

# The Lady in the Looking-Glass: Reflections on the Self in Virginia Woolf

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## Abstract

This essay addresses Virginia Woolf's exploration of the concept of the self through reference to a range of her prose writings. In these writings, Woolf questions whether the self is unitary, constant and finally knowable, or fragmented, unstable and inscrutable; whether the self is merged with other people, and constructed from interactions with the world; and whether or not a durable and fixed self-image is a necessary prerequisite for successful social interaction. Woolf's engagement with the conventions of biography is examined primarily through the lens of two short stories: 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass' and 'An Unwritten Novel'. I argue in the first instance that Woolf's concerns about 'life-writing' are influenced both by the spirit of modernist experimentation and by gender politics, before moving on to an exploration of the ways in which her views on biography inform her own memoir, 'A Sketch of the Past'.

The second half of this essay focuses on Woolf's 1931 novel, *The Waves*, which is, perhaps, her most sustained meditation on the nature of subjective identity. Using Jacques Lacan's concept of the 'mirror stage', I analyse Woolf's rendering of the multiple 'selves' that feature in *The Waves*. Finally, I investigate correspondences between this novel and 'A Sketch of the Past', with a view to situating *The Waves* as a modernist autobiography of the type that Woolf envisions when she re-imagines biographical conventions elsewhere in her work.

*Keywords:* gender, identity, representation, autobiography

The very title of Virginia Woolf's short story 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection' (1929) speaks directly to her close engagement – both here and elsewhere – with the issue of selfhood, and the possibility of its narrative articulation. The looking-glass motif is a recurrent feature of Woolf's writing, and functions variously as a surface upon which the self – or alternative selves – might be reflected or envisioned, and as a metaphor for the processes of autobiographical writing. Similarly central to Woolf's aesthetic is the tension between the individual's public personae and his or her 'private' self. Through a range of biographical, autobiographical, and fictional strategies, Woolf explores the extent to which the private self can be conceptualised as a fixed, unitary, and bounded identity. Furthermore, she questions whether or not the self can ever be formulated 'accurately' within the limited terms of language. In this essay, I contend that these issues can be productively considered in terms of psychoanalytic theory and, more specifically, Jacques Lacan's concept of the 'mirror stage' – the moment in infantile development at which the child first sees itself as distinct from others, and thereby assumes a self-image or *imago* (442). I will argue that much of Woolf's writing, most

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notably *The Waves* (1931), can be usefully re-examined through the lens of recent theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

'The Lady in the Looking-Glass' testifies to Woolf's interest in biography. It is well documented that Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, became the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* in 1882, the year that Virginia was born. This huge responsibility, his 'major life's work', involved documenting the lives of 'great men' in the traditional biographical style, which meant, in essence, recording their major public achievements (Lee 7). While Woolf inherited her father's respect for life-writing, she had a detached and irreverent attitude towards the 'great men' whose lives were documented in the *Dictionary*, as displayed in the final paragraphs of her memoir 'A Sketch of the Past' (1939-40): 'Greatness still seems to me booming, eccentric, set apart; something we are led up to by our parents and is now entirely extinct' (136). Woolf was more interested in writing the lives of the unknown and the marginalised, as demonstrated by 'Lives of the Obscure' in the first volume of *The Common Reader* (1929). As Julia Briggs shows, Woolf's first attempt at biography was the 'kind of life that challenged *DNB* principles – that of a young woman who had lived at home, studied at art school, and recently married': this departure from the focus of her father's *Dictionary* was Woolf's early memoir of her sister Vanessa (249).

In 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass', the narrator, situated inside the house, watches an elderly lady, Isabella Tyson, working in the garden through a reflection in the mirror. Woolf's focalisation of an 'obscure' life such as Isabella's displays Woolf's wish to inscribe neglected areas of female experience into the realm of literature. Woolf describes the appeal of this enterprise through the character of Terence Hewet, in *The Voyage Out* (1915): 'I've often walked along the streets where people live all in a row, and one house is exactly like another house, and wondered what on earth the women were doing inside' (200). In 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass', Woolf works to satirise the conventions of traditional biography by undermining its valorisation of hard 'facts': 'As for facts, it was a fact that she was a spinster; that she was rich; that she had bought with her own hands . . . the rugs, the chairs, the cabinets' (76). These particulars seem prosaic alongside the rich psychical life that the narrator ascribes to Isabella: for instance 'the fall of the branch would suggest to her how she must die herself and the futility and evanescence of things'; Isabella's thoughts have a profundity which the 'facts' of her life lack (79). As a domestic woman, Isabella cannot 'distinguish' herself in any traditional or public sense, so the attempt to distinguish her through the medium of 'biography' is necessarily contingent upon gaining imaginative access to her private consciousness. 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass' thus exemplifies the modernist principles Woolf outlines in her essay 'Modern Fiction' (1921), in which she advocates the presentation of 'this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit' of personal consciousness, rather than 'the alien and external', the dry events of a life (189). In 'Women's Lives: The Unmapped Country', Lyndall Gordon suggests that this kind of formal experimentation is a precondition for writing the lives of the obscure:

