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# **When the Sealing Matter Cracks.**

The 'Real' in Virginia Woolf's *A Sketch of the Past*.

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**Title:** *When the Sealing Matter Cracks. The 'Real' in Virginia Woolf's A Sketch of the Past.*

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**Abstract:** In this essay, I explore the concept of the real in Virginia Woolf's autobiographical text *A Sketch of the Past*. My thesis is that the real here refers to a quality of experience, characterized by sensuous openness to the world. This quality of openness resides in certain moments in a life. Access to the real in this sense is therefore discontinuous rather than pervasive. For the analysis, I use the perspective and conceptual framework of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and show that several aspects of how Woolf describes her experience of "moments of being" correspond to Merleau-Ponty's description of perception as a phenomenal field: her insistence on the vagueness of impressions; her emphasis on how sense impressions are integrated in experience; the sense of flow and integration between subject and world; her strong emphasis on experience as embodied. I suggest that Woolf's moments of being may be understood as a form of phenomenological reduction.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf, the real, phenomenology, body, experience, senses, moments of being

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## 1. Introduction

In this essay I will explore some aspects of Virginia Woolf's philosophy as it emerges in her autobiographical text *A Sketch of the Past*. Woolf (1882-1941) is widely considered one of the most important British modernist writers. She wrote extensively both as reviewer, essayist and novelist. In her fiction (ten novels) she was highly innovative both in terms of form and content, one aspect of which is her use of 'stream of consciousness' narration (Greenblatt et al. 2423-25).

Woolf used material from her own life in all her writing. The main explicitly autobiographical texts are her diaries and the collection posthumously published as *Moments of Being* (1985). The latter comprises five texts composed at different times throughout the author's life. *A Sketch of the Past* is the longest and latest of these. It was written during the very last years of Woolf's life (1939-1940). Here, Woolf writes about memories from her early childhood and teenage years, but these accounts are interleaved and anchored by glimpses of the life she leads while writing. There is thus an interesting juxtaposition of present self and past self in the text (Zwerdling 179-80) and Woolf is here explicit about her ideas on life, reality and the nature and role of memory and writing. The text begins with Woolf's earliest memory and it ends, rather abruptly, in the middle of an account of her life as a young woman in her father's house. As noted by Zwerdling, the text was not even close to completed but referred to, by Woolf, as notes for later use (177). It is clear from her "present day" notes in *A Sketch of the Past* that her writing of these memoirs is partly as a form of retreat and antidote (Zwerdling 178) from her more structured and exacting work, first on a biography of Roger Fry, then on *Between the Acts*, which goes on in parallel. The unfinished and sketchy character of the text may be seen as crucial aspects of its particular qualities, however. It is written in a straightforward, relaxed and hasty style that gives it a sense of exploration and a strong vitality (Zwerdling 179). For all of these reasons, *A Sketch of the Past* can be seen as a crucial document for an inquiry into Woolf's thinking. Even so, this work has not by itself been sufficiently explored from a philosophical angle, but has so far mainly been used either as a primary source of information about the author's life or as a complementary source in various analyses of Woolf's novels.

When Woolf writes about the real, she does not refer to an external, objective truth, but rather to an experience of being in the world as a human. Her perspective challenges the dichotomy of *body-mind* as well as that of *inner-outer*, deeply ingrained in dominant western

patterns of thought (e.g. Olson 46). Because of this and because of her concern with what is actually experienced, it has been suggested that her art anticipated modern phenomenology and the associated existential psychoanalysis (Hussey, xiv-xv). It has even been argued that in Virginia Woolf “phenomenology found its novelist” (Poole qtd. in Koppen 376).

My thesis in this essay is that Woolf’s concept of the real in *A Sketch of the Past* refers to a quality of experience characterized by sensuous openness to the world: a kind of direct access and two-way flow with transformative power. I will argue that this quality concerns the way in which the ‘internal’ world of body and mind meets and mixes with the world surrounding the individual person. This quality of openness resides in certain *moments* in a life. Experiential access to the real in this sense is therefore discontinuous rather than pervasive. It remains within us as memories, however, and may be sustained and perhaps even expanded, through art.

