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Mirroring and Mothering: Reflections on the Mirror Encounter Metaphor in Virginia Woolf's Works

SUSAN SQUIER

“Age had brushed her, even as a mermaid might behold in her glass the setting sun on some very clear evening over the waves.”¹ This mermaid gazing into her mirror presides as muse over the remarks which follow, where I will explore the image she embodies, one which recurs in Virginia Woolf's fiction, memoirs, and essays and is crucial to her feminist theory, yet which is never fully explicated. This important image is the mirror encounter. We may be most familiar with its form in the novels: time after time we have shared that brief moment of communion between Clarissa Dalloway, Rachel Vinrace, or a fictional sister and her looking-glass. Or perhaps we've read Woolf's own moving description of a youthful episode of mirror-gazing, in her painfully honest autobiographical essay, “A Sketch of the Past.” Then, we will remember Woolf's extended analysis of male-female relations, *A Room of One's Own*, where it appears as the encounter between man and woman-as-magnifying-mirror. But familiar as we are with its many varieties, the mirror encounter's role in Woolf's fiction and feminist theory remains fully to be understood. With the mirror-gazing mermaid to guide me, I will explore the psychological and feminist

This essay was written before the publication of Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*.

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significance of the mirror encounter, and then show how an understanding of this image illuminates Woolf's contributions as an artist and a feminist thinker.

I begin my exploration with three hypotheses: (1) that there are two forms of the mirror encounter which figure significantly in Woolf's work: the encounter between a woman and a mirror, and the encounter between a man and a woman-as-mirror; (2) that in her creation of the mirror encounter as image of current gender relations in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf touched on the central cause for woman's oppression and—perhaps more important—her complicity with that oppression; and (3) that Woolf's interest in the mirror encounter springs from a psychological and aesthetic commitment to confront and accept ambivalence—in character, experience, and art. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf wondered whether an understanding of the mirror encounter between men and women could “help explain some of those psychological puzzles one notes in the margins of daily life.”² To show how it can do so is the aim of this essay.

Life for both sexes—and I looked at them, shouldering their way along the pavement—is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking that other people are inferior to oneself. . . . Hence the enormous importance to a patriarch who has to conquer, who has to rule, of feeling that great numbers of people, half the human race indeed, are by nature inferior to himself. It must indeed be one of the chief sources of his power. But let me turn the light of this observation on to real life, I thought. Does it help to explain some of those psychological puzzles one notes in the margin of daily life? Does it explain my astonishment the other day when Z, most humane, most modest of men, taking up some book by Rebecca West and reading a passage in it, exclaimed, “The arrant feminist! She says that men are snobs!” The exclamation, to me so surprising—for why was Miss West an arrant feminist for making a possibly true if uncomplimentary statement about the other sex?—was not merely the cry of wounded vanity; it was a protest against some infringement of his power to believe in himself. Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be

unknown. . . . That serves to explain in part the necessity that women so often are to men. And it serves to explain how restless they are under her criticism; how impossible it is for her to say to them this book is bad, this picture is feeble, or whatever it may be, without giving far more pain and rousing far more anger than a man would do who gave the same criticism. For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he to go on giving judgement, civilising natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is?³

In this striking image, Woolf suggests that woman's role as magnifying mirror for man may help to explain the "psychological puzzles" of everyday life: man's anger, even when he possesses disproportionate social power; woman's powerlessness. In the autobiographical essay, "A Sketch of the Past," Virginia Woolf describes herself as puzzled by another mirror encounter, the cause, she thinks, of the intense shame she always felt when looking at her own face in a mirror. This encounter occurs in a sort of dream: "I dreamt that I was looking in a glass when a horrible face—the face of an animal—suddenly showed over my shoulder. I cannot be sure if this was a dream, or if it happened. . . . But I have always remembered the other face in the glass, whether it was a dream or a fact, and that it frightened me."⁴ The mirror holds a Janus face for Virginia Woolf. In the looking-glass faces of women, man finds a figure which consoles and motivates him, forces him to the work of civilization while at the same time permitting him the solace of private, primitive godhead. In contrast, a young girl is transfixed, cornered by the horrid mirror image of a beast, at once before her in the depths of the glass and behind her, *gazing over her own shoulder*. To woman, the mirror reveals no comparable consoling, semidivine image of the self.

Puzzling in its variety, the mirror encounter challenges us first to discover what it means for the individual in his or her "perpetual struggle" called life. To Woolf, it is first of all the source of that precious self-confidence without which "we are as babes in the cradle."⁵ Psychoanalytic theorists have generally shared this view, attributing both the origin of language use and the structure of the adult character to that first moment when the child sees his or her reflection in a mirror. But most importantly, for D. W. Winnicott, the mirror encounter provides the individual with the first experience of human relatedness. "In individual development," he explains, "the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face."⁶ One day, the nursing infant

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cradled in the mother's arms looks up into her face; what the infant finds there can shape the child's future personality and action in the world. Even at that early stage, the mirror experience is ambiguous and complex, however. In the mother's face, the baby desires to see not merely that familiar image of the other, but the unfamiliar image of the self. "Ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words, the mother is looking at the baby and *what she looks like is related to what she sees there.*"⁷ The experience shapes itself as an encounter, a moment of relatedness both within the self and between self and other. Such an experience establishes the crucial distinction between apperception and perception. If apperception, the process of understanding something with reference to oneself and one's past experience, does not occur—either because the mother is preoccupied and reflects only her own mood or because she is rigidly unresponsive—the child's capacities for creativity may atrophy and he or she will be forced to find other ways of reclaiming a self from the world, being limited now to the static, isolated realm of perception. The encounter with the mirror represents or replicates the early meeting with the self in the mother's face and lays a foundation for the child's sense of self and the awareness of relatedness which will enable him or her to adjust and flourish as an adult.

