“The things people don’t say”: Tracing a Woolfian topology of self

On the Amtrak on the way home from school, I am not lucky enough to get a window seat, ascribable to the high density of holiday bookings and how late I have arrived. With my phone failing to charge the night before and no book in my backpack, my remaining recourse is to look out the window, something I like doing anyway. But, in the window seat, there is a man — a man trying to fall asleep — who is blocking a considerable portion of our window.

Thus begins our stand-off: I try my best to be polite and keep a line of sight 20º away from his face, to respect his privacy. He tries his best to fall asleep as fast as possible, but there are two problems. First, the ideal line of sight for me is 10º away from his face, but that is too close for comfort. Second, he keeps getting nervous and opening his eyes. My eyes drift naturally toward the 10º mark, but I am constantly vigilant for whether he peeps. What we both desperately want to avoid is that fatal collision: we both make eye contact; he knows that I know that he has been peeping in his sleep; I know that he knows that I have been looking a little too close for the general standards of privacy, even for reasons as innocent as scenery-viewing. It is the most exhausting train ride of my life; when he gets off at Providence, I immediately swoop in and replace him in the window seat to avoid such future catastrophe.

Fortunately, at least for me, weird train ride encounters are hardly a unique thing; they were so pertinent to Woolf that she theorized deeply about them at least three times.[1] Why are these nuances of perception so exacting on our daily lives? My anecdote touches on many of the central issues of selfhood for Woolf, which are, in turn, topics of investigation for this essay at large. In the first part of my essay, I define a Woolfian model of self: the internal self, the external self, the self we create, and the self that creates us. In the second part, I discuss how the

[1] In “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” “An Unwritten Novel,” and *Jacob’s Room*.

interaction of self with others, with examples from *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, produces facticity that causes psychological harm to our ability to live with ourselves. When comparing Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, I also investigate permeability and the desire of the self to communicate truthfully, an oxymoronic phrase for Woolf. In the last part of my essay, I use *Orlando* to expand my theory of self through the dimension of time, to understand the interactions between a multiplicity of selves across memory. Finally, I show how *Orlando*'s ending depicts an ideal resolution of the many conflicts of selfhood described in this essay, yet ultimately is only possible because of its surreality.

Part I. Defining the Woolfian Self

A. Sifting through the atoms

To begin: we know that consciousness takes at least two forms: the conscious (the mind that we control) and the unconscious (the mind we do not control). Whether or not these two descriptors form a tight binary (e.g., what about the subconscious?) is a later issue; for now, suffice it to say that these categories form a simple enough framework of the mind. The pertinent questions are then: when are our conscious versus unconscious minds active? What actions fall under each category? For preliminary answers, we may turn to Woolf's essay "The Leaning Tower." Although the bulk of that essay theorizes on education and writing, Woolf describes here a concept of consciousness:

> Unconsciousness, which means presumably that the **under mind** works at top speed while the **upper mind** drowses, is a state we all know. We all have experience of the work done by unconsciousness in our own daily lives. You have had a crowded day, let us suppose, sightseeing in London. Could you say what you had seen and done when you came back? Was it not all a blur, a confusion? **But after what seemed a rest, a chance to turn aside** and look at something different, the sights and sounds and sayings that had been of most interest to you

> swam to the surface, apparently of their own accord; and remained in **memory**; what was unimportant sunk into forgetfulness. ("The Leaning Tower," 163, emphasis mine)

For Woolf, the "under mind" and "upper mind" (terms that we may borrow in this essay to substitute for "unconscious mind" and "conscious mind" respectively) work at separate times in different functions: when we present ourselves to the public ("sightseeing") — with the usual qualifiers being perception by others, involving direct action, requiring vocalization, and immersion in the present — we use the upper mind while our under mind is lost in "blur," "confusion." Then, when the under mind receives its cue of privacy, solitude, quiet ("a rest," "a chance to turn aside"), it processes the public day into some element of self-truth: "memory." The term "self-truth" is heavy-handed and my own, but what it expresses is the foolproof, unimpeachable nature of this process. The way we sift from our days ("sift" is my verb for Woolf's "sights and sounds and sayings that had been of most interest to you swam to the surface… what was unimportant sunk into forgetfulness") cannot be falsified[2]: what we forget we forget, and nobody can recreate that process for us — we cannot even recreate that process for ourselves if we tried.

This is what Woolf thinks the daily frame of mind is. In "Modern Fiction," Woolf writes: "Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. This mind receives a myriad impressions — trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday" ("Modern Fiction," 8). Note that what Woolf is interested in is the "ordinary" mind on the "ordinary" day: the process of sifting through atoms is

[2] To be clear: memories themselves can be (and often are) corrupted — in medical terms "confabulated" — but what *cannot* be corrupted is the process of creating memory, since it is entirely unconscious.

minute and repetitive[3], but it is undeniably complex. It might be the most original thing we do, even while it is as ordinary as "Monday" or "Tuesday." Woolf portrays this process because, as theorized in her memoir, she is exceptionally sensitive to it:

> I go on to suppose that the **shock-receiving capacity** is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. 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 come 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… From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that **behind** the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we — I mean all human beings — are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art… **we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself**. And I see this when I have a shock. ("Sketch of the Past," 72, emphasis mine)

In later sections of "Sketch of the Past," Woolf recalls some "shocks" in her life that readers will recognize in scenes scattered through her works, to support this idea. But what is key here is that my term "self-truth" may not be as dramatic as it seems: for Woolf, too, whatever we end up sifting represents not just truthfulness to ourselves, but also a sort of human truth. Over and over in this passage she depicts the "real thing" as something "behind" something else: "the daily wool of cotton life," "appearances." In the attempt to excavate this "pattern," we somehow gain access, temporarily, to human truth. But the truth is not something vague and foreign; the quest of authorship is not a treasure hunt for a secret lost document or elixir. Instead, by finding this "pattern," we really just find ourselves: "we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself" — the treasure is our truth, on a communal scale.[4]

At the heart of it all is this sifting process, the authorial quest for human truth that, in writing, is just recreated. For Woolf:

[3] Although even in this passage we can already pick up a certain tone of assault; these atoms are "myriad," "incessant," "innumerable," and the trauma of overload is a central theme of Woolf and the later parts of this essay.
[4] "Truth on a communal scale" should not be conflated with reality. *The Waves*, for instance, depicts communal truth without ontological reality.

> Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope **surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end**. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey[5] this varying, **this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit**, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? ("Modern Fiction," 8, emphasis mine)

It is once again emphasized that all truth ("this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit") follows *us* and our sifting process — nothing "alien" or "external" — "from the beginning of consciousness to the end," rather than any ontological reality. As the author feels the radius of the "luminous halo" and "semi-transparent envelope," her sole task is to "convey" that moment through her work, her vessel to reach readers. This is an artistic ideology that follows from Woolf to her author characters, such as Bernard from *The Waves*:

> I took my mind, my being, the old dejected, almost inanimate object and lashed it about among these odds and ends, sticks and straws, detestable little bits of wreckage, flotsam and jetsam, floating on the oily surface. I said, 'Fight.' 'Fight,' I repeated. It is the effort and the struggle, it is the perpetual warfare, it is the shattering and piecing together — this is the daily battle, defeat or victory, the absorbing pursuit. The trees, scattered, put on order; the thick green of the leaves thinned itself to a dancing light. I netted them under with a sudden phrase. I retrieved them from formlessness with words. (*The Waves*, 270)[6]

The author sees "formlessness" and turns it into "words," so that we might access that same formless truth someday, even though words by nature eliminate truth's necessary "formlessness." Such is the trouble she depicts with Miss La Trobe, the frantic director of *Between the Acts*' play: the author's challenge of presenting a just-pre-sifted-enough reality to an audience in order to nudge them toward following the author's own sifting process. "Miss La Trobe stood there with

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[5] From Picasso: "The artist is a receptacle for emotions that come from all over the place: from the sky, from the earth, from a scrap of paper, from a passing shape, from a spider's web. That is why we must not discriminate between things."