An important reference for a discussion of Woolf’s philosophy and her conception of the real is Mark Hussey’s *The Singing of the Real World. The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf’s Fiction*. Woolf’s concept of reality is actually stated as the general focus of this monograph, since “‘reality’ is a very special term in Woolf’s lexicon and will be seen to be crucial in understanding her view of self and its place in the world” (34). Although Hussey also acknowledges the prominent role of the senses and the body in Woolf’s work - and the way in which the characters are depicted as enmeshed in the influences and relationships of the world - it is her ideas about a ‘transcendent reality’ which is his main concern. Writing about the nature of Woolf’s sense of a special reality in her novels, he observes that: “The apprehension of a numinous ‘reality’ has usually manifested itself as a yearning for transcendence of the world of time and death on the part of a particular character” (96). Hussey thus emphasizes those aspects of Woolf’s thinking which tend towards the abstract rather than the concrete, physical world of bodies and things, towards the transcendent rather than the flux and flow of the present moment. Similarly, Jeanne Schulkind, in her introduction to *Moments of Being*, emphasizes the “spiritually transcendent” aspect of Woolf’s idea of the real. She argues that the questions repeatedly asked by Woolf’s characters all lead to one end: “the spiritual continuum which embraces all of life, the vision of reality as a timeless unity which lies beneath the appearance of change, separation and disorder that marks daily life” (18). In both of these texts, the authors’ also recognize the importance of the senses, of bodily experience and of change and flux with respect to individual identity in Woolf’s work. Nevertheless, they seem to understand transcendence of space and time as the most important aspect of her reference to the real.

In much writing on Woolf she has been described as an ‘inward’ writer, primarily concerned with subjective, internal states (Olson 43-44). Olson argues that the general understanding of Woolf’s work as an exploration of a fluid, heightened state of consciousness has so far underestimated the author’s “commitment to ordinary experience” (44). She discusses how Woolf throughout her career struggles with how to represent the ordinary in the sense of the materiality, repetitions and habits of daily life and suggests that this is indeed the most defining feature of her fiction (65). A slightly different viewpoint is taken by Randi Koppen in her article about the relation between life and art in *To the Lighthouse* (also containing numerous references to *A Sketch of the Past*). Koppen mentions the “principle of transcendence or mystical essence of experience” (380) but the core of her argument concerns the centrality of bodily experience and of the physical world surrounding the individual in Woolf’s writing. She wants to correct what she thinks has been an over-focusing on the mediating and subordinate role of the body in modernist readings of Woolf. Seeing the experiencing body merely as mediating is to undervalue its role; Koppen says: “what I wish to remind us of... is something much more simple, namely that the ground of Woolf’s writing is the experiencing, physical body in a spatiotemporal, kinetic field” (382). Further on in the article, Koppen talks about how bodily experience is conveyed in *To the Lighthouse*: “..the truth of life and memory resides at the level of preconceptual, somatic experience.” Koppen refers repeatedly to Woolf’s attempts to capture the *dialectic* between the aesthetic/cognitive, on the one hand, and the body and physical world, on the other, and to the *grounding* of the former in the latter. Both these concepts refer to interaction, exchange or flow between the inner and outer worlds. A similar perspective is taken by Uhlmann in *Thinking in Literature*, who concentrates on the role of ‘rhythm’ and ‘sensation’ in Woolf’s art and thinking. He shows how, for Woolf, rhythm in writing - as a purely material, corporeal presence - is associated with her striving towards conveying the immediacy, the “jar on the nerves” of physical, bodily experience (90). Unlike Hussey, Uhlmann does not associate Woolf’s concept of a unified reality to the numinous or to religion, but to the potential inherent in art.

In a recent essay on Woolf’s fiction, James Harker argues that it is precisely the point of connection between the inner and outer worlds that is the author’s main concern. He describes the historical development of previous criticism on Woolf as a long period of reading Woolf as mainly concerned with the ‘inside’, followed by a period in which she has been seen as mainly concerned with the ‘outside’. But for Harker, both of these perspectives miss out what he sees as most important: “For Woolf, the modern literary experience derives from the nature of the faculties of perception, the tenuous points of connection – and

disjunction – between the inner and outer worlds” (p. 3). In Harker’s analysis, it is actually Woolf’s recurring descriptions of various characters’ misperceptions and sensory confusions that form the basis for his argument about the centrality of perception and the points of connection between the inner and outer worlds. From my reading of *A Sketch of the Past* however, it seems clear that as important as is (ordinary) confusion and misperception is the notion of direct access between inner and outer which happens in certain, privileged moments. In my view, discontinuity over time in the process of perception and in modes of being emerge as a strong theme in *A Sketch of the Past*.

In order to analyze and discuss Woolf’s concept of the real and her understanding of the relation between consciousness and the external world, I will make use of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception, which will be presented in Chapter 2. The next two chapters deal with *A Sketch of the Past*: While Chapter 3 discusses those parts of the text where Woolf narrates memories from her childhood, Chapter 4 focuses on the sections where she is more explicit about her understanding of reality and the nature of our access to it. Finally, I present my conclusion in Chapter 5.

