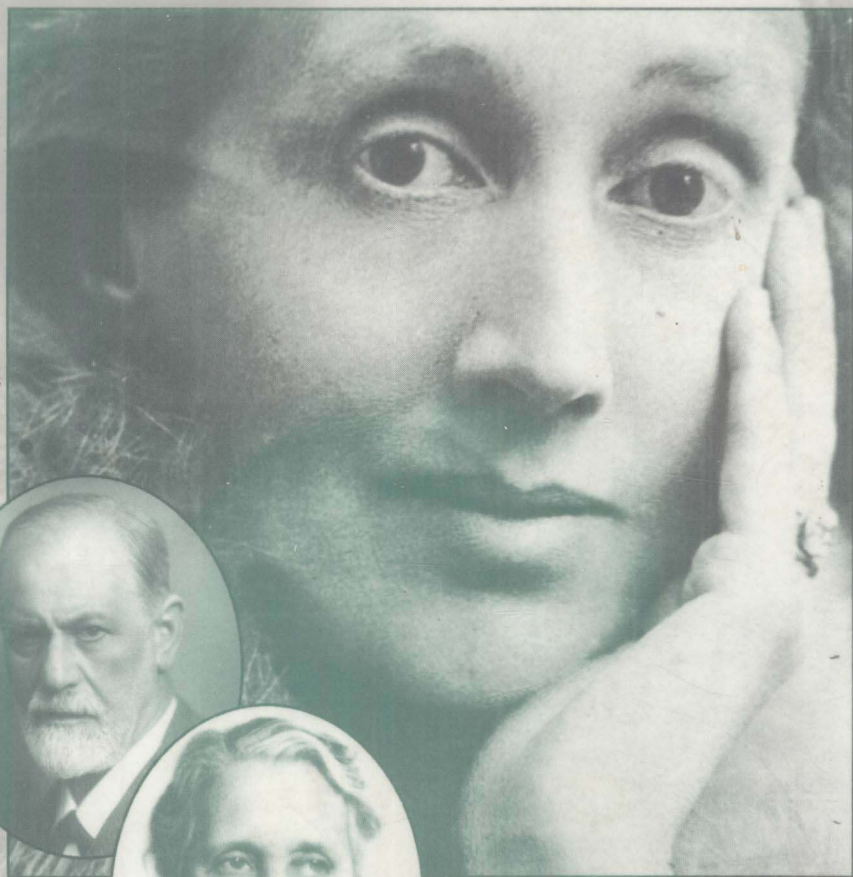


# Virginia Woolf AND THE Fictions of Psychoanalysis



Elizabeth Abel

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Virginia Woolf  
AND THE  
Fictions of Psychoanalysis

Elizabeth Abel



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For my parents  
Marion Buchman Abel  
Reuben Abel

and in memory of my aunt  
Rebecca Bookman Weisberg

## FOREWORD

Spurning a single identity, postmodernism spawns contradictory images of what it might be. Often, it seems a wild young thing, at home in the carnival. From time to time, however, it seems a dour scold, at home in a bare room, stripped of the furniture and bric-a-brac of illusions. Among the most fixed if ornamental of illusions, much postmodern theory asserts, is the belief that we can seek and name our origins, no matter how hidden they might be. This belief assures geneticists that they can legitimately trace biological and biochemical lines of descent back to their beginnings. It assures genealogists that they can, as legitimately, trace lines of descent for a family, be it of blood or thought, back to their beginnings. Beware, a postmodernist might warn, one may find little that is reliable besides the fact that the names of both enterprises have a common Greek root, the verb “to engender” or “to procreate.”

In 1882, the year in which Virginia Woolf was born in London, Sigmund Freud was twenty-six, learning medicine in Vienna. Each was, of course, a formidable architect and carpenter of modernity. For many who have inherited their works and deeds, they are, as well, prophets of the instabilities and discontents of postmodernity. The issue of origins—of consciousness, culture, creativity—was to compel each of them. So did the meaning and nature of sexual difference. Both Freud and Woolf conjoined the questions. They asked, for example, how a child’s recognition of sexual difference arose; how forcefully that perception might then engender an individual sense of identity, a work of art, a society. The

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language of their answers was literary. They wrote, not equations, but narratives; not with formulae, but metaphor.

