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► To cite this version:

Naomi Toth. Re-membering "moments of being". Perception, language and memory in Virginia Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past". *Cycnos*, 2017, Voyage vers la parole. L'Enfant, les Sens, l'Acquisition du Langage, 33 (1), pp.203-218. hal-03169028

HAL Id: hal-03169028

<https://hal.science/hal-03169028>

Submitted on 1 Jun 2021

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Re-memembering “moments of being”. Perception, language and memory in Virginia Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past”

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For Virginia Woolf, modes of perception and modes of writing are inextricably linked: modern literature both responds to and institutes a new relationship with the sensory world. This is a central theme in her essay-manifesto “Modern Fiction”, in which she enjoins writers to examine and record not external appearances and objective facts but rather the shower of disparate impressions that fall upon “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” (Woolf 1925, 154). The innovation she calls for challenges both literary convention and the hierarchies of the perceptive regime such convention maintains and perpetuates: modern fiction ought to interrogate and disrupt accepted divisions separating the significant from the insignificant, the visible from the invisible. Woolf’s famous “moments of being” participate in this project, for these intense, fleeting and highly sensorial experiences, triggered unexpectedly by the most minor of incidents, momentarily disrupt normalized perception and establish a different relationship between the subject and what Woolf was fond of calling “reality”.

Not only do such “moments of being” constitute the structural principle of her novels, as critics have often observed (Beja 137, Sim 2010, ch. 5), but Woolf also describes them as forming the structural principle of her early childhood. Indeed, her most extensive discussion of the term “moments of being” is to be found in “A Sketch of the Past”, the drafts of memoirs she was writing in 1939-1940, that is, at age 57-58.¹

¹ The term “moments of being” first appears in her fiction in the title of her 1928 short story “Moments of Being: Slaters Pins Have No Points”, where it is also synonymous with the term “shock”, as it is in “A Sketch of the Past” (Woolf 2003, 209). If we are to assimilate, as many critics do (Beja), “moments of being” and “moments of vision”, then Woolf’s discussion of such a phenomena dates back to her writing as early as 1918, when she published a book review of Pearsell Smith’s *Trivia* entitled “Moments of Vision” (Woolf 1987, 250-252). However, the most extensive discussion of the term occurs without a doubt in “A Sketch of the Past”.

This discussion occurs very early on in these drafts as a “digression” from her earliest childhood memories. Such “moments of being”, she affirms, formed the “scaffolding in the background [...] the invisible and silent part of my life as a child” (Woolf 1985, 73). This encourages us to consider this term, which is to have such an impact on readings of Woolf’s fiction, in relation to her effort to recall and record her own childhood.

Two aspects of Woolf’s representation of these early childhood “moments of being” and of her practice of “putting them into words” in her memoirs interest me in particular. Firstly, I would like to suggest that Woolf’s childhood “moments of being” engage affect in a process that aims to capture the immediacy of sensation, while paradoxically preventing the realisation of this aim. This has the effect of displacing the apprehension of the perceptive experience onto language itself.² Secondly, a parallel may be drawn between Woolf’s representation of such “moments” on the one hand and her conception of memory on the other, for she describes memoir writing as a process which functions according to strikingly similar principles.

“Moments of being”: shocks of excessive affect and meaning

In “A Sketch of the Past”, Woolf describes a “moment of being” as occurring when the “nondescript cotton wool” of “non-being” is suddenly “torn open”, that is, when the banal, forgettable aspects of daily life, associated with a normalised, habitual mode of perception, are abruptly interrupted (Woolf 1985, 70-72). Woolf uses the term “shock” as a synonym for such an experience: “Then, for no reason that I know about, there was a sudden violent shock; something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life” (Woolf 1985, 71). This tear in the “cotton wool” therefore occurs both unexpectedly and violently, and it affects the subject, who receives it in the form of a “blow” delivered by “something real behind appearances” (Woolf 1985,

² I have already addressed the relationship between affect and writing in Woolf’s discussion of “moments of being” (Toth, 2014) in the context of a critical reappraisal of “epiphany” as a pertinent category for reading modernist literature. The present article revisits and develops certain analyses and arguments from this previous article, but from a different perspective. Here I consider the relationship of “moments of being” not only to literary creation in modernist thought but also to perception and to Woolf’s conception of memory, which she stages reflexively in her reflections on the process of memoir writing. The context of Woolf’s discussion of “moments of being”, that of early childhood memories, is therefore foregrounded in the present article.

