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Dans un environnement marqué par la croissance, sans cesse, des productions scientifiques, la diffusion et la promotion des acquis de la recherche deviennent un impératif pour les acteurs du monde scientifique. Perçues comme un patrimoine, un héritage à léguer aux générations futures, les productions scientifiques doivent briser les barrières et les frontières afin d'être facilement accessibles à tous.

Ainsi, s'inscrivant dans la dynamique du temps et de l'espace, la revue « ***AKIRI*** » se présente comme un outil de promotion et de diffusion des résultats des recherches des enseignants-chercheurs et chercheurs des universités et de centres de recherches de Côte d'Ivoire et d'ailleurs. Ce faisant, elle permettra aux enseignants-chercheurs et chercheurs de s'ouvrir davantage sur le monde extérieur à travers la diffusion de leurs productions intellectuelles et scientifiques.

***AKIRI*** est une revue à parution trimestrielle de l'Unité de Formation et de Recherches (UFR) : Communication, Milieu et Société (CMS) de l'Université Alassane Ouattara. Elle publie les articles dans le domaine des Sciences humaines et sociales, Lettres, Langues et Civilisations. Sans toutefois être fermée, cette revue privilégie les contributions originales et pertinentes. Les textes doivent tenir compte de l'évolution des disciplines couvertes et respecter la ligne éditoriale de la revue. Ils doivent en outre être originaux et n'avoir pas fait l'objet d'une acceptation pour publication dans une autre revue à comité de lecture.

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La revue ***AKIRI*** n'accepte que des articles inédits et originaux dans diverses langues notamment en allemand, en anglais, en espagnol et en Français. Le manuscrit est remis à deux instructeurs, choisis en fonction de leurs compétences dans la discipline. Le secrétariat de la rédaction communique aux auteurs les observations formulées par le comité de lecture ainsi qu'une copie du rapport, si cela est nécessaire. Dans le cas où la publication de l'article est acceptée avec révisions, l'auteur dispose alors d'un délai raisonnable pour remettre la version définitive de son texte au secrétariat de la revue

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Le projet d'article doit être envoyé sous la forme d'un document Word, police Times New Roman, taille 12 et interligne 1,5 pour le corps de texte (sauf les notes de bas de page qui ont la taille 10 et les citations en retrait de 2 cm à gauche et à droite qui sont présentées en taille 11 avec interligne 1 ou simple). Le texte doit être justifié et ne doit pas excéder 18 pages. Le manuscrit doit comporter une introduction, un développement articulé, une conclusion et une bibliographie.

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- Le résumé (200 mots au maximum) présenté en taille 10 pts ne doit pas être une reproduction de la conclusion du manuscrit. Il est donné à la fois en français et en anglais (abstract). Les mots-clés (05 au maximum, taille 10pts) sont donnés en français et en anglais (key words)
- Le texte doit être subdivisé selon le système décimal et ne doit pas dépasser 3 niveaux exemples : (1. - 1.1. - 1.2. ; 2. - 2.1. -2.2. - 2.3. - 3. - 3.1. - 3.2. etc.)
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Les références des sources d'archives, des sources orales et les notes explicatives sont numérotées en série continue et présentées en bas de page.

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# Rewriting the self: Virginia Woolf's unconventional meta-life narrative

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**Abstract**

This article investigates Woolf's reflexive approach to autobiographical narrative as both a personal recollection and a meta-commentary on the difficulty of representing the self. Virginia Woolf's *Sketch of the Past* is not merely an autobiographical account, it is also an investigation into the nature of memory, identity, and the act of life writing itself. Here, she challenges traditional autobiographical structures by privileging her impressions over chronology, introspection over event, and fragmentation over coherence. Her use of the term *sketch* signals an intentional rejection of rigid narrative conventions, allowing her to explore the fluidity of memory and the instability of identity. The text oscillates between autodiegetic and heterodiegetic modes of narration, revealing Woolf's shifting position as both subject and observer. *Sketch of the Past* stands as a meta-life narrative, which invites readers to consider autobiography not as a fixed genre but as a space of experimentation, where the self is continually examined through language, memory, and literary form.

