



Identity and Trauma in the Diaries of Plath and Woolf: Rhetorical Modes of Revelation and Silence in Recovering the Self

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ABSTRACT:

Through careful analysis of the diaries of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, I argue that the diarists construct multiple textual identities in order to give voice to and, more importantly, shroud in silence their respective traumas. While diary studies often focus on the revelatory moments, voyeuristically scrutinizing the private selves revealed publicly in a purportedly personal document, I seek to discover the volumes spoken by the silences in the text. By examining how diarists reveal *by concealing* traumatic experiences, I redress the scholarly tendency to situate what can be read as “truth” and what cannot as “lies” and instead explore the rhetorical strategy of omission. My article argues that silence is an important identity-making strategy; diarists seek to deny pain by aligning themselves with “normal” impulses and societal positions, often “unsaying” testimony while simultaneously justifying it as extraordinary and worth telling.

Keywords: diary, trauma, rhetoric, silence

Virginia Woolf believed that a “life-writer must explore and understand the gap between the outer self”¹ and the soul. She conceptualized her two selves in her diary in tellingly theatrical terms: “the fictitious V.W. whom I carry like a mask about the world.”² Sylvia Plath wrote in her diary that writing creates a facsimile body, a textual double as “a substitute for myself: if you don’t love me, love my writing & love me for my writing.”³ Both situate their writing as constituting the self, part of the multiplicity of identity, a “body” of work as substitution for their own respective bodies. But can diaries fully capture and share their experience, especially

such experiences that contain an excess or incomprehensible level of trauma? For victims of trauma, it is difficult to understand one's nature as anything but marked by an extreme alterity; as Julia Kristeva defines it, abjection is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."⁴ Language can be deployed in an attempt to avoid abjection, "pushing aside by purifying, systematizing, and thinking";⁵ language names and keeps control. This ordering, de-abjectifying function of language is often harnessed by the diary writer: re-living and re-writing a fictive self through diary writing allows the writer control and understanding of the self which has experienced and then changed in the interval of time between the event, the recording, and the rereading.

Traumatic events have long offered challenges to linguistic accounts by historiographers and by victims themselves. The testimony of victims raises many problems; victims "are both living archives and more or other than living archives"⁶ producing overwhelming effects on those who read or hear their accounts. However, Dominick LaCapra seeks to dismiss what he sees as a potentially dangerous idea that "traumatic limit events involve and convey an unrepresentable, anxiety-producing excess."⁷ While he acknowledges that "the unrepresentable excess of extreme events...call for discursive and affective responses that are never adequate to them,"⁸ he believes that humans should still try to represent what *can* be represented about traumatizing limit events, particularly because language can "provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective"⁹ to the traumatized. He acknowledges that trauma can never be fully worked out, but language "may enable processes of judgment and...ethically responsible agency."¹⁰ However, a major difficulty in any linguistic representation of trauma is the way in which the subject of trauma (if there can be any such identifiable, singular subject) is understood and signified.

Postmodern thought has long made clear that language cannot adequately express unstable concepts such as identity, much less capture trauma which ruptures understanding, disrupts any attempts at closure or mastery, and isolates the individual outside of community knowledge.

What, then, is the function of diary writing in expressing self-identity and trauma if it is always inevitably inadequate? Does language become subservient to a unified subject who writes in the diary and declares mastery over his or her trauma (and by recording, makes a readable, accessible account of "how it felt," thus undoing trauma's otherness) by narrating it? Or does language render the self an abject continually violated by the inadequacy of representation? I argue that while language constructs comforting identities and value systems which potentially break down

into incomprehensibility and abjection, it also opens up the radical possibility for naming, constituting, and thus, lending agency to the marginalized and voiceless. I also argue that incomprehensible excesses are handled in multiple ways by diarists, though my paper will specifically focus on two rhetorical modes: by either relentlessly addressing trauma in spite and despite of the account's inadequacy, or by silencing trauma in favor of more comprehensible, pedestrian experiences, though these silenced accounts still serve as important testimonials.

By examining how diarists reveal *by concealing* traumatic experiences, I redress the scholarly tendency to situate what can be read as “truth” and what cannot as “lies” and instead explore the rhetorical strategy of omission. My article argues that silence is an important identity-making strategy; diarists seek to deny pain by aligning themselves with “normal” impulses and societal positions, often “unsaying” testimony while simultaneously justifying it as extraordinary and worth telling. These two rhetorical modes open up the possibility of agency through testimony as theorized by LaCapra; even as damaging language rejects, it generates the potential for recapturing meaning and the self. Ultimately, though trauma may prove incomprehensible, the attempt to convey it is a vitally important part of self-fashioning, meaning-making, and trauma therapy—particularly for writers of fiction who also keep diaries. Their diaries serve as a meaning-making space between the personal and the fictions they create as a reworking of the personal traumas that exceed expression.