72). This “blow” causes not only the collapse of the standardized appearance of the world, but also that of the physical and psychological unity of the self.

The examples Woolf gives demonstrate this. Five of her childhood memories are explicitly labelled “moments of being” in this text: firstly a physical fight with her brother Thoby on the lawn, in which she suddenly stops pommelling him with her fists as she is struck by the futility of hurting another person; secondly, the sight of a flower in the garden; thirdly, the sight of an apple tree while thinking about the news of the suicide of Mr Valpy, apparently a friend of the family (Woolf 1985, 71); fourthly, approaching a puddle in a path and feeling unable to cross it; and finally, being surprised by “the idiot boy” in the park, to whom she gives all her candy in dismay (Woolf 1985, 78). Of these five childhood memories, collapse and terror characterise four of them: “[...] many of these exceptional moments brought with them a peculiar horror and a physical collapse; they seemed dominant; myself passive” (Woolf 1985, 72).

Again I had that hopeless sadness; that collapse I have described before; as if I were passive under some sledge-hammer blow; exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning that had heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected, with nothing to ward it off. (Woolf, 1985, 78)

A “shock” is therefore associated both with *excessive affect* and with *excessive meaning*: it produces a “peculiar horror” or a “hopeless sadness” contemporary with an overwhelming “avalanche of meaning”. In other words, meaning does indeed emerge when the “cotton wool” of “non-being” and its attendant normalised apprehension of the world give way, but in such a way that it eludes rational comprehension and conscious mastery. It is also worth noting that in Woolf’s 1918 essay “Moments of Vision” – a term she takes up from Hardy and Conrad, and that anticipates her own “moments of being” – such experiences are also described as “unaccountable”, as conveying an “*inexplicable* significance”, as being “almost *menacing* with *meaning*” (Woolf 1987, 250-251, my italics). This implies that such intense experiences carry an emotional and intellectual charge too great for the subject to deal with at the time. A “moment of being” or “shock” is therefore threatening in nature, for the perceiver is defenceless, “unprotected”, unable to “ward off” the “sledge-hammer” force of its impact. Woolf describes herself as

becoming “paralysed”, “immobile” and filled with a sense of “powerlessness” during such moments. She is “exposed”, made “passive”: in a word, vulnerable (Woolf 1985, 71).

Paradoxically, then, this “shock”, which is to produce a more direct, *immediate* apprehension of “reality” or “being”, is first experienced as a *breach* in perception and in comprehension. The “real thing behind appearances” that strikes the subject cannot be assimilated, for the force of the affective charge is such that it prevents one from fully seizing and understanding the experience. This introduces a gap, a form of *negativity* in the philosophical sense of the term, into the perceptive experience. “Moments of being” thereby involve the impression of sensorial immediacy while simultaneously preventing its capture as such.

This double excess of affect and meaning and the associated negativity suggest that we may read these “moments of being” as a form of *trauma* in the etymological sense of the term: used in ancient medicine, “trauma” comes from the Greek for the noun “wound” and the verb “to pierce”. This is, of course, the term Freud would take up and transpose into the realm of the psyche to describe an event that “shocks” the subject, involving an affective charge that is so great that the consciousness cannot incorporate the event at the time (Laplanche and Pontalis, 499-503). Woolf’s description of rupture of the cotton wool of non-being seems to correspond to just such an experience. Such a parallel is reinforced by the capacity of the experience to re-emerge. For if a traumatic experience occurs without being comprehended, that is to say that its extent is not immediately manifest to the subject, it contains elements which lie latent, and, as such, are susceptible to re-emerge. Likewise, Woolf makes quite clear that these “moments of being” return, sending their aftershocks into both the near and distant future. Of the “moment of being” she experienced with the “idiot boy” in the park to whom she gave all her candy, she writes:

But *it was not over*, for that night in the bath, the dumb horror came over me [...] I huddled up at my end of the bath, motionless. I could not explain it; I said nothing to Nessa sponging herself at the other end. (Woolf 1985, 78, *my italics*)

Of the first three memories she relates, Woolf writes: “they come to the surface unexpectedly” throughout her life (Woolf 1985, 71). Re-

emerging across time, the ephemeral “moment of being” is not a unique event, but is rather that which, as a result of its very force, recurs.