The Hogarth Press, which Virginia and Leonard Woolf began, published Freud in English. Members of her immediate family helped to found psychoanalysis in Great Britain. Nevertheless, Woolf overtly resisted it as theory and therapeutic practice. Her apparent aloofness was deceptive. In *Virginia Woolf and The Fictions of Psychoanalysis*, this polished and incisive book, Elizabeth Abel discovers and recovers the ways in which Woolf's stories "echo and rewrite the developmental fictions of psychoanalysis." So doing, Abel is a dazzling navigator among various currents of discourse that could both run with and against each other, that were both complements and competitors.

In the 1920s, Woolf offered a visionary, deep alternative to Freud's "paternal genealogies." To *the Lighthouse* plays Freud off against that alternative. Like some British anthropologists, whom Freud refused to accept, she could construe a matricentric, rather than a patricentric, commencement of human culture. Famously, she urged women writers to think back through their mothers. As Abel demonstrates, her narratives about mothers did resemble those of at least one psychoanalyst, a woman, Melanie Klein, born, like Woolf, in 1882, whose ideas were ultimately to touch such feminists as Jessica Benjamin, Nancy Chodorow and Jane Flax. In 1925, the year in which Woolf published *Mrs. Dalloway*, Klein was reconstructing the power of the mother over her children in a series of lectures to the British Psycho-Analytic Society. The mother can both feed her children and deprive them of the milk of life. Klein delivered her lectures, not at a university, nor in a hall, but at the home of Adrian and Karin Stephen, Woolf's brother and sister-in-law.

In the 1930s, however, Woolf turned from the figure of a mother's ambivalent daughter and returned to the figure of a father's ambivalent daughter. In part, she feared the Fascist celebration of "The Mother." She read Freud skeptically, but seriously. In a stunning passage, Abel compares Woolf's last novel, *Between The Acts*, to Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*. Both are "crisis texts" that tell of a world that is ending. In despair, Woolf believed that Fascism marks the triumph of patriarchy, to her the source of disorder and barbarism. As inconsolably, Freud believed that Fascism marks the decline of patriarchy, to him the containment of disorder and barbarism.

In Greek and Roman culture, Psyche, the soul, was invariably a female figure. Grammatically, her name in Greek was a noun of feminine gender. In the late seventeenth century, when English started to deploy the word "psychology," the soul had mostly metamorphosed into the mind, a psychic and mental organism, and men were more apt than women to be granted mental powers. After the late nineteenth century, when Freud gave us that word "psychoanalysis," his narratives ratified such an

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unhappy custom. Strong and supple, elegant and precise, *Virginia Woolf and The Fictions of Psychoanalysis* is too aware of complexity, too balanced between the riot of the carnival and the drone of the scold, to endorse any founding narrative of the origins of consciousness, culture, creativity, and sexual difference. This book does show how greatly Woolf, like Klein and her school, nurtured our understanding of women's psychologies. Such narrators also proved, since proof seemed to be necessary, how grandly women might think; how bountifully and bumptiously a revisionary Psyche might analyze love and work, their mergers and ruptures, and their rocky, fluid narratives.

Catharine R. Stimpson

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By offering me a teaching position in 1982, the Department of English at the University of California, Berkeley, gave me both the time

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## PREFACE

We do Virginia Woolf's novels a disservice if we accept too readily her protestations about narrative: "[T]his appalling narrative business of the realist," as she called it, "getting on from lunch to dinner."<sup>1</sup> For much as she disdained and suspended the conventions of plotting observed by her Edwardian precursors, Woolf was obsessed with the experience of living in time. "I ask myself sometimes," she muses in the same diary entry, "whether one is not hypnotised, as a child by a silver globe, by life. . . . I should like to take the globe in my hands and feel it quietly, round, smooth, heavy, and so hold it, day after day. I will read Proust, I think. I will go backwards and forwards." Sharing Proust's conviction that the present gains depth by assimilating the past, Woolf hollows out a fictional space whose plots she invites us to discern.<sup>2</sup>

New modes of plotting demand new reading habits. "For the moderns," Woolf warns her readers, "'that,' the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology. At once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors. . . . [A]nd then, as the eyes accustom themselves to twilight and discern the shapes of things in a room we see how complete the story is."<sup>3</sup> Woolf's own readers must learn to detect, beneath the flux of consciousness she substituted for realist narrative, fictions that tie the present to the past that slides beneath it.