## 2. The Entanglement of Body (Mind) and World

Phenomenology is a tradition of thought within European philosophy that investigates experience from a first-person point of view (Romdenh-Romluc 4). When first developed by Husserl and then Merleau-Ponty in the early to mid-twentieth century it challenged the dominant dualistic understanding of the nature of human consciousness and its relation to the world. The following presentation is based on (and limited to) the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) as this is presented in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, if nothing else is indicated.

The introductory part of *Phenomenology of Perception* is entitled “Traditional Prejudices and the Return to Phenomena” - a title that well captures Merleau-Ponty’s point of departure in a thorough refutation of both ‘empiricism’ and ‘intellectualism’ as tenable bases for understanding the nature of perception. He argues that both these perspectives misrepresent perception in being unconsciously based on prejudices about what is real, rather than on observations of the process of perception – observations which can only be made by the perceiving subject him-/herself. What Merleau-Ponty refers to as empiricism is the mode of (scientific) thought that assumes that the world, including the human body, can be meaningfully and comprehensively described as being made up of objects. Empiricist attempts to capture human perception describe it as a process in which objects in the surrounding world are transformed into sensory ‘representations’ which are transmitted within the body through a causal, sequential process. Merleau-Ponty argues that this approach is prejudiced in favor of the world and does not at all capture the nature of experience or perception as they really are (66). Intellectualism also understands the world to be made up of objects in the sense of entities which are externally related and interact causally. However, intellectualism sees consciousness as different; it is not just another thing in the world, not causally determined, but active. Thus, when the body has been reduced to an object, the mind becomes something entirely different. This leads to an idea of human existence made up of two modes of (parallel) being: one in which mechanical energy rules and the other governed by spiritual energy. No explanation as to how these two modes of being interact is given in conventional, empiricist or intellectualist conceptualizations of perception (68, 101).

Both empiricism and intellectualism are according to Merleau-Ponty based on ‘Objective Thought’ which comes from a tendency to give priority to the result of perception – its objects – rather than the process itself. This is a commonsense prejudice which has been substantially reinforced by the ontology and methodology dominating science. In order to



avoid being fooled by Objective Thought and arrive at an improved, less contradictory understanding of perception, the phenomenologist must suspend these prejudices as far as possible and return to the world of actual experiences and rediscover *phenomena*: “the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us” (66). The maneuver of suspending prejudices about perception is termed the ‘Phenomenological Reduction’ and can perhaps be seen as the methodology of phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty explains through relating the process of trying to grasp an object at great distance – an object which does not make sense when you first catch sight of it because it is too far away. When you approach it, you realize that it is, for instance, a tilted signpost. Once you have identified the object, however, you tend to forget all about the situation of vagueness and confusion that preceded its identification. The phenomenologist, in contrast, is interested in describing and understanding the whole process and takes the situation of vagueness and ambiguity characterizing the perceptual process seriously. Vagueness and ambiguity are seen as inherent features of perception.

Merleau-Ponty introduces the concept of the *phenomenal field*. The notion of ‘field’ signifies that the nature of perception is understood as continuous, whole and open. One aspect of this is that the sensory systems are understood to work together, rather than independently. Perceptual experience is not mechanistically put together as the sum total of its basic components, but ‘composed’ by the subject. The different qualities of the perceived object are internally related to, and thus mutually dependent on, one another. Merleau-Ponty presents an example of how we perceive the ‘colour’ of a particular patch of carpet as “wooly red” – the particular redness of the carpet cannot be specified without reference to its texture (5). Moreover, objects are never perceived without their background, never without their context. Our perception of the world does not have sharp borders between what is within its reach and what is beyond it. The external world is there as the *horizon* of the phenomenal field, something of which we are aware and can experience although it is not perceived directly. This world, that precedes perception, is ambiguous to the extent that we do not experience it as possessing any qualities at all: “It forms the background to all one’s experience; it is that indeterminate, massive presence against which things are seen” (Romdehn-Romluc 126). This world exerts a pull on us as subjects - a pull to perceive it in a certain way. One may think of the relation between the world and the subject as that between opposite poles of a system of forces (ibid. 129), mutually dependent and constitutive of each other, yet never in direct contact. From this it should be clear that the phenomenal field is not to be understood as an ‘inner’ world. It is by assessing that the phenomenal field is decisively

*not* an inner world, *not* a ‘state of consciousness’ (66), that Merleau-Ponty’s conception of lived experience becomes radically anti-Cartesian (Romdehn-Romluc 22) and anti-dualistic.