SYLVIA PLATH, PUBLIC TRAUMA, AND THE TRAUMATIC ADDRESS

In particular, Sylvia Plath's diary is one of repeated testimony, demonstrating unflinching effort in an attempt to capture how her experiences felt all while distancing herself from the traumatic account she has fashioned. I term this technique the traumatic address: a deliberate and unflinching account composed for a very self-conscious audience of not only the self but others (sometimes directly addressed in epistolary entries, sometimes left unaddressed). Here, we see the importance of LaCapra's testimonial function demonstrated.

Sylvia Plath was a lifelong diarist and writer of literature, though her famed suicide casts a long shadow over her work. Her diaries are a site where she explores her mental illness and traumas in brutal detail; Plath uses language both to wound and heal herself, relentlessly cutting at her psyche with unflinching specificity (violently naming herself as the

quintessential “Mad Girl”) as well as wielding a terrible mastery over her experiences and emotional responses by recounting them. After Plath’s first suicide attempt, her entries resume after a year and a half, but the entries quickly acknowledge the darkness in her mind. In December of 1955 she writes, “I am tormented by the questions of the devils which weave my fibers with grave-frost and human-dung, and have not the ability or genius to write a big letter to the world about this.”¹¹ She writes a couple of months later,

I am going to the psychiatrist this week...I feel like Lazarus: that story has such a fascination. Being dead, I rose up again, and even resort to the mere sensation value of being suicidal, of getting so close, of coming out of the grave with the scars and the marring mark on my cheek which (is it my imagination) grows more prominent: paling like a death-spot in the red, wind-blown skin, browning darkly in photographs, against my grave winter-pallor.¹²

Her suicidal fantasies are elaborate, reverent, and painfully detailed. She even insists upon incorporating her suicidal impulses into *more* of her writing, commenting with vigorous emphasis that “I *must* write one about a college girl suicide. THE DAY I DIED”¹³ and that she should break into the “market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don’t relive, recreate it”¹⁴—and indeed, by revisiting it with bravado again and again in her diary, she does relive it before she ever finishes her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*.

Though it is perhaps impossible to capture her experience of suicidal urges and the reverent drive to death, Plath attempts to recapture her identity through writing about these experiences explicitly in a LaCaprian sense. Plath writes candidly about visiting her psychiatrist Ruth Beuscher (often referred to as RB), the time she spent institutionalized at McLean Hospital, and receiving shock treatments as part of her therapy. She writes with dramatic relish that after a session with Beuscher in which she was told it was okay to hate her mother, “I have been feeling like a ‘new person’. Like a shot of brandy went home, a sniff of cocaine, hit me where I live and I am alive & so-there. Better than shock treatment.”¹⁵ And the day after meeting Ted Hughes, her future husband, for the first time, Plath channels the immediate, ardent passion she feels for him into the drive to write as brutally as she can about her shock treatment:

And now I sit here, demure and tired in brown, slightly sick at heart. I shall go on. I shall write a detailed description of shock treatment, tight, blasting short descriptions with not one smudge of coy sentimentality...I thought about the shock treatment description last night: the deadly sleep of her

madness, and the breakfast not coming, the little details, the flashback to the shock treatment that went wrong: electrocution brought in, and the inevitable going down the subterranean hall, waking to a new world, with no name, being born again, and not of woman.¹⁶

The diary is an important potential location for the painful abjection and subsequent recovery of the self, especially revealing the “duality (or double inscription) of being”¹⁷ that LaCapra says is critical for working through trauma, where “one is both back there and here at the same time, and one is able to distinguish between...the two.”¹⁸ Plath’s remarkably blunt discussion of shock treatment draws unabashed attention to an often stigmatized condition—but even more significantly, the doubling of being both the traumatized self and the distanced self who records the trauma when she refers to the recipient of the shock treatment using the split-voiced pronoun “her.” Madness does not belong to “me,” but it does belong to “her.”

Meg Jensen has argued that diaries act “as the mirrors that reflected [the diarist’s] split-voiced selves and as windows that framed the process of reimagining and escaping their concerns in fiction.”¹⁹ The diary form in particular lends itself to this doubling or the splitting of selves: in the moment of expressing trauma, there is a distinct “splitting within her ‘self’ between ‘deep-lying memory’ and ‘ordinary memory.’”²⁰ As one survivor of Auschwitz admits, “I live within a twofold being. The Auschwitz double doesn’t bother me...As though it weren’t I at all”;²¹ the formation of a fictive self is necessary for her to function and in order to record the memories she feels that she must *depart* from them. Indeed, the traumatized self which gets recorded in a diary entry is already a point of deviation, always distanced in time from the occurrence of the event itself; this is true regardless of how soon after the event the diary account was written. This distancing is necessary for the self-fashioning of traumatic experience both when a diarist chooses to directly record it despite the inadequacy of language, and when a diarist chooses to silence what is uncapturable and unrepresentable in an experience. Indeed, Jensen argues that the diaries of writers are born from this inherent distancing, a “need to construct a textual borderland between self-reflection and public revelation,”²² and always existing in the tension between the private and the public, between revelation and silence.