[6] I attribute this quote to Bernard's consciousness, but this quotation comes from the last chapter, when the six consciousnesses of the novels perhaps merge. Here, for instance, we can also see Louis's obsession with order, Neville's attempts at poetry, and Rhoda's formlessness at work.

her eye on her script. ‘After Vic.’ she had written, ‘try ten mins. of present time. Swallows, cows etc.’ She wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality” (*Between the Acts*, 179). The word “douche” here is key: it is the ideal of Woolf’s author figure to present reality so wholly and truly as to drench — literally shower — the audience in it. Miss La Trobe quickly realizes, though, that presenting true, totally un-sifted reality (“swallows, cows etc.”) is fruitless: her audience is simply confused; they cannot sift to the same “nugget of pure truth” (a Woolfian term from “A Room of One’s Own,” 4) that La Trobe wishes them to reach, because non-artists do not have the same level of “shock-receiving” sensitivity.

But at the same time, Miss La Trobe discovers that there is revelation simply in the connections art asks our under minds to make, whether it be the author’s “nugget” or not. When the rain suddenly falls in the middle of her ten-minute panic-driving silence, she says “‘That's done it,’ … Nature once more had taken her part. The risk she had run acting in the open air was justified” (*Between the Acts*, 181). Says Woolf about her own authorial ideology:

> Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small. (“Modern Fiction,” 9)

For artists and audiences alike, the sifting process, which asks of us what “scores upon the consciousness” no matter how “disconnected and incoherent,” is the one true way of accessing “life” — in the “small.”

B. “Scraps, orts and fragments”

What happens to the sifting process when it is not just “sights and sounds and sayings” we are sifting, but other people — people who are also sifting, who have equal layers of consciousness?

This too is explored in Miss La Trobe's ambitious play: after her ten-minute interlude of "reality," she brings in a troupe of children to hold mirrors to each member of the audience:

> Out they leapt, jerked, skipped. Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping. Now old Bart… he was caught. Now Manresa. Here a nose… There a skirt… Then trousers only… Now perhaps a face… Ourselves? But that's cruel. To snap us as we are, before we've had time to assume… And only, too, in parts… That's what's so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair. (*Between the Acts*, 184)

What happens at the moment of catching oneself by surprise in a mirror that is so jarring? For the audience members watching La Trobe's play, the mirrors feel like a trap: Bart and Manresa are "caught"; the mirror-bearers are called "imps — elves — demons," and the mirrors themselves are "malicious; observant; expectant; expository" (*Between the Acts*, 184). The truth is, when we look at ourselves in the mirror, we are suddenly aware of two versions of ourselves in the real world. One of them is our own consciousness — which I will call the "thinking-feeling-self," composed of the upper and under minds — which we are always aware of because we are always engaged with it (at least when awake). The other is the person that other people perceive — which I will call the "mirror-self" — whether we are aware of them perceiving or not. When I ride the subway, for instance, I am thinking about my destination, my plans, etc. There is music in my ears; there is a lot on my mind. But there exists another version of me in that moment, equal in time, location, and shape, which others see. In their consciousnesses, she is a girl with earbuds in, or a pair of nice shoes, or a blurry entity that is simply taking up too much space on the bench. Maybe if they cared to look closely, they might spot a look of excitement in my eyes, or an impatient jitter, but that is as far as they can go.

If *I* looked in the mirror at that very moment, I would see the same things. When confronted with a mirror, reflecting a self that is both detached and flattened into two dimensions, we are confronted with our twin, the double life which we cannot control. (I cannot

tell you to see me as the girl with the nice jeans, nor can I tell you *not* to think of me as the girl with the ugly jeans.) And the twin leaves impressions on others' minds, whether we consent or not. For this reason, La Trobe's play becomes a trap: the audience members are non-consensually forced to reckon with the flatness of their mirror-selves and the fact that perhaps all they might ever be remembered as is "a nose… a skirt… trousers only… a face." Amid such rich engagement with their thinking-feeling-selves — after all, they are watching and processing a play — they are robbed of that dimensionality. It is "cruel," "distorting," "upsetting," "unfair."

And yet for at least one audience member — the Reverend Streatfield — such flattening can be inspiring. He says, to the remainder of the audience:

> To me at least it was indicated that **we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole.** Yes, that occurred to me, sitting among you in the audience. Did I not perceive Mr. Hardcastle here" (he pointed) "at one time a Viking? And in Lady Harridan — excuse me, if I get the names wrong — a Canterbury pilgrim? We act different parts; but are the same. That I leave to you… I am not here to explain. That role has not been assigned me. **I speak only as one of the audience**, one of ourselves. I caught myself too reflected, as it happened in my own mirror…" (Laughter) "**Scraps, orts and fragments!** Surely, we should unite?" (*Between the Acts*, 192, emphasis mine)

In creating a play, Miss La Trobe incidentally[7] captures a spirit of unity using her genre itself. That is, if Mr. Hardcastle acts as a Viking and Lady Harridan acts as a Canterbury pilgrim, does Mr. Hardcastle not also act as Mr. Hardcastle, and Lady Harridan as Lady Harridan? The Reverend even forgets Lady Harridan's name; there is as much reason to forget it as one might forget the name of a minor character (which to us, of course, she is). To each of our consciousnesses, all impressions and perceptions of other people come as "scraps, orts and fragments" — we only see as much of other people as we can and choose to see, just as others do

[7] Though not incidental on Woolf's part — after all, even the title "Between the Acts" is an analogy between a play and our lives.

the same with our mirror-selves. “I speak only as one of the audience,” says the Reverend, and this contradiction in itself explains his idea of unity. He is an actor; he is a member of the collective. At any given moment so are we: we both have a “role” and do not. It is not a matter of I-see-you or you-see-me; we see each other.

It is in this give-and-take, this unity-in-disunity, that we share an experience of consciousness. Says Terrence Hewet, a character in *The Voyage Out* writing a novel on “the things people don’t say” (*The Voyage Out*, 216):

> The truth of it is that one never is alone, and one never is in company… Something about bubbles — auras — what d’you call ’em? You can’t see my bubble; I can’t see yours; all we see of each other is a speck, like the wick in the middle of that flame. The flame goes about with us everywhere; it’s not ourselves exactly, but what we feel; the world is short, or people mainly; all kinds of people. (*The Voyage Out*, 108-109)

Whether we are “scraps, orts and fragments” or bubbles with flames, it is evident that we must expand our previous framework of under and upper minds if we want to capture the Woolfian self. In a world of billions of thinking-feeling-selves (for Hewet: flames-in-bubbles) perceiving billions of mirror-selves (for Hewet: wicks-in-bubbles), “one never is alone, and one never is in company.” There are more versions of ourselves than just the self we experience, so we must expand our framework to include all the others.

C. The facticity of selfhood

But, in thinking about interactions of our mirror-selves with others, the longest-living mirror-self we put out is really to ourselves — that is, to our thinking-feeling-selves. What is our impression of ourselves? While we still may perceive ourselves in “scraps, orts and fragments” — think, for example, of the fact that you often include some part of your wardrobe when you picture

yourself in your head — perhaps they are more organized scraps, finer orts, and higher resolution fragments. Woolf says, in *Orlando*, "The conscious self, which is the uppermost, and has the power to desire, wishes to be nothing but one self" (*Orlando,* 227). That is, our greatest conscious desire is to unify our "scraps, orts and fragments" into "one self" — a self that is so seamlessly put together as to feel real, accessible (in this essay I will call it the "created self"). Mrs. Dalloway demonstrates how she assembles her created self in the mirror:

> How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same **imperceptible contraction**! She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her a face point. That was her self — pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when **some effort, some call on her to be her self,** drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into **one center, one diamond, one woman**… never showing a sign of all the other sides of her faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions. (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 27, emphasis mine)

The conscious aspect of this process is obvious: to summon "her self" (the space an important distinguisher) in the mirror, Mrs. Dalloway must conduct an "imperceptible contraction" by "purs[ing] her lips"; she requires "some effort, some call[8]." She has done this so many times that she is familiar with her destination, a face "pointed; dartlike; definite," and there is clear attempt at unification here: she "dr[aws] the parts together" into "one center, one diamond, one woman." But this unification — this attempt to create a single, cohesive self from scraps, orts, and fragments — is factitious: Mrs. Dalloway does not smooth over the cracks so much as assembles the prettiest pieces: "never showing a sign of all the other sides of her faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions." That is one key privilege the created self has over the mirror-self we show others:

[8] In *Orlando*, Orlando physically calls aloud for her "self" — or in her case, her "selves."

because we present the created self to ourselves, we can adjust and tune it[9] to the needs of our own egotism — my word for our obsession with our created self.[10]

But even when Mrs. Dalloway is not looking at the mirror, her thoughts and reflections (which are what we read) are all affected by consciousness in some way. This is because language itself is factitious, which is particularly problematic for Mrs. Dalloway because all of *Mrs. Dalloway* is in words.[11] In "Craftsmanship," Woolf writes that:

> [Words] combine — they combine unconsciously together. The moment we single out and emphasize the suggestions as we have done here they become unreal; and we, too, become unreal — specialists, word mongers, phrase finders[12], not readers. In reading we have to allow the sunken meanings to remain sunken, suggested, not stated; lapsing and flowing into each other like reeds on the bed of a river… Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations – naturally. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today – that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages. ("Craftsmanship," 140-141)[13]

That is, words are tokens of much more beneath; when we choose words, we try to emit our unique word-associations to other people via tokenization, which is an automatically contaminating[14] and even reductive process. Says Martha Nussbaum, "Emotions don't stand still to be inspected[15] like so many stones or bricks. The act of bringing them to consciousness

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[9] In my previous essay for Professor Yeazell, I wrote on "réflexion complice," Jean-Paul Sartre's term for self-duplicity via the created self.