**Key words**: autobiographical narrative, meta-commentary, memory, identity, introspection

# Réécrire le soi : la méta-narration non conventionnelle de la vie de Virginia Woolf

**Résumé**

Cet article examine l'approche réflexive de Virginia Woolf à l'égard du récit autobiographique, considéré à la fois comme une remémoration personnelle et comme une méta-réflexion sur la difficulté de représenter le soi. *Sketch of the Past* de Woolf n'est pas simplement un récit autobiographique ; il constitue également une enquête philosophique sur la nature de la mémoire, de l'identité et de l'acte même d'écrire sa vie. Dans ce texte, elle remet en question les structures traditionnelles de l'autobiographie en privilégiant l'impression à la chronologie, l'introspection à l'événement, et la fragmentation à la cohérence. L'usage du terme *sketch* marque un rejet intentionnel des conventions narratives rigides, lui permettant d'explorer la fluidité de la mémoire et l'instabilité de l'identité. Le texte oscille entre des modes de narration autodiégétiques et hétérodiégétiques, révélant la position changeante de Woolf en tant que sujet et observatrice. *Sketch of the Past* se présente comme une méta-narration, invitant les lecteurs à considérer l'autobiographie non comme un genre figé, mais comme un espace d'expérimentation où le soi est continuellement interrogé à travers le langage, la mémoire et la forme littéraire.

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**Mots clés** : récit autobiographique, métaréflexion, mémoire, identité, introspection

## Introduction

Virginia Woolf's *Sketch of the Past* stands as a radical departure from conventional autobiographical writing. Rather than presenting a chronological account of her life, Woolf constructs a fragmented and introspective narrative that interrogates the very possibility of self-representation. Her approach is not simply to recount events, but to reflect on the mechanisms through which memory, identity, and narrative intersect. In this text, the narrator positions herself as both subject and analyst, merging personal recollection with philosophical inquiry. This process produces a hybrid text, merging memoir with meta-commentary and blurring henceforth the limits of autobiography.

Central to Woolf's autobiographical project is her use of the term 'sketch', which signals an intentional break from rigid narrative conventions. The 'sketch', unlike the structured autobiography, allows for fluidity and emotional resonance. It becomes a space where impressions take precedence over facts, and where the instability of identity is not hidden but foregrounded in her text. Woolf's narrative oscillates between autodiegetic and heterodiegetic modes, revealing her position as both narrator and observer. Through this dual perspective, she exposes the limitations of traditional life writing and proposes an experimental form. she transforms autobiography into a site of literary and philosophical exploration. By analysing her treatment of memory, narrative voice, and the tension between lived experience and its representation, we uncover a text that not only tells a life story but also interrogates the very act of storytelling itself.

Examining Woolf's approach to autobiography with the aim of analysing her writing styles, this article draws on three key frameworks: Lejeune's theory of autobiography, psychoanalysis, and narratology. Lejeune's approach to autobiography is grounded in narratological analysis, which helps assess the narrative voices and the distance between the author and her text. While narratology provides tools to analyse the structure and techniques Woolf instrumentalises to shape her narrative, psychoanalysis offers insight into the writer's psychology and her attitude toward her own life story.

### 1. The cyclical and non-linear memory structure

Virginia's approach to autobiography breaks away with classical conventions, both in form and in substance. Her conception stands in contrast to that of the French theorist Philippe Lejeune, who regards the autobiography as a reflexive act of self-writing. For Virginia, however, the autobiography carries a horizontal dimension. The "tomboy code" embodies this