Thus, in writing of her mental illness, however honestly, Plath struggles with subject mastery and finds her experiences abject; she often steps outside her body using the textual figure she has created. This is evident in her dissociation from the figure who receives the shock treatment—even in her determination to write as grittily “real” a description as possible,

Plath does not ever write “my madness.” The madness is to be escaped from; it is not hers. But there is the possibility of recovery: Plath does detach her own experiences into otherness, but she also does so to observe what her role might be in the “great, stark, bloody play acting itself out over and over again behind the sunny facade [sic] of our daily rituals, birth, marriage, death, behind parents and schools and beds and tables of food: the dark, cruel, murderous shades, the demon-animals, the Hungers.”²³ Therefore, even as Plath others the suicidal self, projecting herself as unusual and unique or even shocking in her macabre imaginings, she also seeks to affirm herself as part of a larger cycle of normal human life, “canonically” troubled—confirming her place in the community as non-other, non-object. The diary serves as a way for Plath to have both the face of the exceptionally disturbed woman and the face of one who is thoroughly normal—just another cog in the ever-turning wheel of life, just another casualty of the eternally human condition of sorrow and pain.

Plath’s idea of the self as part of a staged cycle of human experiences directed by some greater entity is repeated multiple times in her diary; at age eighteen, she muses about walking home alone at night as if on stage being guided by an invisible director, “You get a feeling of being listened to, so you talk aloud, softly...I am walking down this street and I am being propelled by a force too powerful for me to break...chained me to the inevitable action...always repeating the circle or line.”²⁴ She frequently muses upon some intangible greater understanding of herself in the larger scheme of the human race:

There are times when a feeling of expectancy comes to me, as if something is there, beneath the surface of my understanding, waiting for me to grasp it...I can feel it when I think of human beings...I consider the prolonged adolescence of our species; the rites of birth, marriage and death; all the primitive, barbaric ceremonies streamlined to modern times...something is there, waiting for me.”²⁵

And Plath seeks to orient her place in this great pageantry of human life through writing her diary. She writes that, “I want to express my being as fully as I can because I somewhere picked up the idea that I could justify my being alive that way...a technique—to make arbitrary and temporary organization of my own personal and pathetic little chaos.”²⁶ Her diary allows her the space to be the woman whose struggles render her object, as well as the woman who fits in with her culture naturally, who can laugh and cry at societally accepted moments. Thus, through her diary, Plath is providing self-justification for her life, producing a declarative “I am” statement and building a place to find some semblance of order and sense

of belonging even as she envisions herself radically other, a powerless puppet in the midst of a tragi-comic theater piece.

Plath claims that her writings are all representative of her life and “come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have.”²⁷ However, she qualifies that intense experiences cannot be left raw and unmediated, but must be germane to a greater human experience. She believes unadulterated passion must be distilled through disciplined thought and intellectualization to find some utilitarian application:

I must say I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife...I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrific, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience...I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be *relevant*, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on.²⁸

While she was referring to the immediacy and intensity of her subjective experiences fueling confessional poetry, her response is also highly relevant to her personal diary writing—to trauma writing—which seeks to unify her experiences within the context of a timeless, universal canon of human suffering.

And when Plath's diary seeks to negotiate her turbulent feelings towards her mother, Aurelia Plath, it also takes on the essence of theater, observing from an outside perspective. The diary allows her to see herself staged within the play of parental relations to understand that “when I commit suicide, or try to, it is a ‘shame’ to [my mother]...An accusation that her love was defective.”²⁹ In some entries, Plath actually assumes the role of her mother, narrating what she envisions is Aurelia's version of her suicide attempt: “Her daughter tried to kill herself and had to disgrace her by going to a mental hospital: bad, naughty, ungrateful girl. She didn't have enough insurance. Something Went Wrong.”³⁰ And when acting out Aurelia's perspective, Plath concludes that her mother blames her (and her licentious sexuality) for their problems, judging that “It was her daughter's fault partly...her daughter was all gaudy-dressed about to go out and be a chorus girl, a prostitute too, probably. (She had a lover, didn't she? She necked and petted...and her pants were wet with the sticky white filth of desire...)”³¹ But by performing her mother's voice, Plath is able to apprehend not just her mother's viewpoint, but the enabling (and thus, self-validating) power of writing her own life story. When Plath asks, “How, by the way, does mother understand my committing suicide? As a result of my not writing, no

doubt. I felt I couldn't write because she would appropriate it. Is that all? I felt if I didn't write nobody would accept me as a human being,"³² she ultimately concludes that creating a surrogate textual self provides a relieving sense of meaning and alleviates her fears of being unloved or invisible and worthless. She continues, "Writing... is also much more: a way of ordering and reordering the chaos of experience."³³ Indeed, Plath agonizes over a crushing fear that her life is not really valid, and her diary is a continuing project in self-affirmation, a way for her to see herself in the text as a living, productive being.