[10] The word "egotism" comes from page 121 of *Mrs. Dalloway*, where Sally Seton is described as having the "simplest egotism" for repeatedly telling others she has "five enormous boys" — an aspect of her created self she is only too eager to share.

[11] In Dorrit Cohn's *Transparent Minds*, she points out that there are two schools of thought on how we think in real life: primarily in words, or primarily not in words. She calls this the problem of "psychological realism" (Cohn, 61), which is a useful term.

[12] Woolf uses the term "phrase finder" and variants to describe both Mr. Ramsay and Bernard, two author-figures who are, by nature of their goals, doomed with failure.

[13] Somewhat ironically, this essay, originally a broadcast on BBC Radio, was part of a program titled "Words Fail Me," and is the last surviving recording of her voice.

[14] For Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out*, music is one escape route from this contamination: "It appeared that nobody ever said a thing they meant, or ever talked of a feeling they felt, but that was what music was for. Reality dwel[t] in what one saw and felt, but did not talk about" (*The Voyage Out,* 37).

[15] Reminiscent of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle: we cannot measure the position and the momentum of a particle with absolute precision, because the process of measuring momentum disturbs position, and *vice versa*.

frequently changes them; the act of expressing them to another almost always does so" (Nussbaum, 738). It is exactly this sentiment that Neville — an unrealized poet in *The Waves* who rejects Bernard's "phrase-making" as insincere — means when he says "Yet these roaring waters… upon which we build our crazy platforms are more stable than the wild, the weak and inconsequent cries that we utter when, trying to speak, we rise; when we reason and jerk out these false sayings, 'I am this; I am that!' Speech is false" (*The Waves*, 138). To Neville, we are fallacious if we believe that, by ossifying the "roaring waters" of our under minds into words — spoken or not — we pin them down with greater accuracy.[16]

In novels, the facticity of words cannot be dismissed, even though the stream-of-consciousness style is our best attempt (arguably) at mimicking conscious thinking. Not only does this style rely on words, the words are also linear: thoughts reach their finish and sentences are rhythmically sound. To demonstrate the deceptive nature of linear consciousness, let us examine this long passage from *Mrs. Dalloway*:

> For having lived in Westminster — how many years now? over twenty, — one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, **Clarissa was positive**, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (**but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza**) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, **she felt positive**, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; **this moment of June.**

[16] An unfortunate loophole of my own essay.

> **For it was the middle of June.** The War was over, except for someone like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven — over. **It was June.** The King and the Queen were at the Palace. (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 4, emphasis mine)

Even though the narration sounds linear and relatively smooth, besides the obvious interjections ("How many years now?" "There!") which attempt to mimic the diversions of real-life thinking, there are different levels of the mind at work here; the linearity is not to be trusted. Take "Clarissa was positive," for instance. A mind unconcerned with others' judgments has no need to remind itself of the confidence it has in its thoughts — whom is she trying to persuade? This is followed by her proposal of a feeling she cannot explain ("indescribable"), and then a parenthetical that provides a possible excuse for that feeling. With her statement bookended by both projected confidence and equivocation, Mrs. Dalloway sets up multiple defense mechanisms to shield her statement, but from whom? She is speaking in her mind to herself alone, and perhaps it is that — herself — which is her audience of care; her created self, that is, one for whom such a silly and amorphous feeling might have bad social repercussions. In this way, her upper mind is constrained by her created self. This is the core idea of egotism: Mrs. Dalloway obsesses so innately over her created self that her consciousness is suffocated, which manifests to us via thoughts that are so tightly controlled and filtered that, for Mrs. Dalloway, her upper mind sometimes becomes nearly aligned with her created self.

We can observe the interplay between her upper mind and her created self throughout the rest of this passage. Near the end of the first paragraph, we see that Mrs. Dalloway's egotism has less of a hold on her — we see this because the syntax dissolves into lists and semicolons (not as eloquent as when she speaks through her created self), and also because of the paragraph break:

"life; London; this moment of June. / For it was the middle of June." What is the difference between "this moment of June" and "For it was the middle of June"? First, tonally, the former comes at the end of a long, rambling list. The latter begins a new paragraph with staccato-like conviction. Second, the former is grounded in experience, in her surroundings, in a state of being ("this moment"). The latter uses time as a narrative token ("it was"). It is a subtle difference, but this transition demonstrates a shift in Mrs. Dalloway's mind: she goes from letting her surroundings envelop her to once again standing self-centered. It is as if she shakes herself from immersion, and the next line shows this regained sense of selfhood too: "The War was over." My analysis is easier to visualize in the follow demarcation:

> **For it was the middle of June. The War was over**, except for someone like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; **but it was over; thank Heaven — over. It was June. The King and the Queen were at the Palace.**

The bold sections are in her egotistical frame of mind; the un-bolded elements are from her upper mind freed. The contrast is clear. Her projected created self believes the war is over; her upper mind wants to believe so but knows it is not — or else why would she name so many examples of trauma, with such pain, in clear observance that the war is *not* in fact over? It is just as she approaches this pain that she interrupts herself with the conviction again that "it was over; thank Heaven," with another punctuated "over" in case of self-doubt. She relocates her created self ("It was June") and closes the passage with a clear reminder of empire ("The King and the Queen were at the Palace") as another piece of comfort to her created self.

While we will go into Mrs. Dalloway's psyche more in depth in later parts of this essay, suffice it to say that she suffers deeply from the weight of her created self, as evident from this

passage alone. Armed with the knowledge that the conscious self, especially when verbally represented, is naturally factitious and influenced, it becomes the reader's task to recognize and demarcate the overtones of egotism that mark a character's stream-of-consciousness narration.

D. Néant and the wedge of darkness

We have explored the levels of inner consciousness, the facets of outward self, and the created self which we present to our own consciousnesses. What happens in the absence of conscious self — a moment of total anonymity? For the sake of vocabulary, I will use Sartre's term *néant*, the French word for "nothing," to describe this absence of self, because I find his concept of meaningful nothingness useful (Goldthorpe, 18).

Here is where we may turn to Mrs. Ramsay's famous "wedge-shaped core of darkness" passage. Reading through Woolf, I have not found too many moments of explicit *néant*, which makes sense for two reasons: (1) novels, once again, are composed of words[17], which naturally reflect consciousness, and (2) *néant* is a rare and transcendental experience, on par with finding "a nugget of pure truth." But if we may find *néant* in Woolf at all, it is in this passage:

> For this reason, it was so important what one said, and what one did, and it was a relief when they went to bed. For now she need not think about anybody. **She could be herself, by herself.** And that was what now she often felt the need of — to think; well, **not even to think. To be silent; to be alone.** All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself**, a wedge-shaped core of darkness**, something **invisible** to others… It was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was **free** for the strangest adventures… Beneath it is all **dark**, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by… This **core of darkness** could go anywhere, for **no one saw it**. They could not stop it, she thought, exulting. There was **freedom**,

[17] *Orlando* attempts to circumvent this issue on page 186, where (somewhat comically) a large portion of the page is left blank for the reader to assume, since "the most poetic is precisely that which cannot be written down" (*Orlando*, 186). One could imagine that if Woolf could get away with doing this sort of thing more often, she would.