The hidden aspect of women's lives—in fact, all lives of the obscure—may require, then, more transgressive experiment if we are to answer [the] question[:] [...] what unrealized possibilities lie unnoticed behind the silence of women's lives in

the outback of history, biography and memoir, the standard records of the past?  
(96)

Woolf's fictional biography utilizes the kind of 'experimental' form that Gordon proposes: a form that attempts to identify the essence of the private selves that lie behind the individual's public exterior.

The role of the mirror in 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass' is manifestly complex. The narrator begins by contrasting the lively, shifting patterns of light in the drawing room (a typical Woolfian motif) with what she sees in the looking-glass, which 'reflected the hall table, the sunflowers, the garden path so accurately and fixedly they seemed held there in their reality inescapably' (75). The 'stillness' of the mirror's world seems lifeless compared to reality, and again we are reminded of the 'materialists', the writers criticised by Woolf in 'Modern Fiction' for their focus on surface detail in their fiction instead of the 'true and enduring' (187). In 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass', then, the dancing patterns of light symbolise the shifting inscrutability of Isabella's inner self: as the narrator observes, 'it was strange that after all these years one could not say what the truth about Isabella was' (76). The ultimate unknowability of the self is an important theme for Woolf, and one that is alluded to directly by Clarissa in Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs Dalloway* when 'she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that' (10). Likewise, in her autobiographical fragment, 'A Sketch of the Past', Woolf comments that 'it is so difficult to give any account of the person to whom things happen. The person is immensely complicated' (69). In these passages, Woolf acknowledges the impossibility of providing a single, total and final account of a person's self.

The complexity of the self is similarly asserted in an early short story, 'An Unwritten Novel' (1920), which, like 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass' throws the narrative spotlight on an unknown woman. In this instance, the narrator invents the biography of the lady who sits facing her in a railway carriage. To explain the lady's nervous twitch, for example, the narrator ascribes to her a loveless, childless, unhappy existence, in which she is tormented by her sister-in-law. The narrator is confident that outward appearances are a reliable 'mirror' of the individual's constant, unitary self: in the opening paragraph, she states that 'life's what you see in people's eyes' (25). This is in stark contrast to the self that the narrator describes in 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass', which is elusive and inscrutable: 'The sun would beat down on her face, into her eyes; but no, at the critical moment a veil of cloud covered the sun, making the expression of her eyes doubtful' (78). Here, then, the eyes are no longer the incorruptible signifier of the self, but a surface that reflects Isabella's ontological doubts.

The narrator's confidence in the stability of the self in 'An Unwritten Novel' is undermined at the story's conclusion, when the woman steps off the train to meet her son, proving herself to be a more complex person than the narrator's strictly imposed 'story' of her circumstances allowed. This is an 'interruption of reality', which Woolf often employs in her writing to bring the narrator and reader out of the imaginative trance and back into the real world. These intrusions are portrayed in both positive and negative ways in her fiction. In the early story 'The Mark on the Wall' (1917), for example, the narrator's free-flowing inner thoughts are brought to a violent end by the appearance of a figure who explains the origins of the eponymous mark and thus forecloses any further imaginative speculation. In 'An Unwritten Novel', however, the 'shock' of the physical

truth is a positive interruption, as it demonstrates the flawed nature of the narrator's assumptions about her fellow traveller's unhappy existence. The interruption validates Gordon's suggestion that 'Women's lives deviate from the set stories of traditional biography': in 'An Unwritten Novel', the narrator makes the mistake of adhering to one of the 'approved stories our culture has produced' when she 'reads' the woman on the train in terms of her external appearance (96).