A diary, then, is "proof" of an ordered, comprehended identity, whereas Plath feels that a life that leaves behind no tangible, recorded evidence is one that might well be meaningless. Plath writes of being wracked by "A panic, absolute & obliterating: here all diaries end – the vines on the brick wall opposite end in a branch like a bent green snake. Names, words, are power. I am afraid. Of what? Live without having lived, chiefly."³⁴ Plath uses the diary to affirm her supremacy over her fears; Plath's audience is often herself and those who have hurt her, in often in clearly addressed epistolary entries. She composes vigorously-worded missives to herself as a means of self-reassurance, excerpts letters to friends and lovers in her journals, and composes "unsent letters" to others as a means of catharsis: "– And so it seems I must always write you letters here that I can never send."³⁵ In the month before her 1953 suicide attempt, she writes many letters to herself in her diary; she tells herself on July 6, 1953, "The time has come, my pretty maiden, to stop running away from yourself...You are an inconsistent and very frightened hypocrite."³⁶ On July 14th, she writes, "Think. You can. You must, moreover, not continually run away while asleep – forget details – ignore problems – shut up walls between you & the world & all the gay bright girls –: please, think – snap out of this."³⁷ During this same time period she writes another missive, addressed as a "Letter to an Over-grown, Over-protected, Scared, Spoiled Baby," to firmly inform herself that "It is not the time to lose the appetite, feel empty, jealous of everyone in the world because they have fortunately been born inside themselves and not inside you."³⁸ She also writes in her diary to her former lover Richard many times after their difficult breakup, producing a long series of unsent letters: "Richard, you live in this moment...You are in my guts and I am acting because you are alive...I want to write you, of my love, that absurd faith which keeps me chaste."³⁹ A later diary entry directs him to, "Please, just write me one very simple declarative sentence...kill your image and the hope and love I give it which keeps me frozen in the land of the bronze dead."⁴⁰ Plath dominates those who have pained her through language, naming them as responsible for the injuries she endures.

VIRGINIA WOOLF, PRIVATE TRAUMAS, AND THE AVOIDANT NON-ADDRESS

Yet the diaries of Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf address mental illnesses in opposing manners: while Plath makes her innermost suffering a public exhibition, Woolf constructs a public self that suppresses the private trauma. Woolf is also highly versed in the rhetorical strategies of fiction, life writing, and the diary, and often chose to blur the margins between them—the literary influence in her diary writing is absolutely unquestionable. Woolf’s technique I term the avoidant non-address, which in and of itself is still meaningful and remains an address (though one deliberately deflected).

While LaCapra acknowledges that testimonials and responses to traumatic events are always inadequate, he believes that writers should still try to represent what *can* be represented about traumatizing limit events—and in the case of diarists trying to capture their own victimized voices, I argue that sometimes what is able to be represented is a resounding silence. Through Woolf’s silencing, she still testifies to her experiences. And indeed, much like the diarist Fanny Burney, whose “claim to artlessness is, of course, carefully constructed, playing to at least two audiences—strangers and her older self...She seeks to establish a character that conceals while claiming to reveal, employing rhetorical strategies far from the artlessness she claims”,⁴¹ Woolf’s diary plays to an audience of herself and her many literary peers, fans, and detractors as she seeks to wrestle her traumatic experiences into silent submission, carefully smothering the excess of her trauma under the power of language. She makes the bold claim in her diary that “I haven’t an inner life.”⁴² However, this sentiment, uttered from the woman whose literary works contain keen and insightful representations of inner life both in her autobiographical pieces and fiction, is grossly misleading, if not a deliberately deceptive statement. It is clear that Woolf is playing to an audience, perhaps one who expects nothing *but* mental turmoil to be recorded in the most intimate writings of a woman who endured several breakdowns over the course of her lifetime before committing suicide in 1941.

While reading the biography of Samuel Butler written by Henry Festing Jones, Woolf comments in her diary, “For such a critical & contemptuous mind, the value attached to reviews seems queer. Why, I don’t think half or quarter so much of mine!”⁴³ And in 1922, she says of *Jacob’s Room*, “The reviews have said more against me than for me—on the whole. Its [sic] so odd how little I mind...But we scarcely sell, though it has been out 10 days. Nor do I much mind that.”⁴⁴ These are statements that pander to her literary audience, a façade of thick-skinned bravado that was, in fact,

belied by her sensitivity to the reviews and sales performance of her work. Woolf *did*, in fact, dwell upon the sales figures and the critical reception for her writing a great deal, revealing the weight she gave to the opinions of her readers and critics. On August 22, 1922, Woolf wrote in her diary that she “should very much like to account for my depression”⁴⁵ and proceeds to recount a visit by Sydney Waterlow in which “Sydney reproduced in his heavy lifeless voice exactly the phrases in which Murry dismisses my writing ‘merely silly—one simply doesn’t read it—you’re a back number’”⁴⁶ Murry’s criticism certainly must have stung Woolf deeply, since she continues to contemplate his words in her diary three days later. She comforts herself by saying, “The Times (weekly) says my novels are by some thought among the finest of our time”,⁴⁷ but admits, “Yet, yet, I am not quite past the depression of hearing Sydney repeat what Murry said.”⁴⁸ In fact, Woolf frequently uses the diary to admit insecurity before seeking to obscure it in a façade of confidence, creating a self which is designed to convince both the audience of herself and her critics that her writing does have value and that she is unaffected by those who claim otherwise. Even if her diary was never intended for publication or a *real* audience, the imagined audience continues to shape how she records her diary self.