> there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. **Not as oneself** did one find rest ever, in her experience… but as **a wedge of darkness**. **Losing personality**, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity. (*To the Lighthouse*, 62-63)

The passage really speaks for itself, but it is important to note that three of our four parts of self are absent in this passage. The upper mind is gone: Mrs. Ramsay is careful to correct herself that she feels the need "to think; well, not even to think," and the facticity of words is gone since she is "silent."[18] No words, no thoughts, no facticity. The imagery later on of "unfathomably deep" darkness and "ris[ing] to the surface" recalls the upper and under layers of the mind; in this absolute darkness, with no more "being" or "doing," only the under mind is active. The mirror-self is obviously gone too ("She could be herself, by herself," "no one saw it"), and so is her created self ("Not as oneself," "losing personality"). In this absence of egotism, which is what confined Mrs. Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsay is totally free, "could go anywhere." And in contrast to Neville's idea that consciousness is building "crazy platforms" on "roaring waters," this experience brings Mrs. Ramsay "a platform of stability": even while she is metaphysically freewheeling ("they could not stop it"), Mrs. Ramsay has control. Although both the created self and *néant* are approaches at singularity, it is only the *néant* that successfully (albeit somewhat unrealistically) coheres the contradictory desires for freedom and cohesion to bring "rest" for "eternity."

The *néant* is the last key concept of self this essay presents. I have compiled a graphic of our current theory of self below.

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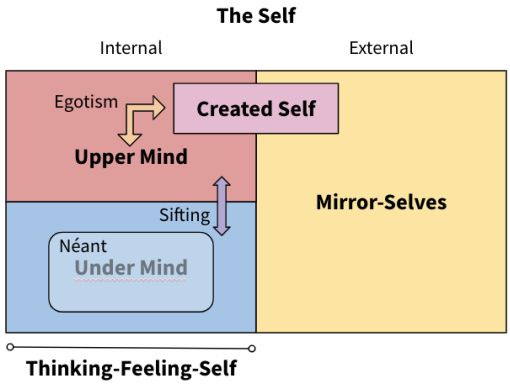
[18] Although it is true that this paragraph is, necessarily, verbalized. Her desire "not even to think" here is directly at odds with the narration saying "she thought," so perhaps this paragraph is better as an example of Mrs. Ramsay reflecting on her experience of *néant*, not as *néant* itself.



With this framework in mind, we are equipped to see our theories of self *in actu* by reading Woolf in greater detail.

Part II. Repercussions of "self"

A. Trauma of the everyday

"Thank you, thank you, she went on saying in gratitude to her servants generally, for helping her to be like this, to be what she wanted, gentle, generous-hearted" (*Mrs. Dalloway,* 29). This sentence confirms what we already know about Mrs. Dalloway: that is, she is confined by the desire to align her upper mind with her created self. But here we also see that this confinement is intentional ("what she wanted"); her egotism is what makes her great. In this section of my essay, I will discuss how egotism, with its promise of cohesion, exacts a force of facticity on who we become, and how that in turn causes deep repercussions to our ability to live with ourselves.

Mrs. Dalloway serves as our first example of egotism: a near-convergence between one's upper mind and one's created self. Consider, for instance, Peter Walsh's statements, "It is Clarissa herself" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 36) and "It was Clarissa one remembered… there she was" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 55); Sally Seton's "Clarissa (for it was Clarissa of course)" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 134); and Peter's last lines: "It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 137).

Mrs. Dalloway's magnetism derives from her apparent oneness, the cohesion she shows others (recall Orlando's "The conscious self, which is the uppermost, and has the power to desire, wishes to be nothing but one self"), even if it is factitious, as we showed earlier. It is her power over other more fragmentary souls such as Peter Walsh, who comments: "She had a perfectly clear notion of what she wanted… with that extraordinary gift, that woman's gift, of making a world of her own wherever she happened to be" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 54). In a way that others cannot — "Clarissa had wonderful energy. Parties terrified Lady Bruton" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 79) — Mrs. Dalloway commits to her created self and is thus a symbol of unity among scraps, orts, and fragments:

> But to go deeper, beneath what people said (and these judgments, how superficial, how fragmentary they are!)… she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. (*Mrs. Dalloway,* 87)

But such commitment to her created self — what Peter calls "her power of carrying things through" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 45) — does not come without a price. We see the facticity of her thoughts in the long passage I quoted earlier; it is full of self-persuasion and censorship. Then, in Peter's memories, we see how she marries Mr. Dalloway as the obvious thing to do — "She will marry that man" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 44) — while hearing from Peter that this is also what causes "the death of her soul" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 43). Now, we may return to the present day of *Mrs. Dalloway* for her own perspective on her facticity:

> It was her life, and, bending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence, felt blessed and purified, saying to herself, as she took the pad with the telephone message on it, how moments like this are buds on the tree of life…. but all the more, she thought, taking up the pad, **must one repay in daily life** to servants, yes, to dogs and canaries, above all to Richard her husband, who was the foundation of it — of the gay sounds, of the green lights, of the cook even whistling… **one must pay back from this secret deposit of exquisite moments**. (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 22)

This is a difficult sentence to parse, but it is at least clear at once that for Mrs. Dalloway, life is transactionary in some way ("repay," "pay back"). Now: what is Mrs. Dalloway giving, who is doing the taking, and what is Mrs. Dalloway getting in return? If we take "daily life" to be the object of "repay," as it syntactically seems to be, then this conflicts with a more obvious statement later of her token of payment: "this secret deposit of exquisite moments." While "daily life" may be "exquisite" — and indeed much of Mrs. Dalloway is about the beauty in the small — what Mrs. Dalloway calls "the most exquisite moment of her whole life" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 26) is actually her kiss with Sally Seton on the terrace, one which has left an indelible mark on her mind and certainly cannot be labeled as "daily." It would be ridiculous to compare such a moment, which is truly worthy of being in a "secret deposit," to the daily moments she mentions here: "the gay sounds… the green lights… the cook even whistling," no matter Woolf's general appreciation for everyday minutiae.

Instead, I take "daily life" to be Mrs. Dalloway's reward. In exchange for her "secret deposit of exquisite moments," including her kiss with Sally Seton, Mrs. Dalloway receives the "foundation of it" — "it" being "the gay sounds, … the green lights, … the cook even whistling" mentioned earlier. And the agents opposite this transaction are "servants… dogs and canaries… above all Richard her husband" — anybody who facilitates Mrs. Dalloway's ability to live her "daily life" in cohesion with how she wants it to be. (Recall the quotation I used to begin this section of my essay: "Thank you, thank you, she went on saying in gratitude to her servants generally, for helping her to be like this, to be what she wanted, gentle, generous-hearted.")

Is this a good trade? In reaction to this transaction, we see Mrs. Dalloway once again show the facticity of her mind: she feels "blessed and purified," yet this is specifically labeled by Woolf as a verbalized thought ("saying to herself"), which we know to take with a grain of salt,

versus her actions: “bending her head” and “bowed beneath the influence.” When we see that Richard is the primary agent (“above all”) she is transacting with — or, subconsciously, “bowed beneath” — we recall this passage:

> She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more: this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 9)

This sort of state as “invisible; unseen; unknown” is evocative of Mrs. Ramsay’s “wedge of darkness” passage, but we recognize it as tonally opposite. Mrs. Dalloway’s disappearance is one that bears limits: “no more marrying, no more having children now… not even Clarissa any more,” in total contrast to Mrs. Ramsay’s exultant freedom. And unlike Mrs. Ramsay’s ability to “go anywhere,” Mrs. Dalloway is chained to “the rest of them, up Bond Street.”

We gain a greater understanding of why Mrs. Dalloway’s disappearance is so terrible — the opposite of *néant* — when we read this passage:

> Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt. **So on a summer’s day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying “that is all” more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says it too, That is all.** Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking; the dog barking, far away barking and barking. (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 29, emphasis mine)

This passage might be Mrs. Dalloway at her most truthful. We recall Woolf’s idea of sifting: that it is precisely a moment like this — “quiet,” “calm,” “content,” after a series of errands — in which our under minds begin to remember and process. Right after this paragraph, the doorbell

rings and the dogs bark, bringing Mrs. Dalloway back into reality. But, for now, there is a timelessness, highlighted in her repetitive sewing action that gives the silk "gentle pause."