Merleau-Ponty argues for an understanding of experience and perception as *embodied*. As I understand it, this notion concerns both the relation between body and world and that between body and mind. From what has been said so far, it should be clear that Merleau-Ponty takes a strong stance against understanding the body as an object among other objects in the world. Although we at times can relate to (parts of) our bodies in this way, for instance, when we paint the fingernails of one of our hands, this is not how we normally relate to it. Our body is rather that with which we perceive, that with which we communicate with the world. Our bodies are, fundamentally, subjects:

I move external objects with the aid of my body, which takes hold of them in one place and shifts them to another. But my body itself I move directly, I do not find it at one point of objective space and transfer it to another, I have no need to look for it, it is already with me.. (108)

Furthermore, the interaction of body and world should not be understood as a sum of stimuli and reflexes. We enter the world (as bodies) with an ‘inner diaphragm’ that determines “what our reflexes and perceptions *will be able to aim at in the world*, the area of our possible operations, the scope of our life” (92). In this sense, body and world are tightly linked, are one. In addition to reflexes and abilities that we share with all other humans, that are inherent in our bodies because we belong to this species, subjects develop particular abilities and habits, what Merleau-Ponty terms ‘practical knowledge’, through living in the world. Practical knowledge is bodily knowledge which enables us to act in the world without involving conscious thought. It also largely directs our perception – the way in which we understand the world around us to invite certain actions or behavior. A person who is an experienced climber, for example, perceives a cliff before her in a different way than does a person without this experience: the experienced climber immediately sees the small crevices where her fingers and feet will fit well enough to move her up the cliff - and she will not have to *think* about this before she starts climbing (Romdehn-Romluc 84). Perception, knowledge and action are thus part of one continuous interactive process with the world, much of which does not involve conscious thought. This is an important aspect of what Merleau-Ponty refers to when he talks of the body being a form of consciousness and of meaning being already there, already present, in the moment of perception.

When it comes to the union of body and mind (soul), Merleau-Ponty tries to convey the idea of the two being aspects, or alternate phases, of one and the same process:

Man taken as a concrete being is not a psyche joined to an organism... It is never a question of the incomprehensible meeting of two causalities, nor of a collision between the order of causes and

that of ends. But by an imperceptible twist an organic process issues into human behavior, an instinctive act changes direction and becomes a sentiment, or conversely a human act becomes torpid and is continued absent-mindedly in the form of a reflex. (101-102)

The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty provides a useful perspective and conceptual framework for an analysis of Woolf's philosophy and her concept of the real. This is so, first and foremost because of Merleau-Ponty's intense concern with the nature of perception beyond our prejudices about what is real. Other reasons are the radical anti-dualistic way in which he describes the relation between subject and world and the strong focus on the body as an integral part of consciousness, the body as subject. As was briefly discussed in the introduction, life and experience as embodied is a pervasive theme in Woolf's writing. In *A Sketch of the Past*, embodied experience is perhaps given even greater prominence than in her novels, because of the important role played by early childhood memories.

### 3. Real Moments

The central argument of this essay is that Woolf's notion of the real refers to a quality of sensuous openness to the world realized at certain moments. As noted in the introduction, Woolf describes important memories from her childhood in *A Sketch of the Past* and this account is framed by a reflective discussion of the nature and significance of these particular moments. Woolf calls them 'moments of being'. The reason why she gives these early memories such a prominent place in the text seem to be that they have, due to the sheer intensity of experience, remained intact as strong memories throughout her life. To present my argument, I will first discuss Woolf's descriptions of her childhood memories and thereafter (in chapter 4) her reflections on the nature and significance of moments of this kind – and in particular how they relate to her notion of the 'real' – communicated by means of a couple of key metaphors.

An important feature of Woolf's description of her earliest memories is that sensory experience dominates the account (Koppen 379). The text opens with a brief reflection concerning the project Woolf is embarking on: the project of writing her memoirs. We are informed that her sister two days earlier gave her the impulse to begin it, by reminding her that she would otherwise soon be too old, too old to remember. The author says there are many difficulties with such an endeavour, that she does not really have a plan for it and she indicates that it is not her highest priority. But then she begins, and she begins at the beginning; with her very first memory. She remembers sitting on her mother's lap on a train or on a bus and seeing the colours of the printed flowers on her mother's dress close up. Those flowers were purple, red and blue, she says; purple, red and blue on a black ground. This first memory is significant because it is the very first, because it is of her mother, but also because it leads on (they were travelling) to a whole series of early childhood memories from the family summer home at St Ives. The first one of these is presented in the following way:

that will lead on to my other memory, which also seems to be my first memory, and in fact it is the most important of all my memories. If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive. (64-65)