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horizontality, where the self is defined through its relationship with others. Unlike a mirror that reflects a static image of the self, the eye of the other reveals a dynamic identity, one shaped through interaction. The autobiographical subject is not centred on a singular personality, but rather on a network of individuals who have come in contact with the author's life. This notion of an interrelated self is illustrated in the following example: « Ainsi, lorsque les souvenirs manquent, l'auteur a même recours à une photographie de sa sœur pour y pallier[1]» (F. Amselle, 2008). Virginia transitions from « l'art de l'enfance" to l'« enfance de l'art [2]» allows her to introduce an experimental mode of self-narration that challenges the norms of traditional autobiography (F. Amselle, Idem). Lejeune writes about chronology in The Autobiographical Pact:

> C'est la chronologie qui règle tous nos rapports avec autrui, de la vie sentimentale aux accomplissements sociaux, et qui finit par prétendre régler tous nos rapports avec nous-mêmes. Nous ne sommes constitués comme sujets que par ce rapport à autrui, et il est naturel que la chronologie, base de notre histoire, tienne une place capitale dans le récit de vie[3] » (P. Lejeune, 1975 : 222).

According to Lejeune, adhering to the chronological order of life events is essential to establishing the autobiographical nature of a narrative. The term "sketch," however, implicitly resists such order. Virginia Woolf does not structure her narrative chronologically; instead, her "Sketch" deliberately subverts linearity by capturing significant moments from her life in a seemingly random way. These moments are arranged not by temporal sequence, but by the intensity of the impressions they leave on her. As Woolf herself asserts: "the ability to see and express the poetry of the up-to-the-minute is the main task of the artist, since the aspiration to the linear narrative and the desire to construct events 'from breakfast to dinner' make the work sound false" (I. Shkola, 2019: 5). This approach reflects her engagement to a fluid and impressionistic mode of self-representation.

Virginia's life story is fragmented into memories that are revealed as the narrative progresses. Each memory represents a fragment of her life or a particular situation within it. Most of the time, there is no clear connection between these memories, resulting in a lack of coherence. The first memory begins as follows:

> - I begin: the first memory.

[1] Thus, when memories are lacking, the author resorts to a photograph of her sister to compensate. My translation
[2] the art of childhood" to "the childhood of art. My translation
[3] Chronology governs all our relationships with others, from emotional life to social accomplishments, and ultimately claims to govern all our relations with ourselves. We are constituted as subjects only through this relation to the other, and it is therefore natural that chronology, the foundation of our history, occupies a central place in life narratives. (My translation),

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> This was of red and purple flower on […]. But it is more convenient artistically to suppose that we were going to St Ives, for that will lead to my other memory, which also seems to be my first memory, and in fact it is the most important of all my memories. (V. Woolf, 1985: 64)

The first memory leads to the second, which in turn reconnects with the first. This implicit interconnection creates a cyclical structure in which the initial memory appears to begin *in medias res* of the author's narration. The cyclical nature of the narrative also explains why, at a certain point, the author abandons the numbering of her memories.

The form of the language, its content, and its style all contribute to the exposition of Virginia's life. The association of her first memory with "red and purple flowers on a black ground" (Idem, p. 64) shows that she recalls only significant moments that surface when she gives them form and consistency. Virginia assumes that a life story cannot be fully captured in a linear narrative. This is partly explained by the idea that "an entirely mimetic novel would tend to be infinitely long, and an entirely diegetic one could hardly be more than a couple of pages" (Barry, 2002: 232). In light of this, she organizes her life story into moments of being and moments of non-being: the former serving as the material for her writing. The colours she evokes in her narrative are not ornamental; they help form a mental image of the unspeakable and the inexpressible.

The idea of the autobiographer as a painter is supported by Philippe Lejeune. Unlike Lejeune, who paints with cold colours, non-colours, Virginia uses vivid and warm tones to depict her life. The transparent life that serves as material for other writings is the routine of everyday existence, which she refers to as moments of non-being. She does not compare herself to other writers, but rather to a painter who brings his drawings to life through colour. Virginia's work is vibrant and alive, in contrast to others' works, which she considers lifeless. Speaking of the painter, she writes: "If I were a painter, I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver, and green. There was the pale-yellow blind; the green sea; and the silver of the passion flowers. I should make a picture that was globular; semi-transparent" (V. Woolf, 1985: 66). Colour conveys meaning: "The deep meaning is hidden behind the colour palette, which creates an additional semantic level in the novel" (Shkola, I., 2019: 5). This semantic layering ranges from scriptural meaning to symbolic meaning (idem, p. 5). Within this semantic cosmos, memory stands as a key factor in shaping the life story.