In 1920, while first conceiving the idea that would become *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf shrugs off any potential critics, claiming that their attacks are spurious and only fuel her determination: “it’s the ‘writing well’ that sets people off—& always has done, I suppose...& then a woman writing well, & writing in The Times—that’s the line of it...But I value blame. It spurs one.”⁴⁹ She dismisses her critic Walkley, calling him “a cheap little gossip... laughed at.”⁵⁰ And after *Jacob’s Room* is finished and she is anticipating its publication, Woolf uses the diary to bolster both her self-esteem and valuation of her writing by pre-planning a self-defense, writing, “Then will begin my season of doubts & ups & downs. I am guarding myself in this way. I am going to be well on with a story for Eliot, lives for Squire, & Reading, so that I can vary the side of the pillow as fortune inclines.”⁵¹ However, she admits that she cares greatly for the criticism that might come from *Jacob’s Room*, and she fantasizes several defiant responses to a potentially negative reception: “If they say this is all a clever experiment, I shall produce Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street as the finished product. If they say your fiction is impossible, I shall say what about Miss Ormerod, a fantasy. If they say, You can’t make us care a damn for any of your figures—I shall say, read my criticism then.”⁵² But planning out all of these bold answers does little to quell her fears. She follows up her imagined defiant act with insecurity, wondering, “Now what *will* they say about Jacob? Mad, I suppose: a disconnected rhapsody: I don’t know.”⁵³ Her diary, then, contains not a singular, sovereign self, but a multiplicity of selves: she is both

insecure *and* impervious and can be both in the same entry. In her diary, Woolf can experience cathartic confession of insecurity while denying it altogether. The diary, then, is not just a spontaneous and uninhibited eruption of the self, but one that allows a nuanced double self (both the public and private) and exhibits elements of deliberation, control, and restraint in self-expression.

By expecting and brushing off her negative reviews in advance, she is performing a public self while subconsciously admitting that they will bother the private self deeply. Her diary entries for October 1922, just before *Jacob's Room* is due to be published on October 27th, demonstrate the dual nature of Woolf's textual personas. On October 14th, she wonders about the sales figures—"I think we shall sell 500: it will then go on slowly"⁵⁴—before addressing her concerns for the reviews. "The only review I am anxious about is the one in the Supt.: not that it will be the most intelligent, but it will be the most read & I cant [sic] bear people to see me downed in public";⁵⁵ Woolf says, and then lists two other publications that she casually acknowledges "will be hostile"⁵⁶ before she brushes them off. These negative reviews will not disturb her, she says, for "nothing budes me from my determination to go on, or alters my pleasure... though the surface may be agitated, the centre is secure."⁵⁷ She declares the same sense of resoluteness and stability, affirming her worth and talent, in an entry dated October 29th. While she admits she is "too riddled with talk & harassed with the usual worry of people who like & people who don't like J.R. to concentrate";⁵⁸ she tries to shrug off any painful criticism as inevitable, quoting reviews casually as if their impact is minimal. "I shall never write a book that is an entire success. This time the reviews are against me, & the private people enthusiastic. Either I am a great writer or a nincompoop. 'An elderly sensualist' the Daily News calls me. Pall Mall passes me over as negligible."⁵⁹ She even goes so far as to say that she *anticipates* cruel reviews.

Woolf's strategy serves to undermine the importance of negative criticism by juxtaposing the criticism with her success: "I expect to be neglected & sneered at...So far of course, the success is much more than we expected. I think I am better pleased so far than I have ever been."⁶⁰ This is nearly an echo of the 1920 diary entry she wrote two years earlier, anticipating attacks on *Jacob's Room* before it was even written; "I predict that I'm destined to have blame in any quantity. I strike the eye; & elderly gentlemen in particular get annoyed. *An unwritten novel* will certainly be abused."⁶¹ She reinforces the idea of herself as "other" and says that resistance to her "otherness" serves only to kindle her spirit again and again, even almost twenty years later; in 1938, she writes of *Three Guinea's* poor reception, "In a way it is a relief. I'm fundamentally, I think, an outsider. I

do my best work & feel most braced with my back to the wall".⁶² The repetition is a dramatic technique, and there is a definite air of rehearsal to Woolf's repertoire of dismissive responses, oft recited and mantra-esque. This recurring tactic frequently spotlights vicious attacks on her abilities, drawing attention to her critics so as to finally express her disdain or indifference to them. At the same time, Woolf reveals her private fears and shows that she feels, to some degree, defenseless against these attacks.