It is in this silence that Mrs. Dalloway tells us about the exhaustion she feels. In the same way Septimus later commits himself to the greatest fall, Mrs. Dalloway experiences small falls every day: her life is like "waves"; the weight keeps drowning her until "even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach" — which we can read as probably some representation of her true core — cannot avoid knowing the exhaustion. "That is all" and "fear no more" — both of these statements are incredibly depressing, the thought that there is nothing left to expect, either good (as in the former) or worse (the latter). With this repetitive cycle of "collect, overbalance, and fall," we learn to question the value of Mrs. Dalloway's continually declared love of life. Her "secret deposit of exquisite moments" has, over time, been traded away and replaced by a sea that is formed by the accumulation of tears every day, tears which she has suppressed in order to survive. And it is for this reason that she feels like "a body alone," a phrase from this passage, or in the words of the selection I previously quoted, "not even Clarissa any more."

It is not only her tears that are forming a sea of sorrow. Only a few pages earlier, we read about the tears of the entire nation, which form the continual undertone of the novel: "This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears. Tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing. Think, for example, of the woman she admired most, Lady Bexborough, opening the bazaar" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 8).[19] Here is where the title of this subsection of my essay, "Trauma of the every day," begins to factor. It is heavy-handed to connect the trauma of war to the trauma Mrs. Dalloway's egotism has wrought, but this is the very connection that Woolf herself is asking us to make. Both bring these terrible,

[19] Lady Bexborough, as we saw earlier, opened her bazaar because "John, her favorite," was killed in the war.

despairing seas of sorrows — one for the nation, one for the individual[20] — and if that connection is not clear enough in this shared language of tears, waves, seas, and sorrows, the character of Septimus Warren Smith encapsulates it:

> Outside the trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths of the air; **the sound of water** was in the room and through the waves came the voices of birds singing. Every power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, **on the top of the waves**, while far away on shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. **Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more.** (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 99, emphasis mine)

Every image is a narratively-contrived doubling: the water, the waves, the dogs barking, the bodily dissociation (for Mrs. Dalloway "the body alone listens"; for Septimus "his hand lay there… far away on shore he heard"), the Shakespeare recitation. Just as Mrs. Dalloway states that she feels like "not even Clarissa any more: this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway," Septimus experiences the same loss of self: "Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now" (Mrs. Dalloway, 9). It is impossible not to label Mrs. Dalloway's sea of sorrows as some sort of trauma when it is precisely trauma that forms the link — so tangible that Woolf contrives it verbally — between herself and Septimus. For Mrs. Dalloway, it is simply that her trauma does not come from a cause and so is less obvious; it is trauma of the every day.

Thus we may return to what is perhaps Mrs. Dalloway's most famous characterization of herself, in a new light:

> She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, **far out to sea and alone**; she always had the feeling that it was **very, very dangerous to live even one day**. (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 7, emphasis mine)

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[20] Another notable victim of the sea of sorrows is Lady Bradshaw (wife to Sir William Bradshaw): "Fifteen years ago she had gone under. It was nothing you could put your finger on; there had been no scene, no snap; only the *slow sinking, water-logged,* of her will into his" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 72, emphasis mine).

What is clearest is her fragmentation: just as both herself and Septimus feel bodily dissociation, so too can readers detect the facticity of her self here. There is Mrs. Richard Dalloway (her egotistical self) and there is her sea of sorrows (her suppressed self). They bring about a double-life, one in which she simultaneously feels "young" and "aged" (the fact that being "aged" is "unspeakable" gives us a hint that this is her suppressed, non-verbalized self) and in which she is simultaneously is an object that is perceived ("through everything") and perceiving ("outside, looking on"). What may have puzzled us before are the last two sentences, but we now understand her feeling of being "out, out, far out to sea and alone" as the despair brought by her sea of sorrows: when she really reflects on it, as she does in the passage above, she does experience the bodily dissociation of being "far out." And her feeling "that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day" may have felt over-dramatic at first read, but now that we recognize the trauma she shares with Septimus, we know that just as Septimus was one "Fear no more" away from throwing himself out a window, so too is Mrs. Dalloway one more cycle of "collect, overbalance, and fall" away from drowning.

It is in Mrs. Dalloway that Woolf shows us the perils of aligning our conscious selves too closely with our created selves. Mrs. Dalloway, with her magnetism and the attractive power of her cohesion, suppresses her memories, those truest to herself, for the stability of daily life. But we know from Woolf's theory of self that the stability of daily life is nothing but "crazy platforms" over "roaring waters"; Mrs. Dalloway's continual facticity causes her trauma every day, until, via her narrative double Septimus, we understand the final consequence.

B. Impermeability and the attempt to express

We have named outward cohesion as one of Mrs. Dalloway's primary social traits; what we have not explicitly discussed is Mrs. Dalloway's impermeability, which is a trait that, despite her tightly controlled projected self (a term I will use to describe the mirror-self that we consciously try to influence; usually an outward expression of our created self), slips out and becomes perceived by others. Mrs. Dalloway herself remarks on it early in the novel: "She could see what she lacked. It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central, which **permeated**: something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 24, emphasis mine).

I derive the word "impermeability" exactly from this quotation; despite her ability to bring people together — unite the fragments, so to speak — she feels unable to really penetrate anyone else's consciousness. From the perspective of Peter Walsh, her impermeability seems like a conscious choice: "He couldn't see her; couldn't explain to her; couldn't have it out. There were always people about — she'd go on as if nothing had happened. That was the devilish part of her — this coldness, this woodenness, something very profound in her, which he had felt again this morning talking to her; an impenetrability" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 44). "Coldness," "woodenness," "impenetrability" are all synonyms for impermeability, while "she'd go on" and "devilish" suggest some intentional aspect to it. Meanwhile, Sally Seton, in her middle-aged, egotistical state, recognizes that something about Mrs. Dalloway is inaccessible, but mischaracterizes it as emptiness: "She lacked something. Lacked what was it?" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 133). As Mrs. Dalloway herself points out, it is not that she is empty inside ("It was not beauty; it was not mind"). Readers also know that, despite the presence of facticity, Mrs. Dalloway has a rich internal life, both conscious and unconscious. But permeability, her accessibility: an absence

of this *would* correspond with Sally's misguided impression that Mrs. Dalloway is in some way empty or lacking.

It is important to clarify that (as we have slightly alluded to already) there are two aspects to impermeability: (1) not letting others see oneself, and (2) not being able to show oneself to others. It is a very slight difference, but perhaps a good analogy is the following: imagine yourself in a house. There is impermeability in two ways: (1) you can close the blinds so those outside cannot see you; this is a choice. Or (2) when you scream, you will find that people outside cannot hear you; this is not a choice. Since permeation involves two components — sight and the consent to be seen — impermeability occurs when there is negation of either aspect.

What may follow naturally from the previous sections of my essay is that impermeability in the first aspect — optional impermeability — is certainly a choice Mrs. Dalloway makes as she projects a factitious self. This is the impermeability Peter feels when Mrs. Dalloway refuses to speak with him about their shared memories. But what may not be so obvious is that impermeability in the second aspect, the inability to express oneself truthfully, is another issue Mrs. Dalloway faces:

> She had a sense of comedy that was really exquisite, but she needed people, always people, to bring it out, with the inevitable result that she frittered her time away, lunching, dining, giving these incessant parties of hers, talking nonsense, saying things she didn't mean, blunting the edge of her mind, losing her discrimination (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 56)

It is evident that Mrs. Dalloway has some true thing she wants to express here — her "sense of comedy" — which is lost in translation more often than not. This is partially because of what we know from this essay: words are factitious, and nothing we express can really be true to ourselves. The other part — the more psychological reason — is harder to define.

It is perhaps more obvious in Septimus. We see the same two-part impermeability in him: "But if he confessed? If he communicated? Would they let him off then, his torturers?" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 70). Here he lets go of his optional impermeability and is willing to let his doctors access some element of his self-truth. Yet when the time comes to actually express himself — "'I have — I have,' he began, 'committed a crime —'" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 69) — he stutters, he is tongue-tied, he cannot verbalize. What we sympathize with at this moment is the obviously non-verbalizable nature of Septimus's trauma: of course he cannot explain it; it would be weird if he could. The connection that Woolf is asking us to make is that for Mrs. Dalloway, his double, the same is true. Expression of truth is not easy for the traumatized. Mrs. Dalloway is victim to that same impermeability she projects. It is only that for Septimus, his source of trauma is war, which we automatically take seriously; for Mrs. Dalloway, her source of trauma is "talking nonsense, saying things she didn't mean, blunting the edge of her mind, losing her discrimination" — the psychological harm of facticity that Woolf asks us to take equally seriously, as something that *also* builds a sea of sorrows.