Memory generates Virginia's perception of herself. She recalls the following fragment from Mark Gertler's comparison between literature and painting: "Last night Mark Gertler dined here and denounced the vulgarity, the inferiority of what he called 'literature'; compared with

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the integrity of painting" (p. 85). Virginia sees herself as a literary painter, offering a lettered image of her life. In doing so, she does not rely on transparent language; instead, she employs colourful words to project a vivid and living image of herself. She views herself as an artist who uses colour to exist, as illustrated in this passage: "Many bright colours; many distinct sounds; some human beings, caricatures…" (V. Woolf, 1985:79). The opening of this textual fragment with "colours" generates a meta-language within her autobiography.

The language of a conventional autobiography is surpassed by that of the sketch. In his definition of autobiography, Lejeune implicitly emphasizes the extrospective dimension of one's life story. Although he does not use the term "extrospection," his explanation calls for external observation, which is subject to verification by the autobiographer's surroundings. On the other hand, the sketch blends extrospective and introspective narratives, asserting that intimacy, impressions, sensory experiences, and the alter ego, supported by psychoanalysis, have a place in narratives about the self, or rather selves.

## 2. The Felt Life: Autobiography as a Mosaic of Memory and Identity

Autobiographical writing shifts from the concrete to the abstract, expressing the writer's inner sensations. "I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture" (V. Woolf, 1985: 67). The author embraces a novel way of speaking about the self, moving away from classical narration of events toward the expression of joy through words like 'ecstasy' and 'rapture'.

These sensations lead to the factualisation of the non-factual. The evocation of dreams, which give rise to impressions of reality, redefines her concept of moments of being. These are moments of intense impression in one's life, whether lived or dreamed. Their impact on the self determines their memorability. She writes, after a long series of self-questioning: "I cannot be sure. But I have always remembered the other face in the glass, whether it was a dream or a fact, and that it frightened me." (p.69) The final part of this sentence, beginning with "and...," suggests that the impression left by a dream or a factual event is more significant than the dream or fact itself.

The language of Virginia's autobiography must also be examined. Her story is not easily accessible to the average reader, as she weaves connections between her life and philosophical concepts. This attitude toward herself and her audience is a deliberate choice, not an unconscious impulse. She writes: "And thus as I dribble on, purposely letting my mind flow, I am introducing a picturesque element into the steel engraving; something that one cannot analyse" (p. 111). Through this statement, it becomes clear that the intended recipient

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of her life's work is not the reader, but herself. She writes to affirm her own ability to produce an autobiography that challenges conventional life narratives. By inserting undecodable picturesque elements, she confronts the autobiographical code, which advocates for an accessible account of one's life. Giving her work a picturesque dimension transforms it into a scriptural drawing, transferring to herself the role of a painter. Her writing does not merely tell; it shows. She is, in fact, fascinated by her own work, which generates a form of self-satisfaction. This paragraph aligns her scriptural libido with that of a human being, aiming to achieve the same pleasure. While she recounts her parents' and sisters' love stories, she does not dwell on her own, but rather on how she would depict them. The "picturesqueness" (p. 109) of the story stems from Virginia's ability to bestow it. Here is what she says about a story she does not feel compelled to write:

> It bores me to write of him, to try to describe him, partly because it is all so familiar; partly because it is a type that for me lacks picturesqueness, oddity, romance. That type is like a steel engraving, without colour, or warmth or body; but with an infinity of precise clear lines. There are no crannies or corners to catch my imagination; nothing dangles a spray at me. It is all contained and complete and already summed up. (p 109)

The material for Virginia's writing is not her life story itself, but rather the ability of her memory to shape it and her senses to feel it. The absence of colour, as expressed in her citations, renders a life transparent, according to her. Here, she draws a clear line between herself and other autobiographers. Where the average writer sees an opportunity to write, she perceives a complete story which does not allow her to give it form unless she rewrites it.