During "the mid-1920s, she has a self-conscious debate with herself about whether it is a diary of facts or a diary of 'the soul'...She seems to have promised herself that the diary would be about 'life' rather than 'the soul'."⁶³ Woolf writes in 1923, "How it would interest me if this diary were ever to become a real diary: something in which I could see changes, trace moods developing; but then I should have to speak of the soul, & did I not banish the soul when I began? What happens is, as usual, that I'm going to write about the soul, & life breaks in."⁶⁴ She then recounts a memory of her cousin Katherine Stephen's neat collection of diaries, which she kept "there in a row on a shelf...Some were brown; others red; all the same to a t."⁶⁵ These diaries are marked not by thoughtful inner contemplation, but only the facts of days, each entry unremarkable as "one of many thousand days, like pebbles on a beach: morning, evening, afternoon, without accent."⁶⁶ Woolf marks how, when prompted to read an entry, her cousin is expressionless and unemotional, "strangely unaccented...level, sagacious...Only once or twice did I strike a spark in the one remaining pale blue eye, which is tenderer than the glass one. Orderly solidity marked every atom there."⁶⁷

Woolf seems to appreciate the strict "soullessness" of these diaries, which her cousin plans to burn on her last day of life, and admires the smooth, inexpressive perfection of Katherine Stephen's diary writing: "I scarcely tried to disturb what had the sculptured classic appearance of alabaster fruit beneath glass"⁶⁸ Woolf aspires to this streamlined diary of facts that does not linger too much on the messy and disjointed ruminations of the soul, though she wavers on this conviction. In 1924, she records that "I think its [sic] time to cancel that vow against soul description...I mean, what's the use of facts at our time of life? Why build these careful cocoons: why not say straight out—yes, but what?"⁶⁹ The entry never resolves this question and tapers off into her plans for the day; and indeed, *but what?* is the key question Woolf's diary examines again and again. *But what* will she share of herself in the pages of her diary?

LaCapra suggests that when writing about trauma, "empathy is a counterforce to victimization" as long as empathy has its correct place—not "an exclusive or primordial position"—and does not promote "the dubious ideas that everyone (including perpetrators or collaborators) is a

victim, that all history is trauma, or that we all share a pathological public sphere or a ‘wound culture.’”⁷⁰ Woolf’s privacy and intensive silencing of her experiences is an active attempt to privatize her suffering; for her, the public sphere is a place far too impersonal for her traumas to be dispersed and shared. Was she afraid of a publicly pathologizing shame, or was she afraid of having her traumas usurped by a public hungry to participate in her traumas? It seems a little bit of both. She hungers to share with others, and yet can’t fully commit to public revelation. The self-consciousness of what to share with others and what to avoid is notable—Woolf examines how she has fashioned herself in the diary text, turning in front of the mirror and wondering at the acceptability of the selves she projects. What can she allow her diary to reveal about the details of her life while simultaneously concealing her soul, such as discussing Samuel Butler’s oversensitivity to his reviews while flaunting her own lack of concern about her reviews? In this way, Woolf’s diary is always seeking to hide behind itself, performing a sleight of hand—distracting the audience with one bit of information while slipping her soul behind the curtain. If she reveals too much, is she being too egotistical? For Woolf worries often about her egotism, frequently deriding herself as a “snob”;⁷¹ she says achieving immortality through her letter writing is vanity, and cries out, “Oh vanity, vanity! How it grows on me—how detestable it is—how I swear to crush it out.”⁷² In 1937, she wonders, “Do I ever write, even here, for my own eye? If not, for whose eye?...I’m musing on the nature of Auden’s egotism...he wants to write straight from the heart: to discard literature”;⁷³ to lay bare the self, free from literary intent, is for Woolf an act of unadulterated narcissism.

LaCapra distinguishes between absence and loss; traumatic historical events are problematically ruptured from the get-go and cannot be generalized into an overarching sense of absence as many are wont to read into these events. According to LaCapra, individuals experience their losses in their own distinct manner—the private and particular—and these traumatic experiences become occluded “when they are enveloped in an overly generalized discourse of absence.” Interestingly, Woolf ensures that her specific losses never get subsumed into a general public discourse of absence by silencing them, but at the same time she *only* allows herself to talk of depression and suicide when it is part of the general public discourse of wartime and war-related traumas. Unlike Plath’s diary, Woolf’s diary often avoided or sought to obscure her mental health issues—Woolf’s diary refers to an extended breakdown in 1913 during which she attempted suicide only as “a series of catastrophes which very nearly ended my life”⁷⁴ and *only* discusses suicide not as an act of depression, but as an escape from concentration camp if Hitler invades Britain,

as her husband Leonard Woolf was Jewish.⁷⁵ Woolf neatly excises personal loss and replaces it with discussions of public absence.