The closing paragraphs of 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass' showcase an alternative version of this 'interruption of reality'. Throughout the story, the narrator has entered Isabella's consciousness, but this only emphasises the complexity and inaccessibility of the inner self that she seeks to understand: Isabella 'was filled with thoughts . . . she was full of locked drawers' (79). Ultimately, then, it is not possible for the narrator to write a final, definitive biography of Isabella's whole being. The ensuing interruption, then, is a surprising one, as Isabella's approaching form in the mirror reveals her to have none of the complexity which had been ascribed to her:

Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody. (80)

On first reading, this appears to stand in diametric opposition to the conclusion that is drawn at the end of 'An Unwritten Novel'. Here, the intrusion of reality strips Isabella of complexity, whereas the woman on the train prompted the exclamation, 'Mysterious figures!'. Where the subject of 'An Unwritten Novel' manages to escape the 'set story' that her appearance implies, the eponymous 'lady in the looking-glass' is judged finally by her appearance in the harsh glare of the mirror. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that Isabella's inner self is not actually vapid or simplistic; rather, it is the mirror that causes Isabella to be reduced to an external appearance. This is suggested by the inconsistencies between this mirror image and the narrator's descriptions of Isabella: in the looking-glass 'she had no friends', but in the preceding description, 'she was rich; she was distinguished; she had many friends', and 'was thinking, perhaps . . . that it was time she drove over to see the Hipplesleys in their new house' (79; 78). Even if we take these to be part of the narrator's fanciful imaginings, the fact that the narrator is inside Isabella's house undercuts any suggestion that she is a recluse.<sup>2</sup> It is the materialistic nature of the reflected self that is criticised at the conclusion of the story: the mirror creates a static image that forecloses the possibility of change or multiplicity—the characteristics by which the private self is, in Woolf's view, defined. The lines that frame the story therefore gain an interpretive significance: 'People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms'; the mirror's stable, externally mimetic image denies Isabella a depth of character (80).

On a symbolic level, the fixed, stable, singular image that the looking-glass projects seems to represent traditional biography and autobiography, and Woolf's

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<sup>2</sup> The narrative voice draws the reader into Isabella's house, too, through Woolf's assumption of a perspective that approaches the second-person: the pronoun 'one' is used throughout, such as 'one realised at last that they were merely letters'; likewise, 'sometimes it seemed as if [the furnishings] knew more about her than *we*' (77; 76, emphasis added). This narrative style also suggests a consensus view of Isabella, which is significant for the conclusions that we take from the story.

concerns about the multiple insufficiencies of these various modes. Woolf's presentation of the lifeless mirror image in 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass' gestures towards the intrinsic flaws of conventional biography, and foregrounds the importance of developing a new kind of life writing. The narrator of the short story remarks,

one was tired of the things she talked about at dinner. It was her profounder state of being that one wanted to catch and turn into words, the state that is to the mind what breathing is to the body, what one calls happiness or unhappiness. (78-79)

Again, the depiction of the 'profounder state of being' is given precedence over the public events around which written lives tend to be organised. In her 1940 essay 'The Art of Biography', Woolf further demonstrates the need for biography that takes account of the subject's inner self (or selves). While acknowledging that biography 'imposes conditions, and those conditions are that it must be based on fact', Woolf advocates a form of biography that attempts to inscribe the multifaceted nature of the subject's self (224):

since we live in an age when a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters and diaries, at every character from every angle, [the biographer] must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face. Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking-glasses at odd corners. And yet from this all this diversity it will bring out, not a riot of confusion, but a greater unity. (226)

Here, Woolf refutes the notion of singular selfhood, and argues that the biographer must be prepared to acknowledge the multifaceted, and often conflicting, nature of selfhood: in short, he or she must use 'looking-glasses at odd corners' as a way of gaining access to the different dimensions of the subject's personality.