This section also addresses the material of her autobiographical writing, which, unlike that of her peers, includes someone else's life story. Virginia is not exclusively focused on what has happened in a life; she blends it with what is desired, transforming it into a meta-life narrative.

The incorporation of psychoanalysis into biographical writing has clarified the non-uniqueness of the self. The plurality of the self is more effectively expressed by Woolf when she presents different angles from which one might assess her birth. Here, she explains why, based solely on life events, many attempts to write about the self ultimately fail. She writes:

> Who was I then? Adeline Virginia Stephen, born on 25th January 1882, descended from a great many people, some famous, others obscure; born into a very communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate, late nineteenth century world; so that I could if I liked to take the trouble, write a great deal here not only about my mother and father but about uncles and aunts, cousins and friends. (p.65).

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The length of the sentence parallels the vast amount of information one can extract from a person's life. The repetition of the word 'born' evokes the multiple perspectives from which life can be assessed. The tomboy code, which prevented Virginia and her sister from looking at themselves in a looking-glass, transforms the gaze of each into a mirror. As a "mirror," Virginia sees herself as an assembly of identities. Her reference to a house in the citation "Little Holland House then was then her education" (p. 88) portrays her fragmented self. The house, made up of many compartments, represents the multiple identities that appear as memories in her work. It also reflects the author's techniques of recollection, which move from internal fragmentation to an external sense of wholeness. In fact, she abandons the numbering of her memories in favour of a more compact presentation.

Virginia defines her identity at the crossroads of others' identities. Her understanding of herself and her suffering are perceived through the observation of the pain experienced by her family members and relatives. Here, she does not narrate her mother's death directly; rather, she expresses the impact of her departure through the lens of other people's eyes. About her mother's death, Virginia writes:

> But beneath the surface of this particular mind and body lay sunk the other death. Even if I were not fully conscious of what my mother's death meant, I had been for two years unconsciously absorbing it through Stella's silent grief; through my father's demonstrative grief; again through all the things that changed and stopped; the ending of society; of gaiety; the giving up of St Ives; the black clothes; the suppressions; the locked door of her bedroom. (p 124)

With her mother's death, the world seems to stop for Virginia and so does the story. Her mother departed with a fragment of everyone's identity. While Virginia is able to articulate what others lost in the wake of her mother's passing, she is unable to express what she herself lost. Her inability to convey her own grief stems from the fact that she feels the grief of others. She can speak of their pain because she experiences it.

We seem not to hear Virginia's life story directly, as she aligns it with her mother's: "that is, the influence of my mother. It is perfectly true that she obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four" (p. 81). Virginia constructs a parallel between her mother and herself. She writes: "the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day's doings. She was one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life" (p. 80). We learn about Virginia through her mother's story. The verbs 'to do' and 'to say' in the second citation suggest a total appropriation of her mother's body through Virginia's ability to

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anticipate her actions and words. The merging of bodies leads to a merging of speech and action. Though these sentences are attributed to the daughter, they also seem to stem from the mother's mind.

Virginia views this state of total dependence as a kind of illness, a psychological disturbance. She sees herself as a patient, burdened by the weight of her mother's identity. She writes: "I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest" (p. 81).

Psychoanalysts treat their patients with words. According to them, healing can occur simply through speaking in front of a psychoanalyst (Peter Barry, 2002). By laying out and explaining her thoughts to herself, Virginia assumes both roles: the patient and the analyst. Her 'Sketch' becomes a confession, akin to what Christians perform before a priest in pursuit of spiritual salvation.