This memory, Woolf's 'base memory' is almost all about sensory experience; about light, colour and rhythmic sounds of movement around her, both in the room and outside. The

feeling of ecstasy that ends her account seems to be identical to the fullness of her experience of the world around her. A bit further on in the text she returns to this memory and says that she sometimes describe it to herself as “lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow” (65). This significant memory is then extended in the text, to include other moments in the near vicinity of the nursery at St Ives at approximately the same time: the sight of her mother in a white dressing gown at the balcony outside the nursery, the passion flowers growing on the wall there. She says that if she was a painter she would paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver and green: “the pale yellow blind; the green sea; and the silver of the passion flowers.” (66) But then Woolf goes beyond her own image of painting and colour by saying that the picture would be “globular” and semi-transparent: “showing the light through but not giving a clear outline.” (66) The curved shapes, the semi-transparency and the vagueness of impressions are part of the essence of this memory, which is in fact a series of connected memories of, as it seems, unity and wholeness with vague internal and external borders. Her account thus has much in common with Merleau-Ponty’s description of the phenomenal field as continuous, whole and open. Woolf then goes on to the next, “more robust” memory:

..it was highly sensual. It was later. It still makes me feel warm; as if everything were ripe; humming; sunny; smelling so many smells at once; and all making a whole that even now makes me stop – as I stopped then going down to the beach; I stopped at the top to look down at the gardens. They were sunk beneath the road. The apples were on a level with one’s head. The gardens gave off a murmur of bees; the apples were red and gold; there were also pink flowers; and grey and silver leaves. The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked. But again I cannot describe that rapture. It was rapture rather than ecstasy. (66)

Again, it is sensory experience that comes first, and there is really very little room in her account of anything else. That she was on her way to the beach is only mentioned in passing to set the stage halfway through. Woolf writes that in these memories she is: “hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture.” (67) The tight connection Woolf makes between sensory experience and the feeling of rapture communicates an idea of rapture being there, in the world around her, or rather in her being open to it: “The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to ... hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure.” These moments of intensive seeing, hearing, smelling arrive and then they pass. Woolf presents them not as typical or representative of her childhood but as particular moments in the midst of everyday life.

One of the things I find most interesting with the way Woolf describes these very early memories from St Ives is her emphasis on how the sensory impressions are integrated. She

returns to how sound and sight memories are indistinguishable from one another over and over again: “Everything would be large and dim; and what was seen would at the same time also be heard; sounds would come through this petal or leaf – sounds indistinguishable from sights.”(66); “all these colour-and-sound memories hang together at St Ives” (66); “but sight was always then so much mixed with sound” (67). These comments bear a striking resemblance to the way Merleau-Ponty talks of different sensory impressions as being internally related (137). Moreover, in Woolf’s memoir, the sense of integration of what we normally think of as different qualities, or different sensory dimensions, goes beyond sight and sound. She describes how, lying in bed in the early morning at St Ives, she heard the caw of rooks “fall” from a great height:

The sound seems to fall through an elastic, gummy air; which holds it up; which prevents it from being sharp and distinct. The quality of the air above Talland House seemed to suspend sound, to let it sink slowly, as if it were caught in a blue gummy veil. (66)

Hearing the sound of the rooks cawing she also ‘hears’ the texture of the air in this particular place, its “gummy veil” character. Woolf’s account of her earliest memories is thus all about sensory experience - about *being*, completely, a perceiving subject - and she recurrently emphasizes the vague outline of impressions and how sound, sight and texture are integrated parts of a whole, or internally related, to use the vocabulary of Merleau-Ponty.

But all childhood “moments of being” recalled by Woolf are not characterized by rapture or ecstasy (as claimed by Olson (46)). Although the first few pages of the memoir are devoted to these moments of intense sensory delight early in her life, the atmosphere of the story thereafter shifts as memories of fear and confusion enter. She tells us about seeing her own reflection in a looking-glass in the hall at Talland House as a young child, and the feelings of ambivalence and shame in relation to her own body, which were part of these moments. She also writes in a straightforward manner, about having been sexually abused by her half brother Gerald Duckworth in the same room at about the same time. None if this is told with the intensity that characterizes the accounts of the first memories of light and sound from the nursery and garden, however. The narration gains in intensity again when Woolf writes about a series of early events, described as moments of violent emotional shock. Most of these shocks seem to have come from sudden and unguarded confrontation with cruelty and hopelessness expressed by people around her. The first is related in the following way:

Week after week passed at St Ives and nothing made any dint upon me. 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. I will give a few instances. The first: I was fighting with Thoby on the lawn. We were pommelling each other with our fists. Just as I raised my fist to hit him, I felt: why hurt another person? I dropped my hand instantly, and stood there, and let him beat me. I remember the feeling. It was a feeling of hopeless sadness. It was as if I became aware of

something terrible; and of my own powerlessness. I slunk off alone, feeling horribly depressed.  
(71)

In the midst of a fight with her brother, the young Virginia is suddenly taken hold of by a question, or perhaps rather a statement, an idea, about what is the right thing to do. This idea is immediately translated into - or perhaps rather identical to - action ("I dropped my hand instantly"). She seems to have been completely taken over by the reality of human vulnerability. Not hurting another person is in this situation not an abstract idea but a highly embodied thought-feeling-action.