This is the technique that Woolf seems to employ in her autobiographical memoir, 'A Sketch of the Past', which is constructed from a series of remembered scenes from her early life. As in her fictional biographies, these scenes are not notable events in any objective or traditional sense. Rather, the discrete, fragmentary 'pictures . . . impressions' that Woolf presents in 'A Sketch of the Past' refer to those moments that have impacted significantly upon her psychological development: events, that is, which have combined to shape her adult self (67). In recalling her 'first memory', which is of hearing the waves break on the shore of St. Ives from the nursery, Woolf observes that 'if life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory' (64). For Woolf, then, memories are the foundation of selfhood, and are vital to the construction of adult identities. Woolf defines these key episodes as 'moments of being': moments that transcend the 'cotton wool' of daily life, and which 'shock' the individual in profound and defining ways. In order to convey this to her reader, Woolf delineates the fragmentary scenes in terms of the effect they had upon her psyche. The episodes she describes illustrate the new biographical praxis that she outlines in 'The Art of Biography': the fragments are indeed like 'looking-glasses [hung] at odd corners', combining to create a 'richer' image of Woolf's psychological configuration.

Autobiography can be further equated with the external self that a person presents to the world, as both are reflections of the multiple, private self: autobiography is the

linguistic codification of self-image, a 'fixing' of oneself in language. As one might expect after reading the narrative critique of the mirror's static, superficial, reflected image in 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass', Woolf's autobiographical reflection in 'A Sketch of the Past' is multifaceted and complex. Significantly, Woolf suggests that autobiography is a vital and positive practice because it allows her to develop a coherent understanding of her (often painful) memories. Writing in 'A Sketch of the Past' about the kind of 'shocks' that punctuated her young life, Woolf makes the following claim:

I make it real by putting it in to 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 . . . 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 (72).

As Woolf sees it, events become whole, connected, and manageable once they have been formulated in the terms of language. The unity created in writing can give credence to Woolf's belief that 'behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern' ('A Sketch of the Past': 72).<sup>3</sup> In this sense, Woolf's fiction and autobiography might be read as attempts to codify, and hence come to terms with, the intense events of her life.

In her essay 'Authorizing the Autobiographical', Shari Benstock reads Woolf's autobiographical writing and fiction in terms of the Lacanian mirror stage. According to Lacan, the mirror stage occurs 'from the age of six months', when the child first conceives of itself as an individual subject, distinct from others and from its surroundings (442). As Lacan explains it:

The *mirror stage* is a drama . . . which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity (444).

Lacan's identification of the mirror stage as a drama in which the self is first seen as a 'totality', where an 'identity' is constructed through its 'alienating' difference from others, is pertinent to the exploration of selfhood in Woolf's writing. In her own analysis of Lacan, Benstock focalises the 'discord' that characterises the mirror stage, in which the child's early 'experience of "self" as fragmented, partial, segmented, and different' conflicts with the 'fusion and homogeneity' that emerge during 'the construction of a "self" (the *moi* of Lacan's terminology)' (12). Woolf's writing often examines this 'discord' between the fragmented self of the pre-linguistic 'semiotic', and the unified, but false, self of the linguistic, post-mirror stage 'symbolic', to use Julia Kristeva's terminology.<sup>4</sup> For Benstock, the unconscious is 'the space of writing', and, as with

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<sup>3</sup> *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is the most notable example of Woolf 'fixing' her past through her fiction in order to come to terms with it: as Hermione Lee shows, the novel 'was the closest that Virginia Woolf came, she says, to undergoing psychoanalysis; she invented her own therapy – the narrative – and exorcised her obsession with both her parents'. (Introduction. *To the Lighthouse* xxxiv)

<sup>4</sup> For a further expansion of the terms 'semiotic' and 'symbolic', see Julia Kristeva, 'A Question of Subjectivity – An Interview' pp. 131-137.

Freud's oedipal crisis, one's memories of the mirror stage are forever relegated to this space (12).

Woolf's 1931 novel, *The Waves*, examines the 'discord' of the semiotic and the symbolic self through the lives of two fictional characters, Louis and Rhoda. These characters have, respectively, a repressively strong and an impossibly weak self-image. Louis, for example, is overly aware of his self-image and how he appears in the eyes of others; he is fixed in the 'symbolic', the alienated self that is inaugurated in the mirror stage. His obsession with his social background and his unusual accent is betrayed by his repeated refrain, 'My father is a banker and I speak with an Australian accent' (13). Louis is hindered by his fixed understanding of his self, which is demonstrated in his contempt for the 'common people' that he sees surrounding him as he dines at a café. They are 'prehensile like monkeys, greased to this particular moment, they are discussing with all the right movements the sale of a piano. It blocks up the hall; so he would take a tenner' (69). However, beneath this disparaging view, Louis is uncertain about his own person, admitting, 'yet I look at the little men at the next table to be sure that I do what they do' (69). Woolf thus examines the difficulties that present themselves to the individual with an inflexible sense of self. In the case of Louis, he must constantly compare himself to others in order to confirm his own identity, and this is something that takes its toll: as Louis himself comments, 'Life has been a terrible affair for me' (153).

