthouse* as therapeutic:

Until I was in my forties—I could settle the date by seeing when I wrote *To the Lighthouse*, but am too casual here to bother to do it—the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day's doings. She was one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life.... It is perfectly true that she obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four. Then one day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse* in a great, apparently involuntary, rush. One thing burst into another. Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind, so that my lips seemed syllabbling of their own accord as I walked. What blew the bubbles? Why then? I have no notion. But 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 I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest. (1985a: 81)

The appeal of the mother in *To the Lighthouse* is established through the character of Mrs. Ramsay, the matriarch who orchestrates human community in a seaside town inspired by the St. Ives of Woolf's childhood. Like the ideal Victorian mother, Mrs. Ramsay is humane, taking care not to crush the dreams of her young son when his father would smite him with the dimmest of realities, recognizing within insecure and deeply flawed individuals the capacity to connect. Her meticulous care to ensure the well-being and comfort of her guests makes salient her virtues. And she befriends Lily Briscoe, the motherless painter—surely representative of both Virginia's sister Vanessa Stephen Bell who herself became a painter and of Woolf herself—who falls in love with Mrs. Ramsay and all that she represents but simultaneously finds her example demanding, oppressive, and engulfing.

Mrs. Ramsay's appeal to Lily is not coincidental. Lily adopts her as a surrogate mother of sorts because Mrs. Ramsay offers a fecund fullness that contrasts the emptiness Lily perceives in herself. Mrs. Ramsay is Woolf's reflection upon the identity of her mother, upon her beauty and her social grace, and in Lily's self-doubt we glimpse reflections of Woolf's own self-doubt when confronting the spectacle of her beautiful, fairy tale mother. Everyone is smitten by Mrs. Ramsay's beauty. Above all, however, Lily is drawn to Mrs. Ramsay because she is an artist. After Mrs. Ramsay's death, Lily reflects on her attraction:

But what a power was in the human soul! . . . That woman sitting there writing under the rock resolved everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags; she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite . . . something—this scene on the beach for example, this moment of friendship and liking—which survived, after all these years complete, so that she dipped into it to re-fashion her memory of him, and there it stayed in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art. . . . “Like a work of art,” she repeated, looking back from her canvas to the drawing-room steps and back again. (Woolf, 1981: 161)

Only Mrs. Ramsay could induce Lily to regard the misogynist Charles Tansley in affectionate terms, to recognize something of the beauty within even him. Throughout the novel Mrs. Ramsay knits, and the recurrence of knitting is a metaphor for the domestic artistry that Mrs. Ramsay transacts. She is creative, delving within those she meets to discover their strengths, recognizing their weaknesses, and sustaining them where they need sustenance. As the novel progresses, both Lily and readers recognize that it is Mrs. Ramsay's imagination and self-reflection that carry her through her days of domesticity. And it is her imagination that enables empathy and her philanthropic impulse. Here we witness Woolf attempting to understand her mother's motivations, her mother's art.

Like Woolf, Lily must combat the numbness maternal death brings with it, and this is accomplished through contemplating the maternal, through imagining herself “sitting beside Mrs. Ramsay on the beach” (1981: 171). Lily's ability to produce art demands an honest assessment of the mother's strengths and weaknesses, as Woolf managed in “Reminiscences” and “A Sketch of the Past.” Even in the process of such acknowledgment Lily is once more seized with the desire for a suicidal symbiosis. Contemplation brings pleasure and it brings pain, the coexistence of romantic images of Mrs. Ramsay “raising to her forehead a wreath of white flowers” retreating with Death to a blissful nothingness and, alternately, distress and condemnation (181). Lily embraces Mrs. Ramsay's contradictions and the contradictory impulses she inspires, and it is only then that she can complete her painting.

We cannot take Woolf's claim to have conquered her trauma through writing the novel at face value, since she revisits the same maternal territory more than ten years after writing *To the Lighthouse*. The paragraph in "A Sketch of the Past" that follows her avowal that writing *To the Lighthouse* brought resolution confirms that her mother's voice is still "faintly in [her] ears, the 'Ah—ah—ah' that is at once mother-speak and orgasm, that is the pre-language of the symbiotic" (1985a: 86). In "A Sketch of the Past" especially, Woolf appears to be utterly smitten with the maternal body, the curves, the lap, the breasts, the delicate fingers. Even the image that she associates with scriptotherapy, that of blowing bubbles from a pipe, recalls both vagina and womb, even as it invokes the phallus, which enables her to approach the freedom and fluidity that is the maternal body.