Another one of these moments came as a consequence of overhearing her father telling her mother that a man called Valpy, who had recently been staying with them at St Ives, had killed himself. Later that night when she is alone in the garden by an apple tree, she experiences the horror of what she had just learned about the suicide, and she is locked into some kind of trance:

It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr. Valpy's suicide. I could not pass it. I stood there looking at the grey-green creases of the bark – it was a moonlit night – in a trance of horror. I seemed to be dragged down, hopelessly, into some pit of absolute despair from which I could not escape. My body seemed paralysed. (70)

The realization that people may kill themselves seems to take hold of her entire field of experience at this moment. The tree in front of her becomes an aspect of this terrible truth as it sinks into her and she experiences her body as paralysed.

It seems that these childhood shocks result from being exposed to the reality of pain and suffering in humans or in human relationships. Somewhat later in the text, Woolf describes an event of a similar kind, but this time from London. She had been intensely scared by an "idiot boy" when they were out in the park, he had come up close with his hand outstretched: "mewing, slit-eyed, red-rimmed" (78) and she had again been overwhelmed with horror and without a word she had poured a bag of Russian toffee into the boy's hand. The sense of horror returned the same night when she was having a bath with her sister Vanessa:

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, so that I huddled up at my end of the bath, motionless. I could not explain it; I said nothing even to Nessa sponging herself at the other end. (78)

Woolf does not explain fully this time what meaning it was that discharged itself upon her at that moment (one might speculate that it has to do with being unguardedly confronted with raw want). However, it is clear from what she says here that she understands the shocks to have been caused by her being exposed to, being open to, meanings inherent in the world around her, or in her interaction with it.

These memories stand in sharp contrast to the moments of rapture with which Woolf begins her memoir. But in spite of the contrast in emotional content, the descriptions of the two types of experiences are also similar in important ways. First, they both concern instances of full and unguarded openness to the world. Secondly, although the emotional shocks seem to be connected to, or initiated by, cognitive processes – a sudden thought, a piece of overheard information – they are at the same time described as fundamentally embodied: the paralysis, motionlessness or passivity of her body; her hand dropping when fighting with her brother, letting herself be beaten and thus giving the statement “the pain of discovering that people hurt each other” (72) a physical as well as emotional foundation and meaning.

The contrast between rapture and despair sketched so far does not fully capture the nature of Woolf’s memories of moments of being, however. There is one memory which does not fit into either of the two types, but stands out as one of its kind. It is introduced as one of the “sudden violent shocks” along with the fight with her brother and overhearing her parents about their friend’s suicide. After having told these three memories one after another, she realizes something: “now that for the first time I have written them down” (71): that two ended in despair whereas the third did not. The third memory is first narrated in the following way:

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. (71)

Although being brought in as an example of something that happened violently to her, the event ended in a state of satisfaction and this sets it apart from the other two shocks. Woolf writes that the important difference between this event and the other two probably has to do with a sense of being able to deal with the realization, the meaning, that rushed into her being when she looked at the flower, whereas she was completely unable to deal with the meaning implied in the other two shocks. What was it that she “put away” from this moment, then? I understand it to be a moment of profound realization about interrelatedness in the world. That, what we normally perceive and understand as neatly and precisely delineated objects are in reality inextricably parts of larger wholes. In that moment, by the front door flowerbed at St Ives, conventional ways of perception, the ‘prejudices’ that we perceive by (Merleau-Ponty 67), seem to have suddenly fallen away, leaving the meaning of what was there in front of her to be interpreted anew.