Autobiography, as a journey, is subject to discovery. The latter is prospective rather than retrospective in its recounting of life. The trip with her mother described on page sixty-five serves this purpose. The phrase 'if I begin to go through them' evokes a form of defence. 'To go through' implies a movement, a displacement, then a voyage. This reflects Woolf's evolving conception of autobiography:

> I see it - the past - as an avenue lying behind;
> -"I suppose that my memory supplies what I had forgotten, so that it seems as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen" (V. Woolf, 1985: 67).

The material for writing about the self is based on the supply of memory: it is an abstract material. The extraction of that material is shaped by moments of being, moments of non-being, and a third category, moments that lie in the future, sustained by the words "I am really making it happen."

For Virginia, autobiography is an atemporal form of writing, in which the writer stands in the present to speak about the past. The present plays a significant role in her narrative. To emphasize its importance, she begins one of her memories with the words "the present" (p. 107). Faithful to her conception of autobiography, the word *present* dilutes the purity of the concept. It serves as both a rupture and a reminder of the autobiographer's ability to step into the present. The citation continues:

> The present. June 19th 1940. As we sat down to lunch two days ago, Monday 17th, John came in, looked white about the gills, his pale eyes paler

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> than usual, and said the French have stopped fighting. Today the dictators dictate their terms to France. Meanwhile, on this very hot morning, with a blue bottle buzzing and a toothless organ grinding and the men calling strawberries in the Square, I sit in my room at 37 M[ecklenburgh] S[square] and turn to my father. (p 107)

This citation alternates between present and past tenses, producing the effect of the writer losing control over language. It is difficult to determine whether this textual fragment addresses the present or the past. Nevertheless, the opening and closing of the citation in the present tense suggest that the past is embedded within the present. For Virginia, autobiography is also about the present, calling therefore for a "presentification" of the concept. This approach explains why she allows herself to comment on her life story while writing it. The present also renders the story more vivid, detaching it from the buried past it portrays.

> I twisted my hair, imitating him. "Father does it," I told my mother when she objected. "Ah but you can't do everything father does," she said, conveying to me that he was licensed, for he was somehow not bound by the laws of ordinary people. (p 111)

The segmentation of the narrative is implicit. This unveils a chaos embedded in a fragmented work, sustained by the serial disclosure of the author's thoughts. It is difficult to keep track of the names in the *Sketch*, as Virginia shares her impressions of anyone who ever came into contact with her. Even though she judges certain individuals as incomplete and therefore not worthy of being written about, the mere mention of their unworthiness adds consistency to her writing. This creates a chaotic narration in which every name introduces a new story.

Virginia's work relies on the supplement of her memory, which is tied to her capacity for recollection. Fear of losing that ability drives her to establish her life story as a monument. In doing so, she invokes the concept of being and non-being, supported by the idea of the "cotton wool" of daily life (p. 72). She addresses the question of memory's reliability at the beginning of her work. Summoning the past requires revisiting it, which also functions as a journey. The prefix 're' implies a reshaping of the stream of facts. The unreliability of memory results in an unreliable narration, shaped by a flawed recollection.

Virginia's work is based on impression rather than logical organization. Reading her writing gives the impression that she is expiating her sins. She confesses before an absent reader, and in doing so, selects significant moments from her life. This particular writing strategy leads her to digress, recounting events that left a strong impression on her. The result is a narrative that seems to escape her control.

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In recollecting her memory, Virginia chooses the word "caricature" (p. 74) instead of description. Both aim to represent a figure, but while description is conveyed through words, caricature is picturesque. Virginia offers vivid portrayals of her characters, compelling the reader to visualize them. Here is an example:

> One more caricature comes into my mind; [...]. I am thinking of Justine Nonon. She was a hunch-back; and walked like a spider, feeling her way with her long dry fingers from one chair to another. Most of the time she sat in the armchair beside the fire. I used to sit on her knee; (p. 74).