In contrast, Rhoda has an unbearably fragile sense of her own identity. While Louis 'looks at himself in the looking-glass as he comes in', Rhoda wishes to avoid her own image, which suggests that she does not see herself as a stable, ontological entity:

"That is my face", said Rhoda, "in the looking-glass behind Susan's shoulder – that face is my face. But I duck behind her to hide it for I am not here. I have no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world...Whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second" (31).

Like Louis, Rhoda cannot function completely successfully in the world because of her self-image. In her case, however, her difficulties stem from her lack of Lacan's *imago*, a fixed self to present to others. Rhoda's aversion to her mirror image is evocative of an incident that Woolf recalls in 'A Sketch of the Past':

There was a small looking-glass in the hall at Talland House . . . When I was six or seven perhaps, I got into the habit of looking at my face in the glass. But I only did this if I was sure I was alone. I was ashamed of it. A strong feeling of guilt seemed naturally attached to it (67-8).

Woolf uses her autobiography to investigate this shame, asking, 'But why was this?'. Characteristically, she does not provide the reader with an authoritative interpretation of her shame, just 'some possible reasons' for it (68-69). In assessing these 'reasons', Benstock argues that Woolf's primary explanations—that she and Vanessa were 'tomboys', or that she inherited "a streak of the puritan" which made her feel shame at [...] narcissistic behaviour—are not quite adequate (12-13). Rather, Woolf tentatively implies that the abuse she suffered at the hands of Gerald Duckworth caused her to feel

ashamed of her physical self. Mirrors, which in *The Waves* are avoided by Rhoda because they do not reflect her shifting self, are linked in 'A Sketch of the Past' to a traumatic event that may have contributed to Woolf's own uncertain sense of self.

In *The Waves*, Rhoda's failure to progress through the mirror stage successfully means that she is also incapable of differentiating herself from the world around her. The most telling example of this is when she 'came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell' (47). The absence of what Lacan refers to as an 'alienating identity' means that Rhoda cannot distinguish between herself and her surroundings, and the anxiety to which this gives rise leads to her physical collapse. This is another episode that echoes one of the 'moments of being' that Woolf recalls in 'A Sketch of the Past': 'the moment of the puddle in the path; when, for no reason I could discover, everything suddenly became unreal; I was suspended; I could not step across the puddle' (78). According to Benstock, 'Psychic health is measured in the degree to which the "self" is constructed in separateness, the boundaries between "self" and "other" carefully circumscribed' (15). If this is the case, then Rhoda's collapse and, by extension, Woolf's inability to step across the puddle, might each be read as physical manifestations of psychic paralyses.<sup>5</sup>

While Woolf addresses the nature of human subjectivity in much of her shorter fiction, it is in *The Waves* that she does so most explicitly. Woolf gestures towards an ideal strength of self-image, between the extremes of the semiotic and symbolic. While Rhoda's fragile sense of self represents the former, and Louis's inflexible, restrictive identity signifies the latter; the other four characters in the novel are situated between these two poles. In Bernard's final 'summing up' in *The Waves*, he echoes Woolf's view of the multiplicity of the self, in his statement, 'There are many rooms – many Bernards. There was the charming, but weak; the strong but supercilious'; Bernard lists many more of the personalities that he presents to the world, and concludes: 'What I was to myself was different; was none of these' (200). This uncertainty about the veracity of the public self is sustained throughout Woolf's writing. In Nancy Walker's view, this concern was also a major issue in her life:

That Woolf was conscious of human role-playing—of the deliberate selection of a self to present to others—is clear from numerous comments in her letters and diaries. In her worst moments, she felt that all life was a façade. (293)

Early in *The Waves*, Bernard addresses this same concern, wondering, 'When I say to myself, "Bernard", who comes? A faithful, sardonic man, disillusioned, but not embittered. A man of no particular age or calling. Myself, merely' (60). Bernard, the story-teller of the novel, realises that beneath his various 'façades', his inner self is undistinguished, but genuine. Woolf, in her guise as writer, felt the same way: in a 1922 diary entry she observed that 'Sydney comes & I'm Virginia; when I write I'm merely a sensibility' (qtd. in Lee 5). This impersonal 'sensibility' corresponds to Bernard's sense of his inner self, as it lies beneath the multiple layers of his public selves.