Woolf thus narrates her childhood as a series of moments in which she has been overwhelmed by sensory impressions and meaning. In some cases she has been overwhelmed



by rapture, in others by despair, and in the case of the flower she seems to have been overwhelmed by the interconnectedness, the wholeness of the living world. Several aspects of how Woolf describes her experience of moments of being correspond to Merleau-Ponty's description of perception as a phenomenal field: her insistence on the vagueness of impressions (in the first memories); her emphasis on how sense impressions are integrated in experience; the sense of flow and integration between subject and world which she communicates; her strong emphasis on experience as embodied. I wish to end this chapter by a quote from Woolf's very last novel, *Between the Acts*, which was composed during, or soon after the time she wrote *A Sketch of the Past*. Quite early in *Between the Acts*, she describes a moment in one of her characters' life, a moment which seems to fuse some of the most important memories of her own life. George, who is a young child, is out on a walk in the garden with the nurse:

George grubbed. The flower blazed between the angles of the roots. Membrane after membrane was torn. It blazed a soft yellow, a lambent light under a film of velvet; it filled the caverns behind the eyes with light. All that inner darkness became a hall, leaf smelling, earth smelling of yellow light. And the tree was beyond the flower; the grass, the flower and the tree were entire. Down on his knees grubbing he held the flower complete. (10)

#### 4. Metaphors of (dis-) Connection

In this chapter, Woolf's notion of the real as presented in *A Sketch of the Past* will be explored not through her account of childhood memories, but through the metaphors she uses to discuss what these memories represent in relation to life and writing. Two issues will be in focus: first, how Woolf understands the relationships between moments of being, the real and writing, and, secondly, the discontinuous character of experiential access to the real.

As mentioned before, Woolf's account of childhood memories is interrupted now and then by reflections on the wider relevance of what she remembers and why. After having written about the early memories of rapture at St Ives, Woolf enters into one such "digression", pursuing the question of what it is about some experiences that makes them stand out from all the rest. The question deserves attention since, she says, many moments that have been lost from memory ought to have been much more memorable, "one would have thought", than, for instance, the hum of bees. It is in this context that she introduces the distinction between moments of being and what she calls "non-being":

Often when I have been writing one of my so-called novels I have been baffled by this same problem; that is, how to describe what I call in my private shorthand - "non-being". Everyday includes much more non-being than being. (70)

Woolf then goes on to tell us about what she did and experienced the previous day, holding out some moments before others: of taking in the colours and texture of the world around her ("all plummy and soft green and purple against the blue"), of reading Chaucer with pleasure, etc:

These separate moments of being were however embedded in many more moments of non-being. I have already forgotten what Leonard and I talked about at lunch; and at tea; although it was a good day the goodness was embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool. This is always so. A great part of every day is not lived consciously. (70)

It is the moments of being that contribute goodness to daily life. Some of them are remembered as long as one lives. Most of the time, however, one is in a state of non-being – in a "nondescript cotton wool". In her discussion of Woolf's idea of "the cotton wool", Olson connects the notion of non-being strongly to everyday life. In my view, this is somewhat misleading, since moments of being are then associated to the extraordinary in a non-everyday sense; as in "grand action" (Olson 54). In *A Sketch of the Past*, moments of being are indeed described as moments of profound importance (though sometimes painful), but they often arrive in the midst of the everyday and should be seen as part of everyday life. But they are, by their nature, transitory. Rather than reflecting the distinction between the

extraordinary and the ordinary, I think Woolf's distinction between being and non-being is fundamentally about the discontinuity in the quality of experience characterizing our (daily) lives.

After introducing the image of the cotton wool here, Woolf then uses it many times throughout the text. The metaphor suggests that she thinks of the state of non-being as something soft and insulating, at once protective and obstructive. The emphasis is, however, clearly on the negative: the cotton wool is something which *prevents* being - it is clearly *in the way* of the more valued state. At the end of the last quote above, Woolf uses the phrase "to live consciously" as a synonym for "being". Given the character of the preceding descriptions of "being", the term conscious here does not seem to refer to a thought process per se, but rather to a quality of the contact with the surrounding world, perhaps similar to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body as a form of consciousness (see page 7).

The discussion of moments of being and non-being leads the author into an account of the memories of violent emotional shock (which she clearly also understands as moments of being) discussed in the previous chapter. From the realization, while writing, of the difference between the shocks leading to despair and those leading to satisfaction, Woolf goes on to discuss the greater significance of this in her life. As discussed briefly above, she explains the difference as having to do with the ability to deal with, and explain, the meaning that rushes into her. From this she concludes that age is important, since one has a greater power to provide an explanation through reason, as one gets older:

I think this is true, because though I still have the peculiarity that I receive these sudden shocks, they are now always welcome; after the first surprise, I always feel instantly that they are particularly valuable. 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. (72)

There are two things in this passage that are of particular interest in the context of this essay. First, what Woolf writes about the shock being "a token of some real thing behind appearances" clearly shows that she understands these shocks as privileged moments as far as *being in contact with reality* is concerned. That the cotton wool of non-being prevents being and prevents living consciously thus means it prevents (full) access to reality. The second thing I wish to draw attention to is the connection established between the 'real' and the 'whole' in the last two sentences. As in the memory of seeing the flower by the front door at St Ives and saying to herself: "That is the whole", perceiving reality is inextricably connected with the concept of wholeness. Woolf thus claims that reality and wholeness, that which can

be accessed in the privileged moments of being, can also be accessed, yes created, even, through writing. This theme is discussed by Koppen in terms of Woolf's dialectic between the aesthetic/cognitive on the one hand and the body and physical world on the other (382).