Woolf's discovery of a technique for rendering the stereoscopic play

of time made *Mrs. Dalloway* a breakthrough novel. Though *The Voyage Out* and *Jacob's Room* had plunged into subjectivity and radically revised closure as death, they had adapted their new conception of character to the linear structure of the Bildungsroman. In composing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf discovered her famous “tunneling process,” which enabled her to “tell the past by installments,” as she needed them, to “dig out beautiful caves” behind her characters, to evade the tyranny of sequence by reshaping time as depth.<sup>4</sup> Even when her novels resume a more straightforward course from infancy to age, memory repeatedly realigns the present with the past, proliferating histories. We detect these pathways to the past by refocusing our gaze on unemphatic moments, on faint variations among recurrent metaphors, on near repetitions of sentences and scenes which gesture toward stories that are never told.

These stories echo and rewrite the developmental fictions of psychoanalysis. *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* examines and contextualizes this exchange within the historical moment Woolf shared with Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein. Although Chapter 1 maps Woolf's lines of access to the psychoanalytic culture that emerged in London in the 1920s, the book is less concerned with influence than with intertextuality. Woolf, as we will see, was familiar with the debates unfolding within British psychoanalysis, but rather than addressing them specifically, she engages in her novels the set of terms that generated the debates. Reading across the discourses illuminates them both. By alerting us to certain recurrent but submerged narrative tensions in Woolf's texts, psychoanalysis helps make us the discerning readers she desired. Woolf's fiction, in turn, de-authorizes psychoanalysis, clarifying the narrative choices it makes, disclosing its fictionality.

Woolf's engagement with psychoanalysis was deeply embedded in history. Increasingly through the 1920s—the major decade of her career, and the primary focus of this study—Woolf's narratives move backward toward a maternal point of origin that Freud, in the same decade, both acknowledged and occluded and that Klein mapped with greater complexity. In the 1930s, however, Woolf swerved abruptly, although reluctantly, from Klein toward Freud as the ideologies of motherhood that flourished in the 1920s and that fostered her critique of Freud were appropriated and irretrievably contaminated for her by the fascist state. By no means a static configuration, Woolf's relationship to Klein and Freud shifts dramatically in the course of the two decades that mark her career. My project is to highlight and to explicate the signal moments that (re)define the shape of this career.

The book opens with a chapter on the gendering of narrative in psychoanalysis, anthropology, and literature in the 1920s. Freud's construction of the Oedipal narrative, Klein's excavation of the early mother-infant bond, and the rival anthropological claims for an originary

matriarchy or patriarchy constitute a gender discourse of which Woolf was aware and in which her texts participate. The next three chapters focus more sharply on the multiple narratives within Woolf's two most celebrated novels. Chapter 2 plays the submerged story of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Clarissa's evolution from Bourton to London, against the Oedipal narrative Freud wrote contemporaneously. Chapters 3 and 4 move forward (chronologically) and backward (psychologically) to *To the Lighthouse* (1927), whose diverse inscriptions of the family romance make it the richest text for my inquiry. These chapters tease apart the novel's patriarchic and matricentric narratives and locate at the level of the individual sentence Woolf's dense and complex play with genealogy. Chapter 3 maps the effects of gender on the central Ramsay children, James and Cam; Chapter 4 shifts to Lily Briscoe's painting, whose spatial relations articulate the boundary negotiations that shape the mother-infant bond.

The more deeply Woolf excavates the relation with the mother, the more intense the ambivalence she uncovers, and the greater her affinity with Klein. Her most conflicted vision finds expression not in the vulnerable private sphere of the autobiographically grounded *To the Lighthouse* but in the more mediated discourse of her nonfiction texts. I turn next, therefore, to *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf's most explicit, extended, and hostile celebration of matrilineage. *Room* marks the end of an era; in its sequel, *Three Guineas* (1938), the female subject becomes the "daughter of an educated man." Reading the discursive texts together, the project of Chapter 5, reveals the central disjunction in Woolf's career to be a shift from maternal to paternal genealogies.<sup>5</sup> The obsession with the father in *Three Guineas* both reflects and reinforces Woolf's new interest in Freud.