“Moments of being” and language

Implicit in this last quotation is the relationship established in “A Sketch of the Past” between the experience of a “shock” and its linguistic representation. For it is precisely the capacity to put the experience into words, that is, to find a reason for it, that distinguishes the single affirmative childhood “moment of being” from the others Woolf remembers:

The second instance was also in the garden at Saint Ives. I was looking at the flower-bed by the front door; ‘That is the whole’, I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower. It was a thought I put away as being likely to be very useful to me later. (Woolf 1985, 71)

The capacity to formulate the experience linguistically – “That is the whole” – is what separates this “moment of being” from the others which left her in a state of mute horror, because this explanation “blunts the sledge-hammer force of the blow” (Woolf 1985, 72). Indeed, she writes later:

When I said about the flower ‘That is the whole’, I felt that I had made a discovery. [...] I found a reason; and was thus able to deal with the sensation. I was not powerless. I was conscious – if only at a distance – that I should in time explain it. (Woolf 1985, 71-72)

Putting the experience in words thus enables the young Virginia to accede to the “reality” of the experience: she suddenly understands what the “real” flower was, she makes a “discovery”, thereby capturing the meaning the experience held.³ Language therefore allows her to cope

³ It is worth noting that this reality of the flower is heterogeneous – “part earth, part flower” – and composed of fragments that nonetheless form a sort of unity, or what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari might have termed an “hecceity”, a composite entity

with the shock; it is what makes the difference “between despair and satisfaction” (Woolf 1985, 71).

Not only this, but Woolf considers her capacity to both experience the “shock” of a “moment of being” and to “put it into words” as central to her literary vocation:

And so 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 become a revelation of some order, it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and *I make it real by putting it into words*. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. (Woolf 1985, 72, my italics)

As an adult, Woolf is no longer powerless and passive when faced with a “shock”; rather she channels its affect – its terror – into language, more precisely, into literature. However, as this passage makes clear, this process cannot be understood in terms of a simple relationship of cause and effect. Though the “shock” seems to precede its linguistic “explanation”, language is also that which creates the reality of the shock itself: “I make it real by putting it into words”. The “reality” of a “moment of being” is thus both an *effect* of language and a *call for* language. Woolf’s description of a shock thereby deconstructs the immediacy or purity of this perceptive and affective experience, and displaces it towards language, such that at the heart of the most intense *feeling*, we find *representation*.⁴

For the adult Woolf, then, writing literature is a way of

that nonetheless forms an indivisible unit, an “individuality” other than those of subjects and objects (Deleuze and Guattari, 318). In this sense, the “reality” that Woolf seems to point to here could be likened to the “plane of immanence” the philosophers develop in this work.

⁴ For indeed, reality’s blow could be read as an effect of what Jacques Derrida would describe as “difference” in perception itself, inseparable from its formulation in signs (See Derrida 1967, ch. 7, 1972, 1-28).

reconfiguring the pain of a “shock” and thereby limiting the devastating effects such an “avalanche” of affect and meaning produces. The receptivity of the perceiving subject is here inseparable from her creativity; she both passively experiences and actively fabricates the reality of a “moment of being”. Literary creation thereby provides her with a means of approaching the “shock” *as a subject* rather than simply *being subjected* to it. Moreover, putting the experience into words generates “pleasure” or even “rapture”. For Woolf continues:

[p]erhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. (Woolf 1985, 72)

The “dumb horror” of a “shock” is thus attenuated by the delight of creation.

Attenuated, but not, however, eliminated. For in Woolf’s description of her creative process, terror and pain underlie the “rapture” the creative act procures, forming its very condition. Linguistic representation both produces the “shock” of a “moment of being” and allows its danger to be “warded off” by giving it circumscribed form. It is therefore a highly equivocal process. Giving form to the “shock” does not therefore pacify it in an appeasing sublimation⁵: Woolf never forgets that any “whole” is constructed from “severed parts”.⁶ The affective charge of the shock is thus not so much diminished as displaced in the writing experience. Indeed, pain and delight, shock and rapture, passivity and activity cannot be read in terms of binary opposition in this process, but are to be held in constant dialectical tension.

⁵ In this sense, it is difficult to describe the process of creation in terms of sublimation, unless this term is understood as a displacement and reconfiguration of the emotion and pain of the experience, rather than a purification or elevation of the experience into an idealistic form, as it has often been understood in psychoanalytical approaches to art. See the discussion of sublimation in Georges Didi-Huberman, 2012, postface.

⁶ This is particularly obvious in the representation of the play Miss La Trobe stages in *Between the Acts*, in which unity is constantly held in tension with dispersion, each word becoming dismembered into ‘un’ and ‘dis’ to form a new word, or rather sound, that figures the fragmentary and incomplete nature of what is represented, nonetheless, as a community formed by and represented in the aesthetic experience of a play (Woolf, 1941/2002, 116-119).