Perhaps one can understand the quote above to mean that the effort to explain through writing what has been perceived in moments of being is a way to extend such moments, a way to expand the domain of reality, of truth:

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 we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and most emphatically there is no God; we are the words, we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. (72)

The whole world is a work of art – a pattern laid bare in privileged moments – and we are part of this pattern, we are “the thing itself”. This statement can obviously be interpreted in many ways, but there is, again, a striking similarity with the ideas of Merleau-Ponty here. When he sums up his ideas about the body as perceiving subject, he writes that: “The body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art.” (174)

Most of what has been discussed thus far refers to passages from the first ten pages of *A Sketch of the Past*, a text which altogether comprises almost one hundred pages. The reason for this focus on the beginning of the text is that this is where Woolf has a clear focus on her experiences as a young child and this is also where most of her comments concerning the nature of being and reality can be found. However, towards the end of the text, she returns to the theme of reality and writing and presents another image of (what I interpret as) the privileged moments of being. She writes about her tendency to use scenes to represent a much larger whole:

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 is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is a scene—for they would not survive entire so many ruinous years unless they were made of something permanent; that is a proof of their “reality” (142)

In almost exactly the same way as she writes about the sudden violent shocks of her childhood, arriving all of a sudden “for no reason that I know about” (see quote on p. 11) she here writes about the ‘scene receiving capacity’ of hers. Woolf clearly thinks of her capacity to make the real through writing as directly connected, or the same as, her capacity to open up to reality, to ‘crack open’, at certain moments in her life. The notion of the (insulating, protective) cotton wool is here exchanged for the image of a sealed vessel afloat on the sea of the real. The two metaphors communicate similar meanings: Most of the time we are largely

protected from, or perhaps rather disconnected from, reality (Schulkind 17). Yet it is there constantly. To be connected, the sealing matter must crack, the cotton wool must be perforated.

These images, taken together with the descriptions of childhood memories discussed in the previous chapter, lead me to suggest that Woolf's moments of being could perhaps be understood as a form of phenomenological reduction. What Woolf writes about as her shock receiving capacity is perhaps an ability to spontaneously open up to, take seriously and remember "the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us" (Merleau-Ponty 66). Although this is only one of many possible ways to interpret these central metaphors, it is one which takes Woolf's emphasis on embodied experience (Koppen 382) and her focus on the point of connection between outer and inner worlds (Harker 3) seriously.

## 5. Conclusion

In this essay, I have explored the concept of the real in Virginia Woolf's autobiographical text *A Sketch of the Past*. My thesis is that the real here refers to a quality of experience characterized by sensuous openness to the world; a form of direct access and two-way flow with transformative power.

To present my argument, I have tried to show how Woolf connects the real to certain moments, what she calls 'moments of being', and that these are characterized by a quality of unguarded openness to the world. For the purpose of this analysis, I have used the perspective and conceptual framework of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and shown that several aspects of how Woolf describes her experience of moments of being correspond to Merleau-Ponty's description of perception as a phenomenal field: her insistence on the vagueness of impressions; her emphasis on how sense impressions are integrated in experience; the sense of flow and integration between subject and world which she communicates; her strong emphasis on experience as embodied.

In Woolf's account, such experiences do not characterize life or perception in general: the quality of openness resides in certain moments in a life. Woolf's distinction between moments of being and non-being is highly significant in this regard. The metaphors she uses to describe the shifts between the two, communicate the idea that most of our lives we are largely protected from, or perhaps rather disconnected from, reality, although it is there around us, constantly. To be connected, the 'sealing matter' must crack, or the 'cotton wool' removed or perforated. Woolf thus clearly regards access to the real as discontinuous rather than pervasive. Her view of discontinuity in the quality of our lives, or in our contact with the real, has not been much discussed in the literature. It is not captured by the conceptual distinction between the ordinary and extraordinary as suggested by Olson (44).

This leads me to suggest that Woolf's moments of being can be understood as a form of phenomenological reduction. Access to that "layer of living experience" which precedes our prejudices about the world and our relation to it, achieved by the phenomenologist through intentional effort, Woolf seems to have achieved spontaneously. As important as her ability to spontaneously receive these shocks of the real, however, was her ability to take them seriously and explore them, extend them, through writing.

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