The book concludes with a reading of the final full-length works of Woolf and Freud, texts composed in the spreading shadow of fascism's victories. Woolf read Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1934–38) as she began to write *Between the Acts* (1939–40). In this final intersection is a final irony: the mother whose absence haunts *Between the Acts* and fuels the unwilling turn to Freud represents for Freud a catastrophic return of the repressed.

Freud, Klein, and the theorists who extend them are major figures in this book, but Woolf defines its center and shapes its plot. Her novels determine which psychoanalytic fictions will be scrutinized, and when. The scrutiny is also skewed. Dispersed through multiple discursive texts, psychoanalytic narratives are most coherently assembled at some distance from their contexts. I use the psychoanalytic essays to articulate, and to interrogate, certain narratives; but I read the literary narratives as texts.

The question of Woolf's relation to psychoanalysis has usually been posed as either a question of her response to Freud or of her anticipation of a mother-based theory. I try in this book to resist such a simple opposition

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by tracing the trajectory of Woolf's engagement with the developmental narratives of both Klein and Freud. By playing these narratives against each other, I seek to dislodge the binary construction of the encounter not only between Woolf and psychoanalysis but also between literature and psychoanalysis as criticism habitually couples them.<sup>6</sup> Woolf encourages the practice of triangulation: the differences within her texts invite a heterogeneous psychoanalytic reading; and the differences among her texts, the reversal in the hierarchy of narratives in the course of her career, solicits an account of the ways that history mediates literature's negotiations with psychoanalysis.

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## (EN)GENDERING HISTORY

The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths. In those moments I find one of my greatest satisfactions, not that I am thinking of the past; but that it is then that I am living most fully in the present. For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper . . .

Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past"

Psychoanalysis, after all, is primarily a narrative art, concerned with the recovery of memory and desire.

Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*

Woolf's novels are thick with a variety of pasts. Each character cherishes a different history, and different fictions connect these pasts to the present. By rendering the past primarily through memory, Woolf diversifies it: the pasts reconstructed in part 3 of *To the Lighthouse*, for example, differ from one another and from part 1. Evading the grip of a unitary fiction, analogous in her eyes to the ego's tyranny, Woolf generates heterogeneity not only by shifting narrative perspective but also by pluralizing history.

Each character, nevertheless, reverts to certain privileged memories that Woolf marks formally in ways she suggests in her own autobiographical essay, significantly entitled "A Sketch of the Past": "I find that scene making is my natural way of marking the past. Always a scene has arranged itself: representative; enduring. . . . Is this liability to scenes the origin of my writing impulse? . . . [I]n all the writing I have done, I have almost always had to make a scene."<sup>1</sup> In her fiction, Woolf transmits this strategy for marking the past to her characters. Constituted by a minisequence of self-contained actions within a constant visual space, the fictional scenes create a sense of closure, temporal and spatial, enabled by the work of memory. Against the flux of the present, these scenes, "representative; enduring," yet not accentuated, provide backdrops whose distance from the present the characters' baffled backward gaze solicits us to bridge.

Although Woolf's scenes are typically fashioned unselfconsciously, the narrative positions them deliberately. Lily Briscoe, Woolf's closest fictional representative, wonders in part 3 of *To the Lighthouse* why a scene

of herself, Mrs. Ramsay, and Charles Tansley on the beach ten years earlier has “survived, ringed round, lit up, visible to the last detail, with all before it blank and all after it blank, for miles and miles.”<sup>2</sup> Never represented in the present, the scene is tangential to the central narratives. Yet despite her bewilderment at its arbitrariness, Lily suggests why this scene is encircled and preserved: in this moment of uncharacteristic harmony between herself and Charles Tansley (the only scene in which she calls him Charles), she perceives Mrs. Ramsay’s capacity to resolve “everything into simplicity,” to make “of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)” (239, 241). The moment’s distillation from the blur of memory launches Lily’s revision of her relationship with Mrs. Ramsay, a relationship whose history is rendered only through discontinuous scenes.