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<sup>5</sup> In 'A Sketch of the Past', Woolf notes that she was 'never [...] able to compare my gifts and defects with other people's' in childhood, which suggests a difficulty in constructing a self-image in relation to others (65).



Bernard also suggests that his self is a social construction; that his identity is something dynamic that is irretrievably merged with his friends. ‘And now I ask’, he states, “‘Who am I?’ I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know’ (222). In *Woolf: The Waves*, Eric Warner suggests that the characters that feature in *The Waves* might be interpreted as discrete facets of the author’s own character. Warner’s reading is supported by a letter that Woolf wrote to G.L. Dickinson, in which she told him that ‘The six characters were all supposed to be one. I’m getting old myself . . . and I come to feel more and more how difficult it is to collect myself in Virginia’ (qtd. in Warner 83). Warner proceeds to forge links between each of the characters and Woolf’s complex personality. He reads Jinny, for example, as ‘a project[ion] of Woolf’s love of clothes and social occasions’ (83). Just as ‘The Lady in the Looking-Glass’ represented Woolf’s subversive and pioneering attempt to write explicitly subjective biography of an unknown and unknowable figure, so *The Waves* can be read as Woolf’s attempt to reconceptualise the structure of traditional autobiography. Warner does, however, understate the importance of Bernard’s characterisation of his group of friends as a ‘seven-sided flower’—a description which implies that the self is definable in relation to others, rather than through anything intrinsic to the individual subject (95). Throughout the novel, Woolf distinguishes the characters through their differences, and they often refer to how others would react in a given situation. Bernard, for example, establishes a sense of his own identity by distinguishing it from that of Neville: “‘Therefore”, I said, “I am myself, not Neville”, a wonderful discovery’ (185). Furthermore, Bernard sees the group as having been unified, then splitting, saying, ‘We suffered terribly as we became separate bodies’ (186). The language Bernard uses here is reminiscent of the child’s (mis)recognition of the self-as-whole in the mirror stage. After the distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other’ has taken place, however, the group is still connected: ‘We exist not only separately but in undifferentiated blobs of matter’ (189).

This idea of metaphysical links between selves is vital to a consideration of Woolf’s fiction, in which characters are often posited as separate, bounded, and unknowable beings, at the same time as they are shown to be connected, and even convergent. In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf hints at this using the character of Hewet: “‘I’m not like Hirst”, said Hewet . . . “I don’t see circles of chalk between people’s feet. I sometimes wish I did”” (205). Hewet doubts whether people are as clearly defined and separated as we might suppose, and this circumspection is supported elsewhere in the text when Woolf represents the character of Rachel as inextricable from the persons who surround her. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa supports this alternative philosophy of selfhood: she feels herself to be ‘laid out like a mist between people she knew best’, which is reminiscent of the group identity in *The Waves* (11). Later in the novel, she feels like she is

everywhere . . . So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter – even trees, or barns. (199-200)

This view of the self as merged with people and places, as opposed to stable and unitary, is central to *Mrs Dalloway*, and emerges most forcefully in the parallel that is drawn

between Septimus and Clarissa. Through his suicide, the novel suggests, Septimus allows Mrs Dalloway to continue living. This demonstrates Woolf's view that 'behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern': the textual 'affinity' between the characters transcends physical connections and traditional understanding.

This metaphysical approach to selfhood is situated at the edge of Woolf's narrative explorations of subjectivity. For Woolf, writing served as a mirror through which she could contemplate the subtlety and variability of identity; in accordance with her sense of the plural, fragmentary nature of the private self, Woolf refused to restrict her interpretation of selfhood to one, singular metanarrative. In 'The Mark on the Wall' (1917), Woolf predicts the multiplicity of narratives in novels to come:

As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror . . . And the novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will pursue (56).

The 'almost infinite' reflections of selves that Woolf proposes could be part of the 'proper stuff of fiction', emerges in the diversity of narratives in the postmodern enterprise: Woolf's interrogation of identity, however, has a subtlety and depth that remains unsurpassed.

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