In addition to the romanticization that characterizes her fascination with the womb are self-consciously romantic visual images of her mother that are dominated by her beauty, images that she admits are likely not fully representative of life as it was when her mother was alive. Particularly notable is her description of Julia at tea with nobles and artists, dressed in a striped silk dress, holding a plate of strawberries and cream. Here, as in "Reminiscences," Julia appears as from a fairy tale, as from the Pre-Raphaelite romantic paintings for which she was a model. To summon her mother "as she really was," Woolf claims, "I dream; I make up pictures of a summer's afternoon" (1985a: 87). She fantasizes. In "A Sketch of the Past" Woolf also reiterates the vision of her mother "as happy as it is possible for a human being to be" in her marriage with Herbert Duckworth, in her life before Virginia Woolf was herself imagined or conceived.

Throughout "A Sketch of the Past," such idealization inevitably yields to the reality articulated in "Reminiscences" of Julia's aloofness. Woolf's admission that lying awake longing for her mother's presence inspired her artistic imagination is especially provocative. Her mother encouraged her to imagine substitute "lovely things," which suggests art as a way of mediating absence and loss (1985a: 82). She tells of Julia's sharpness, of the fact that she cannot recall ever being alone with her mother for an extended period. As Woolf puts it, "it was impossible for her to leave a very private and particular impression upon a child . . . She was keeping what I call in my shorthand the panoply of life—that which we all lived in common—in being. I see now that she was living on such an extended surface that she had not time, nor strength, to concentrate, except if one were ill or in some child's crisis, upon me, or upon anyone—unless it were [Virginia Woolf's youngest brother] Adrian" (1985a: 83). Again she returns to Julia Duckworth Stephen as an absent presence, and again she suggests maternal favoritism that was not directed toward her. She also insinuates that Julia "sacrifice[d]" her children to their testy father, in insisting that one child always accompany him on his walks and in molding "the legacy of his dependence, which after her death became so harsh an imposition" (1985a: 133). In Woolf's account, Julia Stephen did not lose her

identity through mothering, but Virginia the child wishes that she had.

Yet, this woman she knew on a less than personal level was the “creator of that crowded merry world which spun so gaily in the centre of ... [her] childhood,” the world that collapsed upon itself on May 5th, 1895 (1985a: 84). Here Julia is constructed as an artist who organized the intricate life of the family into a veritable dream world. Throughout, Woolf reiterates that recapturing that world is a tentative, creative endeavor, one that requires the intervention of imagination. It requires the mind of an artist, and it is significant that the mind of that artist was formed when Julia yet lived because even then young Virginia was forced to engage in a good bit of imaginative work to attempt to know her mother. Equally significant is Woolf’s claim that her mother’s death enhanced her artistic sensibility:

...[M]y 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. To take another instance—I remember going into Kensington Gardens at the time.... I had taken *The Golden Treasury* with me. I opened it and began to read some poem. And instantly and for the first time I understood the poem.... It was as if it became altogether intelligible; I had the feeling of transparency in the words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them; to foretell them as if they developed what one is already feeling. (1985a: 93)

Not only does this develop an intriguing connection between art and the mother—she was, after all, consumed with her mother in this period, with her mother’s absence—but it also suggests a relationship between trauma and art. Was it her mother’s absence that allowed her to become the sensitive artist that she was? Was it desire for the mother? Was it the trauma of her mother’s death?

“A Sketch of the Past” probes deeply Virginia Woolf’s traumas—especially the deaths of her mother and of Stella—and the desires they provoke in her. Woolf’s essay explores the traumatized memory, the post-traumatic recollections of the adult nostalgically constructing for herself what she believes was her childhood, the artist’s reflection on the sources of her artistic temperament. Here she suggests that the loss of the mother, the loss of the idyllic, symbiotic sphere, provoked in the sensitive, young woman the necessary development of imagination and a regard for depth. Beth Schwartz (1991) claims that, “in invoking maternal figures as her muses, Woolf rewrites the erotic, heterosexual plot of the poet-muse relationship.... Woolf aims to establish the mother as the repository of memory and as the source of poetic inspiration for women writers by locating her at the core of the creative impulse” (721). Julia Duck-

worth Stephen, with her foibles and virtues, as "a mixture of the Madonna and a woman of the world," inspired the art that struggles to approximate, however imperfectly, the Mother, the art that sustains and nurtures readers as they struggle to realign themselves with the lost Mother (1985a: 90).

Clearly Woolf resolved her maternal obsession in neither *To the Lighthouse* nor in her autobiographical writings. In her afterward to *Virginia Woolf and Trauma*, Suzette Henke (2007) warns against romanticizing Virginia Woolf's watery suicide, and I do not intend to do so, yet its maternal dimension is undeniable. Virginia Woolf spent her life contemplating what it meant to be a child of an absent mother. Her suicide, I believe, was a self-conscious return to the mother, but as we have seen in "Reminiscences" and "A Sketch of the Past," she was under no illusions about the struggles returning to the mother entails. While in her final days she feared she was falling into madness, I believe she recognized the tortures of the death she chose. In a time when her homeland was threatened by Adolph Hitler, when the world seemed to be dominated by evil, perhaps she finally isolated an immersion in the cloudy, suffocating amniotic waters as the only way to die meaningfully.

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