Woolf also voices through Lily the anxieties of scene making. To enclose moments and endow them with (in Lily’s words) “a wholeness not theirs in life” (286) is to tamper with the reality of change and veer dangerously close to the “nuggets of pure truth” whose abstraction from history Woolf satirizes in *A Room of One’s Own*.<sup>3</sup> The necessity of making scenes to hold the past, one’s own or others’, renders the products no less fictive: “[T]his making up scenes about them, is what we call ‘knowing’ people, ‘thinking’ of them, ‘being fond’ of them!” Lily scoffs as she half recalls and half creates the marriage of Paul and Minta Rayley. “Not a word of it was true; she had made it up; but it was what she knew them by all the same” (258). Intimating the theater and the performance of roles more crisply outlined than the heterogeneous psyche, the distillation of experience to scenes is as suspect as it is gratifying. Hence Woolf plays the clarity of scenes against their dissolution into consciousness. Scenes narrate in her fiction by their failures to encapsulate history, by the discrepancies within them and among them. Rather than arresting narrative, they are vehicles of stories that hover in a potential literary space which the reader articulates within Woolf’s texts.

Attending to stories unrecounted in Woolf’s texts honors her own insistence on the places of silence in literary discourse. Woolf calls attention to the “sidelong” ways, the strategies of evasion, the tactics for provoking us “to supply what is not there” that contribute to her assessment of Jane Austen as the “most perfect artist among women.” Had Austen lived, Woolf speculates, “she would have devised a method . . . for conveying not only what people say, but what they leave unsaid. . . . She would have been the forerunner of Henry James and of Proust—but enough.”<sup>4</sup> The silence following Proust’s name coyly marks Woolf’s own place in this lineage. From her first fictional portrait of a novelist, Terence Hewet, who wants to write “a novel about Silence; the things people don’t say,” to her final novel, in which shreds of conversation dangle on the page and “silence add[s] its unmistakable contribution to talk,” Woolf

conforms to the aesthetic she attributes to Austen, who “by not saying something . . . says it.”<sup>5</sup>

By requiring her reader to fabricate the links among scenes, Woolf adapts a modernist strategy she projects retrospectively on a female precursor. Of the modernists, she is as always closest to Proust. Yet if Proust translates his obsession with fragments of “pure time,” apprehended in the difference between past and present moments, into a narrative technique that stimulates the reader to generate characters from discontinuous stills, Woolf juxtaposes scenes to produce not synchronic understandings of character but fictions that join a moment in the present to its antecedent.<sup>6</sup> It is no accident that Austen is constructed as Proust’s precursor, for Woolf qualifies her alliance with literary modernism by allegiances to narrative and to matrilineage.

Woolf’s interest in the fictional shapes of private history peaked in the mid-1920s, when her narrative breakthroughs freed her from a pre-determined chronology and allowed her to explore the multiple links that join the present to the past. As she tunneled backward, she encountered the points of origin marked by mother and father. Powerful private sources fed her representation of origins: until her death Woolf preserved what she called her “child’s vision” of “those old people—I mean father & mother—how simple, how clear, how untroubled.”<sup>7</sup> Magnified, and in Woolf’s case quintessentially gendered, the parents seen from childhood stand as untroubled—yet troubling—figures of origin. “Until I was in the forties . . . 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,” Woolf insists. “Yet he [her father] too obsessed me for years. Until I wrote it out, I would find my lips moving; I would be arguing with him; raging against him; saying to myself all that I never said to him.” “I was obsessed by them both unhealthily; and writing of them was a necessary act.”<sup>8</sup> Woolf’s discourse elevates this private necessity to an axiom of subjectivity: the mind, she explains in *A Room of One’s Own*, “can think back through its fathers or through its mothers” (101).

By exploring the consequences of this choice, Woolf joins in the narrative project on which psychoanalysis was embarking concurrently. In the central decade of her career, Woolf’s narratives interrogate Freud’s. “A woman writing,” the sentence from *Room* concludes, “thinks back through her mothers.” By questioning the paternal genealogies prescribed by nineteenth-century fictional conventions and reinscribed by Freud, Woolf’s novels of the 1920s parallel the narratives Melanie Klein was formulating simultaneously and anticipate the more radical revisions that emerged in psychoanalysis over the next half century.<sup>9</sup>

The challenge Woolf’s fiction poses to Freud was bolstered by the discourse on gender and history that flourished in London in the 1920s. During this decade the developmental narratives emerging within psycho-