What both incidents of impermeability highlight, in addition, is the agony of silence and our base need to express ourselves in some way. If Septimus had the benefits of modern therapy, if he had some way of verbalizing his "crime" to a sympathetic audience to some degree of self-truth, perhaps he would not reach the end that he did. If there were only some way to eliminate all facticity and share oneself with somebody else in an external yet truthful way (we can already see the many problems with this premise), then perhaps he could successfully leave an ounce of pure truth on earth for posterity. When Mrs. Dalloway hears of his death, she realizes this desire in herself:

> **A thing there was that mattered**; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in **corruption, lies, chatter**. This

> [Septimus] had preserved. Death was defiance. **Death was an attempt to communicate**; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 130, emphasis mine)

The elements of our model of self are clear in this passage: the "thing" is our pure truth; the "chatter" is facticity; being "alone" is impermeability, "death" is expression. Moreover, our life goal of expression is on a timer: once the "thing" has been totally corrupted with facticity, it is gone — no longer "preserved." Hence Mrs. Dalloway's concern: "Had he plunged holding his treasure?" (Mrs. Dalloway, 131). So, if the sole mission of life is to express our one "treasure" before its total corruption, and expression is impossible for those who are impermeable, especially due to trauma, what hope of achieving and communicating *néant* — pure truth — besides suicide may there be?

For Mrs. Dalloway, who does not die (despite the symbolic conjunction of their deaths), there may be one other solution:

> It was unsatisfactory, they agreed, how little one knew people. But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere, not "here, here, here"; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. 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. It ended in a **transcendental theory** which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since **our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death… perhaps — perhaps**. (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 108)

Here we must return to our theory of mirror-selves and scraps, orts, and fragments, since it is obvious that this concept is what Woolf is evoking with language such as "our apparitions, the part of us which appears." What Mrs. Dalloway realizes here is that while the "unseen part of us"

— the truth, *néant*, "treasure," whatever term we may call it — is too large, too difficult to make permeable and express ("spreads wide") for posterity, it is nearly effortless to express our mirror-selves, the self others see from us, when we simply go about our daily lives. In a way, our mirror-selves, at least the ones that are not projected, require no expression at all; they exist unconsciously in the sense that we cannot control them; we cannot control when we are perceived beyond locking ourselves in a box. With myriad mirror-selves out there, "attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death," would someone in the future, in the same way that we sift to some truth by connecting bits and pieces of our daily life, be able to sift to the truth of us simply by connecting the scraps, orts, and fragments of our mirror-selves?

It is a ridiculously metaphysical idea, this thought experiment that we may be pieced together after death out of memories. Biographies, after all, are more factitious than not. But suppose everybody who has ever perceived me, whether it be directly (in conversation), indirectly (by simply registering my presence or an aspect of my presence), or totally collaterally (if I am just an arm in a crowd) — suppose all of these people shared their consciousnesses for a moment. Would they be able to piece together who I am? Would they perhaps even be able to sift their way down to the deepest core of myself, my *néant*, the non-verbal truth that I bear in my deepest consciousness? Both the predicate and the hypothesis of this proposition are unlikely — metaphysical to the absurd — and indeed, this passage is actually told by Peter Walsh as a theory he had heard Mrs. Dalloway espouse in the past; it may not still apply to the Mrs. Dalloway of the present, with her undoubtedly deeper sea of sorrows. But it is this possibility that offers Mrs. Dalloway one last hope, if she does not wish to face her "horror of death" and choose the solution Septimus chose.

C. Marriage and the merging of consciousnesses

A question that may now surface, and indeed is necessary to address, is what makes Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay different, if anything? Both are social hostesses; both are in similar positions in life. And yet Woolf asks us to grapple with topics of trauma and suicide in *Mrs. Dalloway* in a way that she does not in *To the Lighthouse*. Does Mrs. Ramsay escape the trauma of the every day, remote as she is in the Isle of Skye? Is her relationship with Mr. Ramsay, which is portrayed much more in depth than the relationship between Mrs. and Mr. Dalloway, her saving grace? These are the questions I will attempt to answer in this final subsection.

On the outset, it is almost uncanny how similar the relationships between the Dalloways versus the Ramsays are. Observe the language in the following pairs of passages,[21]

on understanding needs:

> And Clarissa turned faint and Dalloway did the whole thing; bandaged, made splints; told Clarissa not to be a fool. That was what she liked him for perhaps — **that was what she needed**. (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 54, emphasis mine)

> "You won't finish that stocking tonight," he said, pointing to her stocking. **That was what she wanted** — the asperity in his voice reproving her. (*To the Lighthouse*, 123, emphasis mine)

on non-verbal communication:

> He was holding out flowers — roses, red and white roses. (**But he could not bring himself to say he loved her**; not in so many words.) …But how lovely, she said, taking his flowers. **She understood; she understood** without his speaking; his Clarissa" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 85, emphasis mine)

> Will you not tell me just for once that you love me? …**But she could not do it; she could not say it.** Then, knowing that he was watching her, instead of saying anything she turned, holding her stocking, and looked at him. And as she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not

[21] I actually had two other pairs of uncannily similar passages to include, but felt it was prudent to excise them for space. They are on privacy (pp. 85 in *Mrs. D*, pp. 65 in *TTL*) and marital ecstasy (pp. 83 in *Mrs. D*, pp. 124 in *TTL*).

> said a word, **he knew, of course he knew,** that she loved him. (*To the Lighthouse*, 124, emphasis mine)

It is evident immediately that these two pairings sound like the same relationship: the social hostess with the tyrant (for Mr. Dalloway, political; for Mr. Ramsay, academic); both have implicit understandings of what each person needs; both are able to communicate love in its most authentic form — non-verbally, as it must be. Yet, as we discussed earlier, Mrs. Ramsay has access to the *néant* as the wedge of darkness; Mrs. Dalloway only has her sea of sorrows. What makes up the difference?

If Mrs. Dalloway demonstrates impermeability, Mrs. Ramsay perhaps represents the opposite. We see numerous times Mrs. Ramsay described as "simple" (29, 41, 50, 121, 160), almost "child-like" (6, 11, 50, 101). In the observations of Mr. Bankes, "Her simplicity fathomed what clever people falsified. Her singleness of mind made her drop plumb like a stone, alight exact as a bird, gave her, naturally, this swoop and fall of the spirit upon truth" (*To the Lighthouse*, 29). There is certainly still facticity to Mrs. Ramsay's character; she puts on a projected self in front of her children, in front of her dinner guests, and we see glimpses of her exhaustion and her sadness — the result of such facticity — throughout the first part. Yet we also cannot ignore that Woolf continually positions Mrs. Ramsay against windows (17, 33, 47, 49, 51); the title of the first part is "The Window"; Mrs. Ramsay even *becomes* a window in this scene with Mr. Bankes and Lily: Mr. Bankes sees through her with a "silent stare" (*To the Lighthouse*, 48), which Lily compares to "the shaft of sunlight, lying level across the floor" (*To the Lighthouse*, 48); then Lily "look[s] along his beam… added to it her different ray" (*To the Lighthouse*, 48); then Lily looks again later, with a "ray passed level with Mr. Bankes's ray straight to Mrs. Ramsay" (*To the Lighthouse*, 52). In this mental conversation, in which Mrs.

Ramsay plays no part except the object, she becomes transparent, a window through which Mr. Bankes and Lily think.

Of course, we cannot ignore the fact that Lily's strongest attempt to see through her, when Lily tries to merge her own consciousness with Mrs. Ramsay's, ends in definite failure: "Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing! as she leaned her head against Mrs. Ramsay's knee. And yet, she knew knowledge and wisdom were stored up in Mrs. Ramsay's heart" (*To the Lighthouse*, 51). But *does* it fail? Only a page later, when Lily reviews her painting, she finds a "triangular purple shape… she felt the need of darkness. Simple, obvious, commonplace, as it was" (52). If painting is one of the non-verbal ways of permeating to some truth, then Lily has somehow intuited Mrs. Ramsay's exact truth: her "wedge of darkness." Something about Mrs. Ramsay's "darkness," "simple"-ness, has translated between consciousnesses, in a true connecting of minds, a successful example of expression from both ends. It, of course, does not give Lily the "knowledge and wisdom" that she sought when lying on Mrs. Ramsay's knee, but is "knowledge and wisdom" the truth of Mrs. Ramsay, anyway, when we sift her down?