For Woolf, the generalized discourse of absence is the only one she can speak of; her private, specific loss cannot be addressed. Indeed, Woolf believes that going beyond objective facts to reveal her personal losses (which she terms experiences of the “soul”) would be indulging a particular fault of self-absorption: “Soul, you see, is framing all these judgments, & saying as she sits by the fire, this is not to my liking, this is second rate, this vulgar; this nice, sincere, & so on. And how should my soul know?”⁷⁶ And Woolf certainly detests feeling vulnerable and open to judgment after she has revealed too much of her soul, as evidenced by her humiliated 1920 entry after a meeting with the Memoir Club. Woolf writes after the event, “If this diary were a diary of the soul I could write at length of the 2nd meeting of the Memoir Club...‘Oh but why did I read this egotistic sentimental trash!’ That was my cry, & the result of my sharp sense of the silence succeeding my chapter...What possessed me to lay bare my soul!”⁷⁷ Indeed, her intense concern with revealing her “soul” is revealing in and of itself, producing a view inside of her soul nonetheless. But despite her conflicted views on how to portray herself, the diary is a platform where she *can* have many faces—Woolf’s diary is, in fact, a theater where she performs *both* public and private through many fictive selves. Her entries recognize the difficulties of dividing the “life” from the “soul” and the “public” self from the “private,” the problem of reducing a complex self which is torn by opposing impulses down to a single identity. Thus, Woolf’s diary, despite its performative nature and many faces, represents the intricacies of an individual mind and the multitude of selves it seeks to understand—her control over her traumatic experiences is always slipping away from her, but even so, she continues to strive for linguistic agency over her life in the diary.

But despite her silences, even Woolf enacts the double-inscription of being that LaCapra terms necessary for recovery of the self. Woolf, fascinated with the idea of a continuously changing identity through individual experience (and how writing mediates that experience), came to the understanding that the dated diary format allows the recording of the past self through the lens of the present self. The implicit distance in a diary’s text allows the writer the stability to achieve self-reflection. Therefore, in “A Sketch of the Past,” the memoir written in diary-esque dated blocks from 1939 to 1940, Woolf establishes why she has begun to record the dates in which she works on the segments:

2nd May... I write the date, because I think that I have discovered a possible form for these notes. That is, to make them include the present—at least

enough of the present to serve as a platform to stand upon. It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast. And further, this past is much affected by the present moment. What I write today I should not write in a year's time.⁷⁸

She appropriates the diary form because she sees the evolution of the self over a dated interval as a useful form to reconstitute her life. This "inaccurate recall" of the diary entry—not just encompassing the "gap" in time, but the distance between the life event and the consciously or subconsciously controlled, recorded event—often helps to produce a retroactive understanding of the significance of a traumatic event. This understanding is a vital contribution to the formation of the diarist's development, which is a departure from the original self who lacked both understanding and mastery over the event and its impact on the self. The evaluation of trauma creates distance between the lived event and the textual event, and subsequently divides the self which experienced the event from the recorded self, as "it is not until after the [traumatic event] that real knowledge of the trauma is possible."⁷⁹ By reliving the event on the page, the writer can control the experience in a way that was not originally possible; it is a parachute jump after a traumatic free-fall.

Ultimately, the diary account is a way for the diarist to "re-experience the inner trauma of plummeting without support and understand its meaning."⁸⁰ Diaries are useful for post-event re-experiencing and self-evaluation. The diarist obtains a greater understanding of the significance of events in retrospect, after having laid them out on paper to make order and meaning of them. Only then can life experiences be applied to one's understanding of oneself and help one both become the self one wishes to be and successfully mediate future experiences. This controlled re-living through diary writing is a way to present and better understand one's own testimony even as it departs from reality, and the nature of the fictive self serves to ensure that even as the textual double conceals the reality of events, it also *reveals* something through what has been intentionally concealed. For example, in the case of a kiss that traumatized Sylvia Plath, she has taken control of the memory in the retelling and is able to see things in writing the diary that she could not see before, noting that "It seemed of no significance then, but now I remember how Ilo had shut the door, had turned on the radio so that music came out."⁸¹ The distance between herself and the "character" self she has made in her diary allows her an almost disassociated out-of-body experience; it enables her to watch her life unfold from a new perspective with added clarity and detail. The entry also serves to reveal how devastating the moment is to her.

Like Plath, Woolf often reverts to the LaCaprian dissociated two-fold persona when recording traumatic events in her diary, as clearly seen from her diary's declaration that she possessed no inner life. Indeed, her subterfuge, whether done intentionally or not, successfully distracted some; reviewer Nona Balakian writes, "Nothing yet published about her so totally contradicts the legend of Virginia Woolf than this first volume of her projected complete diaries," and Keith Cushman wonders that there is "No torment or psychic struggle here." Virginia Woolf's diary has proven notable to critics not for what it says, but for what it *does not* say, and yet, they fail to understand that its silence speaks volumes, a testimony of sorts. The fact that she hasn't written directly about trauma is read to mean that she was not actively suffering from it, instead of suggesting that she had found ways to write *around* her traumas. Woolf never directly references any mental breakdowns, for example, choosing to only mention them on rare occasion obliquely or euphemistically coding them as a "catastrophic illness."⁸² That Woolf was circumventing a painful subject is clear, and her avoidance says much about her coping strategies and how her diary participated in constructing a normative self.