Likewise, the crisis in meaning involved in the experience of a “shock” ought not be taken independently from the generation of meaning entailed by the linguistic representation of the experience. In other words, the breach in perception and understanding that accompanies a “moment of being” is also that which gives rise to its “revelation”.⁷ This negativity is therefore best understood not as pure absence but as a form of latency that participates in the movement of representation, and the meaning revealed through such an experience cannot be of an external, objective, positive order. For the “truth” or “reality” behind appearances can only be accessed through a *process* of continuous unveiling – that is, of continuous creation –, a process which is both limited by, and draws upon, this negativity. A “moment of being” “is *or will become* a revelation of some order”, writes Woolf (1885, 72, my italics). Thus inscribed in the unfolding movement of time, the meaning a “moment of being” produces belongs, therefore, to *a certain order of revelation*.

Revealing patterns

Nonetheless, for Virginia Woolf, a “moment of being” also gives rise to *the revelation of a certain order*. For, in a passage that has long intrigued scholars⁸, Woolf goes on to describe the “order” such moments reveal as a “pattern”:

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. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that

⁷ My reading therefore differs from Lorraine Sim’s reading of Woolf’s “moments of being” in which she discusses them in terms of a binary typology. Sim characterises certain “moments of being” as “positive” and “pleasant”, and associates such moments with the discovery of meaning (albeit a mystical one). She distinguishes these “positive” moments of being from “negative” ones, which she associates with “shock”, “trauma”, “pain”, and with a crisis in meaning. These two modes of “moments of being” are conceived of as distinct and as in opposition to each other (Sim 2010, ch. 5, see 140, 142, and 150 in particular). My argument is rather that these seemingly contradictory characteristics must be dialecticised in order to understand any single “moment of being” in Woolf’s thought and work.

⁸ This statement has been used as the starting point for many reflections on Woolf’s thought. See, amongst a very large bibliography, Mark Hussey, ix.

we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God. We are the words, we are the music, we are the thing itself. *And this I see when I have a shock.* (Woolf 1985, 73, my italics)

Given the modality under which this pattern is “seen” – a “shock”, that is, a “moment of being” – it is difficult to agree with critics who have read this passage as evidence of dualism in Woolf’s thought.⁹ For though this pattern is to be found “behind the cotton wool”, this pattern is not the abstract or ideal double of appearances. Though it might be invisible in normalised regimes of perception, it is not unperceivable *per se*: for it does indeed manifest itself, through art. The pattern behind appearances is described as a creative product: a quartet or a play. It is both constructed by and unveiled in – that is, *invented*¹⁰ – in the aesthetic act.¹¹

The collapse of individual subjectivity in the intensity of a “shock” here allows for the emergence of a pattern that is not personal but collective, a pattern which is not limited to the privacy of an individual mind but which connects each subject of an aesthetic experience to “all other human beings” who participate in it while being surpassed by it. In other words, through experience of the world not in terms of its banal cotton wool but *as art*, as something both unveiled and created through aesthetic experience, “we” can accede to and create an a-personal realm that is not chaos, but whose “order” is both revealed and invented in a “shock”.¹²

⁹ See for example Sim 2005. Sim takes up a tradition in Woolf criticism: that of reading the writer’s work in terms of Platonic dualism. See, for example, Dalgrano, to whom Sim refers to extensively, or Hénaff.

¹⁰ There is an element of *invention* in the very experience of a “shock” itself, if the term “invention” is understood both as “creation” and “revelation”, that is, as the simultaneous fabrication and unveiling of meaning in the perceptive experience. See the discussion of the term “invention” in Georges Didi-Huberman 2012, 19-20.

¹¹ This has led Angeliki Spiropoulou (2010, 174) to read this passage as support for the idea that Woolf’s defends a “transcendental” vision of art. Spiropoulou also revisits this quotation and goes so far as to claim this pattern performs a “transcendent role” and stands “in lieu of God” (Spiropoulou 2014, 165). However, such a metaphysical reading is challenged when we take into consideration Woolf’s description of the emergence of this pattern.

¹² In this sense, my reading is much closer to that of Douglas Mao, who sees the pattern as “immanent” and participating in human existence rather than lying beyond it.