This citation gives the impression of a déjà-vu. The two definite articles (the) suggest that the described item has already been introduced, which is not the case. The flexibility of memory allows it to escape the control of ordinal and structural sequencing. As Virginia progresses with her life story, she abandons the structured presentation of memory initially introduced at the beginning of each paragraph with precise ordinal numbers. The phrase "another memory" (p. 68), within the stream of her consciousness, introduces a bifurcation of memories. The memory within the memory, expressed in the sentence: "[...] for that will lead to my other memory, which also seems to be my first memory..." (p. 64), leads to a disorganisation of the narrative. It is less a reconstruction of the past than a meditation on the self.

The 'Sketch', as a philosophy of one's life, blends various writing techniques, ranging from familial autobiographies to friendship biographies. The opening scene of the work serves as a signal. There, although the writer's interlocutor asks her to stop writing about others and begin her own story, the narrative does the opposite: it prepares the reader to encounter both techniques throughout the text. Unlike Lejeune's autobiography, which establishes its veracity outside the text, Virginia's autobiography establishes its truth from within.

With Woolf, memory does not shape the narrative; rather, the narrative shapes her memory. Depending on the sensation she wishes to convey, she erases the boundaries between literary categories. She frequently employs reported speech, which lends her thoughts greater vivacity as if she were engaged in a silent dialogue with the absent subject of the narration. This technique renders her story more descriptive than narrative, giving the impression that she does not filter information, as though the processes of thinking and writing occur simultaneously. Explanation hinders narration, so that the beginning of the 'Sketch' becomes indistinguishable from its end.

On page ninety, and in many other parts of *The Sketch*, the author shifts from autodiegetic to heterodiegetic mode of narration. The narrator forgets herself and focuses solely on recounting others' stories. Her work becomes a boundaryless autobiography, mimicking both

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the novel and the biography. She reproduces what she critiques in other authors attempting to write autobiographies. At times, Virginia adopts the posture of an omniscient narrator, one who has prior access to the inner thoughts of the character being depicted. Virginia is able to read her mother's feelings because there has been a transfer of emotion from mother to daughter, viewed through a psychoanalytical perspective. This emotional transfer also implies a transfer of soul, as emphasized in the following citation:

> I was playing. I stopped, about to speak to her. But she half turned from us, and lowered her eyes. From that indescribably sad gesture I knew that Philips, the man who had been crushed on the line and whom she had been visiting, was dead. It's over, she seemed to say. I knew, and was awed by the thought of death. At the same time I felt that her gesture as a whole was lovely. (V. Woolf, 1985: 90)

The textual extract above highlights Virginia's ability to perceive her mother's inner thoughts and feelings. Without her mother uttering a single word, she is able to accurately sense a situation preceding her mother's sadness. A word like 'indescribably' closes the door to rational perception and instead calls upon the senses. The verb 'felt', placed at the end of the citation, establishes a connection between mother and daughter; the former acting, the latter feeling and expressing.

### 3. Questioning the Form: Toward a Meta-Life Narrative

The autobiographical project of Virginia Woolf is also about the difficulties of writing an autobiography. Her preoccupation lies not in the content of the autobiography, but in its narrative technique. This approach produces a text that speaks for itself. Here, she reveals several difficulties:

> Here I come to one of the memoir writer's difficulties – one of the reasons why, though I read so many, so many are failures. They leave out the person to whom things happened. The reason is that it is so difficult to describe any human being. So they say: "This is what happened"; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened. (V. Woolf, 1985: 65)

Virginia discusses the writing strategies of autobiographies. In doing so, she divides autobiographers into two categories. The first, writing classical autobiographies, centres their narratives on the life of the subject. The second, of which she identifies herself, privileges the subject itself. She thus calls for an actualization of the autobiography. For her, the life stories produced by the first category are misleading and ultimately failures. Virginia advocates for an introspective life narration, which stands in opposition to the extrospective narration, typical of classical autobiographies. This stance explains why she favours extensive descriptions of the characters, rather than recounting their everyday routines.