After the 1937 death of her nephew, Julian Bell, who was killed driving an ambulance in the Spanish Civil War, Woolf refuses to ruminate upon death and instead immerses herself in the ordinary. She writes of death: "Now this is what I intend to combat. How? How make good what I protest, that I will not yield an inch or a fraction of an inch to nothingness... Work of course. I plunged on Monday into Congreve, & have about done him this morning."⁸³ She downplays traumatic events by aligning their level of significance with her everyday work. Instead of leaving a record of grief, Woolf instead documents a list of work and the various distractions she will use to distance herself from her grief. Woolf does not allow it room in her daily recorded routine to expand beyond trivial importance. When she concludes her entry on Julian's death with the realization that Julian's mother and her bereaved sister "Nessa is alone today,"⁸⁴ she follows it up with, "A very hot day—I add, to escape from the thought of her."⁸⁵ This entry is telling and quite rare in that she leaves flags showing where she is omitting her more serious thoughts.

In her diary, she can declare a day in which she records no mental turmoil and her most substantial activity was that she "shopped in Oxford Street; went to Warings; liked the china cups: think of buying a dinner service" to be "A fairly specimen day."⁸⁶ Perhaps it *was* a specimen day—certainly her life was not one of daily miseries. Reading this entry alone would not yield much in the way of understanding Woolf's traumas. However, given that her diary also reveals long periods of silence after breakdowns, places where she insistently writes around her grief at the

loss of loved ones (or fails to address significant deaths or other devastating experiences altogether), and glib conversations about war, it becomes more clear that Woolf's diary is hiding just as much as it is revealing. The day after her initial entry denying reflection upon Julian Bell's death, she contemplates whether she should leave her husband alone to sit with her grieving sister Vanessa, who "was again in the submerged mood"⁸⁷ and finally concludes that there is "no use in thinking—I mean in analysis. I shall have a long walk this afternoon, to Piddinghoe: walk myself serene; play bowls, read; & not think of little arrangements."⁸⁸ Therefore, it is apparent that Woolf does *more* than just capture the banal quality of day to day living; she focuses on it entirely in relentless lists as a way of deflecting attention (perhaps both hers *and* that of any future readers) from her innermost thoughts and personal turmoil. Underneath the vivacious social observations there is much to be gleaned about Woolf's inner life—her agonies are merely detached and subverted.

Whether actively attempting to display experiences through the traumatic address or deflecting it in the avoidant non-address, the diarist's techniques prove useful and revelatory for how we understand trauma and its representation. Who receives these revelations? Though the diary is a purportedly private document, all are constructed with some addressed audience in mind, whether for personal or religious use in taking measure of the present spirit for the self or God, keeping track of daily activities, for later memoirs, to pass down to posterity, or even for the aged self as a future reader. Even when a diarist writes with the intent that it later be destroyed, there is a consideration of audience—the future readers it seeks to deny. And because there is an audience, the diary's meanings and vocal silences are ultimately addressed to someone, even if that "someone" is unknown or unspecified. Importantly, the address of an audience, or attempt at non-address as the case may be, is useful not only to the diarist herself as she works through or silences her traumas and attempts to make meaning of or erase them, but to future readers and scholars who might project and speculate on the material, perhaps in conjunction with other writings or biographical data. Jensen suggests that as writers "turned from journal to storytelling and back again, their diaries enabled them to define their writerly efforts against the past, and transform the split they felt between their public and private selves into figurative discourse."⁸⁹ That borderland between public and private, and the transformative rhetorical methods (whether through disclosure or silence or some other method) in which the borderland is constructed, remains a rich location for scholarly exploration.

I argue that despite the postmodern difficulties of pinning down excesses of experience and even identifying direct audiences who have

or will receive the revelations in these diaries, there remains endless possibility for traumatic violation and restorative healing within language and subsequently, diary accounts of trauma. Language gives voice to, constitutes, and interpellates the values of civilized man, and its power continues to name and break the idea of the sovereign “I” and unified self. But still, testimonials and diary entries can and must be written and addressed, even if its recipients do not know how to read excess or understand silence. LaCapra points to the possibility that testimony of hatred and horror do not lock in the abjectified self as utterly unrecoverable, but liberate it and lend it voice. Indeed, the diaries of Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf lend credence to this possibility of recovering abject identity through language. Plath’s entries often amplify the silenced voice of mental illness, however violent it may be, and simultaneously declare her place within human society through the traumatic address; Woolf’s rhetorical technique of avoidant silencing enables her to exercise a “normal” existence (almost to the point where she insists upon banality) and subvert her illness under the language of her diary. The tension between public and private proves productive for diarists, as well as for their future scholarly readers to explore the rich rhetorical methods by which diarists tackle excesses of trauma.

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