Re-membering patterns, staging memory

When read in light of Woolf's philosophy of "pattern", her description of "moments of being" as the "scaffolding in the background, the invisible and silent part of my life as a child" takes on a new significance. Indeed, her memoirs may be read as an effort to render this pattern both visible and audible, to make the fragmentary and disparate "moments of being" of her early childhood memories hang together somehow by giving them representable form:

Many bright colours; many distinct sounds; some human beings, caricatures; comic; several violent moments of being, always including a circle of the scene which they cut out: and all surrounded by a vast space – that is a rough visual *description* of my childhood. *This is how I shape it*; and how I see myself as a child, roaming about, in that space of time which lasted from 1882 to 1895. (Woolf 1985, 79, my italics)

"A Sketch of the Past" may therefore be read as an attempt both to uncover and create this scaffolding.

Such a parallel between the *pattern* "moments of being" unveil and the *scaffolding* of "moments of being" that give form to her childhood allows us to examine the relationship between "moments of being" and the functioning of memory as it is staged in "A Sketch of the Past". Indeed, if the "pattern behind the cotton wool" or the "scaffolding in the background" are understood, not as static structures, but as dynamic, constantly shifting ones, situated along a temporal dimension which obeys laws other than those of linear progression and development, this would allow for forms in this pattern to *reappear* anachronistically to the subject, facilitating the resurgence of such "moments" in the form of memory. This would help to explain the dual nature of the temporality of "moments of being" in Woolf's work: fleeting on the one hand and yet capable of leaving a "dint" (Woolf 1985, 71) which means they are endowed with a kind of permanence on the other.¹³

¹³ Ann Banfield quite clearly sets out the dual nature of such moments, characterised by both their fleeting nature and their permanence. Her analysis of this duality, however, draws on Bertrand Russell's dualism and differs significantly from the one suggested here.

This is how Woolf discusses the functioning of memory in the opening pages of "A Sketch of the Past":

In certain favourable moods, memories – what one has forgotten – come to the top. Now if this is so, is it not possible – I often wonder — that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? [...] I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start (Woolf 1985, 67)

In the same passage, Woolf playfully imagines being able to invent a device that will allow one to relive past experiences by "fitting a plug into the wall" and "turn[ing] up August 1890". This technological fancy is however based on a more serious proposition concerning the nature of memory. If the *trace* that any intense experience leaves can be imagined to have "an existence independent of our minds", that is, to continue to exist in another realm that extends beyond present states of consciousness, then it is also potentially possible for this trace to be re-actualised through a new experience of its materiality. This would allow it to "come to the top", or "resurface" in the present, to borrow a metaphor that recurs constantly in these memoir drafts.

Contrary to Woolf's imaginary technological device, however, the resurfacing of intense past experiences does not function according to the subject's will or consciousness, at least not in her representation of this process in her memoirs: "memories" are not what one consciously remembers, but rather, the sudden return of "what one has forgotten". Indeed, as she states further on: "a scene comes to the top" involuntarily and unpredictably:

I find that *scene making* is my natural way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged; representative. This confirms me in my instinctive notion – it is irrational, it will not stand argument – that we are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality; at some moment, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is a scene – for they would not *survive* so many ruinous years unless they were

made of something permanent; that is a proof of their 'reality'. Is this liability of mine to *scene receiving* the origin of my writing impulse? (Woolf 1985, 142, my italics)

As the context makes clear, the "scene" here is a scene from the past, emerging in an a-linear, a-chronological fashion, to be re-experienced. Just as her ability to experience a "moment of being" is described as the origin of Woolf's literary vocation, her "scene-receiving capacity" is described as "the origin of [her] writing impulse". Both experiences give privileged access to what she calls "reality". And just as in an experience of "moment of being", the unity of the subject, here likened to a vessel, is broken at the moment that a "scene" appears. The slippage in vocabulary between the initial reference to "scene making" and the final reference to "scene receiving", blurring once again the distinction between the activity and passivity of the subject in the "making" of the scene: a creative role seems to be attributed to the receiver in determining the form of a scene that nonetheless seems to emerge already "arranged", "intact" at the moment it re-appears. The past may have an "independent existence", but the form of its re-emergence remains dependent on the shape the crack in the sealing matter makes, or on the "platform of the present" from which it is viewed, to borrow another expression Woolf uses to describe her own situation in her memoir writing activity (Woolf 1985, 75). The past is thus *re-membered* in the act of writing.

It seems quite clear, then, that Woolf conceives of the workings of memory and memoir writing in terms very similar to those she uses to represent the experience of "moments of being" and the writing of literature. This has at least two consequences for readings of her thought.