We do not see such an example of successful expression with Mrs. Dalloway; the closest we get is the replication of language between Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus, but this is entirely narratively contrived — they never meet or perceive each other — so we cannot attribute it to expression on Mrs. Dalloway's part. Here, between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay, however, is that sort of doubling, the true meeting of minds, which successful expression and perception, rather than narrative contrivance, has enabled. What allows for it in *To the Lighthouse*?

First off, nobody tries to paint a painting of Mrs. Dalloway. *To the Lighthouse* is a novel of love, of patience and careful observance of each other that is not found so easily in the quick, judgmental world of *Mrs. Dalloway*'s London. Lily asks, "Could loving, as people called it,

make her and Mrs. Ramsay one?" (*To the Lighthouse*, 51). This is the very question that Martha Nussbaum, in her essay "The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds" investigates. Since her essay covers more than what I might ever be able to say on the topic, I suggest reading her analysis of the last pages of "The Window," in which Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay share consciousnesses in a unique and profound way; it is full of piercing looks, implicit understandings, and correct replies — what Nussbaum calls the product of "long familiarity and an intensity of focus" (Nussbaum, 746). What I call "love" is a summation of the effort that Nussbaum's "focus" takes, and the ability to achieve this pseudo-merging of consciousnesses is a byproduct of love: continual attempts at permeation, the thing Lily tries once and successfully finds her purple triangle with. Suffice it to say that:

> By working patiently to defeat shame, selfish anxiety, and the desire for power, it is sometimes possible for some people to get knowledge of one thing or another thing about some other people; and they can sometimes allow one thing or another thing about themselves to be known. (Nussbaum, 752)

"Shame, selfish anxiety, and the desire for power" are somewhat heavy-handed and malevolent terms for what may be subconscious or even unconscious in our cast of characters. But I support Nussbaum's general claim: that with our guards down — that is, when we are most permeable — love can allow us to experience what a merging of consciousnesses might feel like.

This is not to say that Mrs. Ramsay loses her facticity by becoming permeable. In the words of critic Irene Yoon:

> Glass in [Woolf's] work also always asserts itself as a limiting factor, a material surface that opens up the recognition of such opportunities while simultaneously foreclosing them. That is, the blankness of its transparent surface may represent a nonexistent barrier, as Woolf [reminds] us, but it isn't nonexistent: it exists, it is there, and for all of its illusory absence it still materially intervenes and physically separates. (Yoon, 52)

For all the simplicity and love in the world, there will always be barriers between consciousnesses, even if, as Lily does, we try to capture the truth non-verbally and intuitively. This is a problem that disturbs Mrs. Ramsay: "It was painful to be reminded of the **inadequacy of human relationships**, that the most perfect was flawed, and could not bear the examination which, **loving her husband, with her instinct for truth**, she turned upon it" (*To the Lighthouse*, 40, emphasis mine). If only there could be open air instead of a window, their marriage might be absolutely perfect. But here at least we are reminded once more that love is a conscious choice: Mrs. Ramsay "turn[s] upon" this kind of pessimism and chooses to love her husband in pursuit of his truth anyway.

Part III. An additional dimension of time

A. Multiplicity of self

In her memoir, Woolf writes:

> I was thinking about Stella as we crossed the Channel a month ago. I have not given her a thought since. **The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river.** Then one sees through the surface to the depths. In those moments I find one of my greatest satisfactions, not that I am thinking of the past; but that it is then that I am living most fully in the present. **For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else**, when the film on the camera reaches only the eye. But to feel the present sliding over the depths of the past, peace is necessary. The present must be smooth, habitual. ("Sketch of the Past," 98)

Does this process sound familiar? For Woolf, yet another application of sifting is the way we sift through our past.[22] Just as we sift through the day's events, we also sift through the events of our

[22] In her diary entry from March 18th, 1925, Woolf writes: "I can only note that the past is beautiful because one never realises an emotion at the time. It expands later, and thus we don't have complete emotions about the present, only about the past" (*The Diary*, 5).

entire lives, given the right circumstances of "peace," "smooth[ness]." An appropriate division between these types of sifting might be short-term memory versus long-term memory; it is our long-term memories that form the non-verbal vocabulary of our consciousnesses, a more accurate way of how we think in real life ("the present when backed by the past").

We see a little bit of this past-backed present in Mrs. Dalloway, where the slightest reminder of Bourton brings her into a memory that makes the moment "a thousand times deeper." But the real opportunity for the depth of past-backed present is in *Orlando*, whom we follow for centuries across two hundred pages. Because we see Orlando in action for so long — much more than we see Mrs. Dalloway, whose present action spans a single day, or Mrs. Ramsay, whose present action spans a month but does not include many memories — when Orlando references an event from the past, we do not have to rely on her memory (second-hand memory, so to speak) as we do for Mrs. Dalloway remembering Bourton. Instead, we have our *own* memories of those events to draw from, which provide a much more powerful past-backed experience. Our ability to have our own copy of Orlando's memory-vocabulary, from birth to present, helps us expand her self through the dimension of time in a way that provides greater depth and understanding as she recalls her memories.

Since a large portion of the novel is plot-heavy, I will skip straight to the ending, where Orlando finally gains the consciousness to do that sort of past-sifting:

> "Time has passed over me," she thought, trying to collect herself; "this is the oncome of middle age. How strange it is! Nothing is any longer one thing. I take up a handbag and I think of an old bumboat woman frozen in the ice. Someone lights a pink candle and I see a girl in Russian trousers. When I step out of doors — as I do now," here she stepped on to the pavement of Oxford Street, "what is it that I taste? Little herbs. I hear goat bells. I see mountains. Turkey? India? Persia?" Her eyes filled with tears. (*Orlando*, 223)

Here we see the phenomenon we dissected earlier in action. When reading this passage, more than 200 dense pages into Orlando's life, "Nothing is any longer one thing" for us, either; when we read "an old bumboat woman frozen in the ice," we have a memory-experience in our minds that suffuses the present with tones of the past. What Orlando must do for us, however, is the sensory experience of the present: we must trust Orlando to perceive correctly: tell us accurately that it is a handbag and not a briefcase she is seeing, and relay to us that when she "step[s] out of doors" it is a sensory experience that includes "little herbs." From "little herbs" we can jump to Orlando's experience with the gypsies, but without that cue we remain grounded in a "present [that] presses so close that you can feel nothing else," in Woolf's words.

But this kind of past-present experience, which both Orlando and readers experience together, is bizarre to our existing concept of self. If we create a self for each of the moments described here — the bumboat-self, the Sasha-self, the gypsy-self, and the present-self — then each one deserves a diagram similar to the one I inserted at the end of Part I of my essay. There is a thinking-feeling self at each time; there are countless mirror-selves projected outward at each second for others to perceive. And there is a created-self for every moment, too: at each stage of our life, our idealized version of self is different, depending on the insecurities we have not worked through and the desires we have not achieved. Which self does Orlando temporarily draw from — and which self do we draw from — when she undergoes this succession of past-present experiences?

It is difficult for us to say, because Orlando herself is unsure: "It is an open question in what sense Orlando can be said to have existed at the present moment" (*Orlando*, 225). It is easy enough to get lost in the pure-present self; Mrs. Dalloway has shown us that much, with layers of her mind suppressing others. But once we introduce time: "What then? Who then? …Thirty-six;

in a motor car, a woman. Yes, but a million other things as well. A snob am I? The garter in the hall? The leopards? My ancestors?" (*Orlando*, 227). We could try to label each part of this sentence with a part of the self, but such a task would be Herculean, especially with Orlando's further incoherent catalog of selves on page 226.

To relate a little to what I think Orlando must feel in this moment: above my desk is a wall of printed photos (maybe thirty) ranging the past six years of my life: The other day, in a moment of vulnerability, I looked up and suddenly saw them all, feeling myself flicker from my self at prom, my self in quarantine, my self in the woods behind my house, my self with friends eating lunch, my self on a trip to Iceland… In a flash, I felt myself spread wide over space, over time, and what's more: I didn't just feel wide, I felt immeasurably deep. I remembered the emotions I felt at each snapshot; I remembered my goals at the time, my fears; I remembered my best friends at the time, and I also recognized that I'd lost some of those friends in the present day. It amazed me how much I'd done — me, sitting alone in my bedroom — and as I re-experienced years' worth of excitement, loneliness, relief, grief, I couldn't help but marvel at how much capacity I have had over the years. It is this sort of wide, deep flash over personal history that I assume Orlando feels when she starts cataloguing her selves; for her, it happens over several pages due to verbosity, but for me, it happened in a second.