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Virginia expresses the need to free herself from conventional terminology that restricts the boundaries of writing about the self. The word 'sketch', situated halfway between the autobiography and the autography, offers her the opportunity to escape the war of terminologies. The well-structured autobiography, adhering to the constraints of narrative order, becomes merely "an orderly and expressed work of art" (p. 75), written to beautify, hence its artistic dimension. Such an autobiography, observing the past from the present, faces the difficult task of merging two entities of the same self: *I* yesterday and *I* today, bringing them into a unified whole. The 'presentification' of the past, which leads to its actualization, is one of Virginia's key writing strategies.

Virginia's life story must pass through her imagination in order to become writeable. She brings her story into being by giving her memoir literary consistency. She writes

> […] I find that scene making is my natural way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged; representative. This confirms me in my instinctive notion – it is irrational; it will not stand argument – that we are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is a scene. (p. 142)

Here, Woolf does not aim to reconstruct factual truth; rather, she constructs a system of images that enables her to evoke emotional and existential truths. Her posture aligns with that of a linguist who makes the distinction between the signifier and the signified. Just as the first is a literary device to represent the latter, she too brings into play her own literary device to talk about her life.

Virginia's objective shifts from portraying the self as the object of her writing to treating her life story as the object. The narration evolves from an autodiegetic mode to a heterodiegetic one, in which the narrator gradually fades, abandoning her own story to focus exclusively on that of others. This shift can be observed in many parts of the book, particularly in the first paragraph on page ninety, which serves as an example. There, the narration moves from precision to imprecision, alternating pronouns such as it*,* she*,* her*, and* there.

Virginia Woolf's autobiographical project in *Sketch of the Past* operates as both a narrative and a critical reflection on the act of life writing. In this text, Woolf positions herself simultaneously as a homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator: she speaks of herself in the first person while also referring to herself in the third. This dual perspective underscores the meta-narrative dimension of her work, where the self becomes both the subject and the object of inquiry. Rather than simply recounting her life, Woolf assumes the role of a guide, exposing the mechanics of autobiographical writing. Her life story becomes a specimen, a pedagogical

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tool for the reader as a student, illustrating the challenges inherent in representing the self. She writes about the difficulty of capturing lived experience in language:

> I could spend hours trying to write that as it should be written, in order to give the feeling which is even at this moment very strong in me. But I should fail (unless I had some wonderful luck); I dare say I should only succeed in having the luck if I had begun by describing Virginia herself. (p. 65)

Here, Woolf does not narrate her life directly; instead, she comments on the impossibility of doing so, foregrounding the tension between intention and execution. The act of writing becomes a subject in itself, a process of negotiation between memory and form. By blending narration and criticism, Woolf challenges the conventions of autobiographical writing. Her text does not merely recount events; it interrogates the very possibility of self-representation, shifting the focus from the life lived to the life narrated.

**Conclusion**

Virginia Woolf's Sketch of the Past isn't just a story about her life. It is a reflection on the nature of autobiographical writing and the evolving task of self-representation. Through her fragmented, introspective, and philosophically structured narrative, Woolf dismantles the traditional expectations of the autobiography. She refuses the linearity and coherence typically demanded by the genre, opting instead for a form that embraces ambiguity, emotional resonance, and the stream of consciousness technique. Her use of the term 'sketch' is reflective of this resistance: it signals a deliberate departure from formal narrative toward a more open and exploratory mode of expression.

By positioning herself at the same time as narrator and critic, Woolf transforms her life story into a meta-life narrative that does not only narrates but interrogates the very act of narrating. Her work challenges readers to reconsider the nature of autobiographical truth and the limitations of literary form. She oscillates between autodiegetic and heterodiegetic modes, emphasizing impression over event. Her philosophical reflections on identity contribute to a text that is as much about recounting as it is about lived experience. In *Sketch of the Past*, Woolf invites readers to witness the self not as a fixed entity, but as a constellation of memories and perceptions. Her work stands as a turning point in autobiographical writing, opening new pathways for introspective and experimental life writing in the modern era.

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