Firstly, if intense perceptive experience in the present functions according to the same principles as the memory of intense moments experienced in the past, the distinction between perception and memory becomes difficult to maintain. Troubling such a distinction, of course, means undermining conceptions of perception that privilege the present as the measure of sensory purity and the basis of perceptual knowledge. For representing the experience of "memory" in the same terms as a "moment of being" suggests the erosion of hierarchies between sensory experience in the present and the experience of an absent past, which necessarily involves representation, and thus further destabilises the idea that an immediate, unmediated sensory experience of the world is

possible.¹⁴ The role of representation in the perceptive experience is thereby reinforced. Blurring the boundaries between perception and memory also foregrounds the dimension of invention involved in the retelling of past events intensely experienced by the subject.

Secondly, the intersection of the “pattern” that “connects all human beings” and the “scaffolding” that gives structure to an individual’s memory has the effect of de-personalising such experiences, of taking them out of the realm of individual subjectivity and placing them squarely in an intersubjective, communal, cultural context. Indeed, in Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past”, traces continue to exist “independently” in a latent form, be it behind the “cotton wool” or sunk beneath the vessels floating on the surface of the present; they survive in a medium which largely surpasses the frontiers of an individual mind. This in turn gives new meaning to Woolf’s famous reference to the “common life” which surpasses individual lives and allows women writers to “think back through their mothers” in *A Room of One’s Own* (Woolf 2000, 112).

Such an understanding of memory and aesthetic experience seems to resonate with the concept of *Nachleben* – afterlife – that Woolf’s contemporary, the art historian Aby Warburg, was developing at the time. For Warburg, certain cultural forms can be understood as reminiscences on a transindividual scale. Culture is understood as developing according to an a-linear historical temporality which allows for repetitions and anachronistic resurgences of figures and configurations, rather like an unconscious. Such an unconscious can neither be substantiated nor personalised, and its manifestations resist any attempt to fix them into universal “archetypes”. Rather, the displacement and return of formal characteristics across time allow for the intensity of conflicts and contradictions, the *pathos* within culture to be represented. Be they literary or visual, such forms may be understood as complex *symptoms* or traces of affect within a culture. In using such a vocabulary, I am summarizing to the extreme (without, I hope, inordinately distorting) Georges Didi-Huberman’s presentation of Warburg’s thought (Didi-Huberman, 2002).

Two characteristics seem to link Woolf and Warburg here. Firstly, the idea that artistic forms allow for the anachronistic return of

¹⁴ This is, of course, the deconstructive reading of phenomenology suggested by Jacques Derrida in *La Voix et le phénomène*, in which Derrida erodes the Husserlian distinction between ‘retention’ as a part of the process of perception of the present and ‘memory’ as representation of past perception (Derrida, 1967, ch. 7 in particular).

traces or “scenes” that have been intensely or traumatically experienced. Secondly, the idea that certain “scenes” or forms contribute to and open out onto a common “pattern” or a common “sea of reality”, one that surpasses the boundaries of individual selves and concerns a community. Continuing life is accorded to intensely experienced “scenes” within a community in both thinkers’ work, and art is understood as the site at which such “scenes” may be figured, across individual and even generational boundaries.

Woolf’s conception of “moments of being” and its link to memory and art in her thought resonate throughout her fictional work, be it in her description of the “scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories, and ideas” that resurge in Lily Briscoe’s painting process in *To the Lighthouse*¹⁵ or in her portrait of Orlando as a figure of survival and resurgence, to mention but two. Such links merit further exploration, and so my summing up here can only be provisional: in “A Sketch of the Past”, Woolf’s effort to recall her earliest childhood memories and to put their sensorial charge into words lead her to develop her “theory” of “moments of being” and her “philosophy” of a pattern behind appearances. At the heart of the most intense perceptual experiences she remembers as a young child, an excess of affect and of meaning generate a negativity which displaces such sensations to the terrain of language, and awakens the desire to write literature. In recalling these experiences as an adult, her memoir drafts stage a *re-membering* of such experiences, that is, they represent memory as functioning according to very similar principles to those of “moments of being”. Woolf thereby destabilises the frontiers between present experience and the reactivation of traces of the past, allowing for a perceptive “shock” to be re-experienced, that is, to send its aftershocks beyond it such that they extend to us, the community of readers of her work.

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¹⁵ I have begun sketching out the relationship between the description of “moments of being” in “A Sketch of the Past” and the *mise-en-abyme* of the artistic process that is Lily Briscoe’s painting in *To the Lighthouse* in Toth (2014).

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