It took me some days to re-ground my sense of self in the present; time in this way seems to be yet another form of mental trauma. For Orlando, in the midst of this flash, there is need for re-grounding too: "Then she called hesitatingly, as if the person she wanted might not be there, 'Orlando?'" (*Orlando*, 225). When this attempt fails, it is followed by a rationalization of how she might approach relocating her self; Orlando concludes that she must conduct a search for "the Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls them all. Orlando was certainly

seeking this self" (*Orlando*, 227). But we know that by rifling through all her selves Orlando is not going to find the peace she seeks, not when the only form of self-truth is an absence of self altogether.

It takes some time, but Orlando catches up to what we already know: "And it was at this moment, when she had ceased to call 'Orlando' and was deep in thoughts of something else, that the Orlando whom she had called came of its own accord" (*Orlando*, 229). This we recognize as the process of sifting: when, with the upper mind turned away from the events of the day, the under mind, the non-factitious part of the self, shows its presence. And then Orlando has the privilege of feeling the sort of *néant* that Mrs. Ramsay felt in her "wedge of darkness" passage:

> The whole of her darkened and settled, as when some foil whose addition makes the round and solidity of a surface is added to it, and the shallow becomes deep and the near distant; and all is contained as water is contained by the sides of a well. So she was now **darkened, stilled**, and became, with the addition of this Orlando, what is called, rightly or wrongly, **a single self, a real self**. And she fell **silent**. For it is probable that when people talk aloud, the selves (of which there may be more than two thousand) are conscious of disseverment, and are trying to communicate, but when communication is established there is nothing more to be said. (*Orlando*, 229-230)

The cues of darkness, stillness, silence, and singularity make it quite clear that this is a moment of *néant*, of pure truth, "a real self" in the lack thereof. Woolf once again reinforces the facticity of words ("she fell silent"), and shows that our conscious verbalization ("when people talk aloud") is in direct exclusivity to the "selves" unifying. These are mostly things we already knew from the previous parts of this essay; with the introduction of memory and time, however, the stakes are higher: it is "two thousand" selves that must unite, which means the *néant*, if it is even possible, becomes all the more profound.

B. The self freed

The ending of Orlando is chaos: there is Orlando's ridiculous husband; there are leopards; there is Big Ben chiming in the background; there is a dead Queen and an airplane. But there is also a feeling of transcendence, at least for the reader. Orlando achieves some height, but what is it? This last subsection of my paper is dedicated to investigating whether, with the vocabulary and theories of this essay, we might be able to elucidate our feeling.

It is a long way back, but we must begin with Orlando's first mention of his heraldic leopard in order to appreciate the ending's references to light and dark:

> His fathers had been noble since they had been at all. They came out of the northern mists wearing coronets on their heads. Were not **the bars of darkness** in the room, and **the yellow pools** which chequered the floor, made by the sun falling through the stained glass of a vast coat of arms in the window? **Orlando stood now in the midst of the yellow body of an heraldic leopard.** (*Orlando*, 12, emphasis mine)

Here, "heraldic" is used literally to mean the insignia sculpted by the window and reflecting on the floor. But it might make more sense to truncate that word into "herald" — "herald"-ic to mean something that announces that some event is about to happen. Orlando, after all, stands in the heraldic leopard's "yellow body" in "yellow pools," and this yellowness follows Orlando throughout the major events and transitions of his life: when Sasha abandons him and the river floods, the clock "**herald**[s]... death and disaster" (*Orlando*, 46, all emphasis in this paragraph mine), then the sky turns "a pale **yellow…** a whole gay city had stood on its pavement was now a race of turbulent **yellow** waters" (*Orlando*, 46), then when Orlando later recalls this as a sifted memory, what he remembers is "**yellow** icebergs" (*Orlando*, 123). The coach that brings Orlando home after her sex change is yellow (*Orlando*, 125); the wedding band that jolts her into a husband-hunt is "jaundiced **yellow**" (*Orlando*, 175); when she meets Marmaduke Bonthrop

Shelmerdine (henceforth referred to as MBS), she sees the "**yellow**-slashed sky of dawn" (*Orlando*, 183). Yellow is the beginning, middle, and end of Orlando's life: the heraldic leopard overlays him with yellow light when he is born, "and she would be buried here... Though she could hardly fancy it, the body of the heraldic leopard would be making yellow pools on the floor the day they lowered her to lie among her ancestors" (*Orlando*, 232). This yellowness, combined with heraldry and the pouncing motion of the leopard, is a symbol of time moving forward, history in the making, which is thematically appropriate for a book in which one life spans centuries of British reigns.

Just as the leopard is yellow and black, so too do the shadows of the heraldic leopard make "yellow pools" and "bars of darkness" on the ground — the bars presumably originating from the lines between fragments of stained glass. With such foreshadowing, we must expect that after centuries of yellowness, Orlando must encounter darkness too. We see, just before the ending scene:

> "Night had come — night that she loved of all times, night in which the reflections in the **dark pool of the mind** shine more clearly than by day. It was not necessary to faint now in order to look deep into the darkness where **things shape themselves** and to see in the pool of the mind" (*Orlando*, 239, emphasis mine)

What is the difference between the yellow heraldic leopard and the dark pool of the mind? The former, as we said, moves forward in time; the latter occurs during night, when time becomes ambiguous. The "heraldic leopard" pounces and is an agent of history — heraldry, after all, stemming from war; meanwhile the "dark pool" is "of the mind," in which "things shape themselves" — the self is passive while things are done to it. With this distinction, it is somewhat fair to label instances of yellowness or heraldness or leopardness as moments where the upper mind is at the helm: forward and full of action, while instances of darkness, specifically this

paragraph and the remainder of the novel, which occurs "in [a moment] of dead calm… when the leopard was still" (*Orlando*, 240), represent the under mind, which operates when time seems to stand still and has processes which we cannot control or verbalize.

If the last two pages of Orlando form some sort of representative experience of the under mind, then it becomes a sort of psychic adventure, the kind that Mrs. Ramsay, in her "wedge of darkness" passage, experiences under the *néant*. (Recall that she says "It was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures… Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep.") Orlando certainly seems to feel the same sort of freewheeling motion across time, memory, and space: she soars with MBS "on the Serpentine, and then the Atlantic itself, where it storms in great waves past Cape Horn… rising to the top of the wave!" (*Orlando*, 240). She is free in *néant*, and she is in control of her adventures.

When she cries "Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine!" (*Orlando*, 240), then, it is less silly than we might think. Each part of MBS's name stands for some portion of her: M for her lover-self (*Orlando*, 188), B for her death-self (*Orlando*, 190), and S for her quiet-self (*Orlando*, 190). It is perhaps a simplified version of the facticity Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay face, as described earlier in this essay: it is impossible to be two at once, but in this instance Orlando manages to become all three. Rather than selecting a "Captain self" and saying only one part of MBS's name, she has achieved the same *néant* that we saw earlier, when all 2000 of her selves communicated in silence, albeit on a smaller scale. And the fact that she cries this self-truth aloud is important: recall the impermeability Mrs. Dalloway faced. Orlando circumvents this problem with the surreally perfect communication she and MBS share: they guess each other's names at first sight and they fulfill each other's gender and emotional needs perfectly. In

speaking aloud her perfect expression of truth, made possible by the total permeability between herself and MBS, Orlando does what neither Mrs. Dalloway nor Mrs. Ramsay can do.

So, when we read that Orlando expressed her self-truth "standing by the oak tree" (*Orlando*, 240) — "The Oak Tree" being the one poem she dedicated her whole life to writing — we realize that Orlando achieves *néant*, self-actualization, in a way that no character in a realistic world could. It is this very impossibility, unrealism, which Woolf highlights at the end of the novel: "'It is the goose!' Orlando cried. 'The wild goose…'" (*Orlando*, 241). Orlando has managed to catch the wild goose at the end of a wild goose chase, a conclusion contradictory to its premise. But this scene, reality aside, helps us understand what an ecstatic, phosphorescent[23] rendition of the *néant* might look like.

[23] Both of these adjectives are borrowed directly from the ending of *Orlando*.

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