The moment of mirror-gazing reflects the individual's inner world, signaling that all goes well there or, by its exaggerated importance, indicating a disorder in the individual's psychic world. When the experience of looking into a mirror produces undue anxiety or undue pleasure, that will suggest to a psychoanalyst that the process of knowing oneself and of making sense of prior experience has been reduced to the static experience of seeing, rather as if the individual's experience had obeyed Mrs. Ramsay's injunction, "Life stand still here."⁸ In contrast, a satisfying mirror encounter, like its precursor in that shared gaze of mother and child, links self and other; past, present, and future.

Our two perspectives on the mirror encounter hitherto have been distinctly different; we have compared the theoretical formulation of a psychoanalyst to the insights of an essayist and novelist. Winnicott's focus, in his treatment of the mirror encounter, is the psychology of individual development, whereas Woolf uses the image to explore adult social experience in *A Room of One's Own*. Still, their accounts of the mirror encounter possess remarkable similarities. First, both understand the mirror as analogous to a woman's face. For Winnicott, that mirroring mother's face creates confidence in the infant in the early

months of life; similarly, Woolf tells us that the adult man finds the self-confidence he needs for the difficult adventure of human life in the complexly satisfying mirroring interaction with a woman. Then, both Woolf and Winnicott link the experience to nourishment, both physical and psychological: the baby at the breast first knows the mirror as the mother's face, into which he or she gazes while nursing and which soothes and consoles; the adult man looks across the table, "at breakfast and at dinner," to see himself reflected, reassuringly, "at least twice the size he really is."⁹ Finally, both Woolf and Winnicott find the mirror encounter a useful metaphor for a human transaction which can be either rewarding or depleting both to individuals and to society. Originally, that contact occurs between mother and child; later, the transaction is an analogue of that primal contact. Both thinkers share the following assumptions, then: that mirroring is largely something women do, and that the experience of mirror-gazing *can provide* psychological sustenance.

"Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size."¹⁰ Woolf's metaphor reminds us of the problem: any sustenance which the mirror encounter provides in this culture is usually given to men by women. Two questions arise when we consider our special, culturally defined form of the mirror encounter. First: why do men need women to serve as magnifying mirrors, and so sustain them psychologically? Second: why do women comply with man's request so to serve him? Our survey of the psychoanalytic meaning of the mirror encounter, and of the more primitive mother-child interaction of which it is an analogue, reminds us: "In individual development, the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face."¹¹ Further study of our current difficulties in gender relations will reveal a devastatingly simple fact: such difficulties find their origins in the very situation which Winnicott's formulation takes for granted; that the earliest tie between a child and a nurturing adult is characteristically formed with a woman. "Her face is the first whose expression changes reciprocally with [the child's] own."¹²

The mother-monopoly of early infant care produces an adult society suffused with anger, oppression, and fear, Dorothy Dinnerstein has argued. Virginia Woolf found this reflected in another sort of social mirror, the evening paper. "The most transient visitor to this planet . . . who picked up this paper could not fail to be aware . . . that England is under the rule of a patriarchy. Nobody in their senses could fail to

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detect the dominance of [man]. His was the power and the money and the influence. . . . With the exception of the fog he seemed to control everything. Yet he was angry."¹³ Dinnerstein's analysis of the mother-monopoly's effect on society helps to establish both the cause for man's anger and the effect of woman's complicity. The results of woman's dominance of infant care are: (1) both male and female children come to identify the mother with the nonhuman natural world from which, at an early stage, they had difficulty differentiating themselves; (2) both male and female infants struggle with ambivalence toward the mother: they feel not just love, but also intense rage and hatred for that powerful figure who never completely satisfies the intense needs all dependent infants feel. As they grow older, and recognize the figure of the father, they frequently resolve their ambivalence toward the mother by directing to the father their feelings of warmth, closeness, love, and gratitude; to the mother they relegate their negative feelings, particularly the anger and hatred resulting from unmet needs. The implications of this primitive split in feelings are complex and long-lasting, affecting the most widespread societal relations and the most intimate sexual relationships. But, most important for our purposes, (3) the adult man comes to see all women as both threatening repositories of the awesome power of the early mother and as contemptible embodiments of the subhuman, embarrassingly carnal, mortal self. Thus, adult men attempt to control women as a way of achieving belated control over that disconcertingly free mother whom they once jealously wanted to possess completely; adult men attempt to enforce dependency on women as a way of denying the dependency they once felt on their seemingly all-powerful mothers. We now know why men need women to act as magnifying mirrors: because men need to combat that primitive image of themselves as weak, needy creatures; because men desire to control and even to humiliate the woman figure who enforced that early powerless self-image. Men need women to serve as magnifying mirrors in order to fight off the continuing, debilitating suspicion that they are never free of their primitive longing for that powerful mother figure.

A string of related, minor puzzles which Woolf mentions in *A Room of One's Own* is unraveled once we acknowledge the force of man's reaction formation against his early infant dependency. "That is why," Woolf tells us, "Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge."¹⁴ Yes, and women *must* magnify men; other-

wise, man fears, he will be once more a weak and helpless creature, under the formidable power of the omnipotent mother.

That serves to explain in part the necessity that women so often are to men. . . . how restless they are under her criticism; how impossible it is for her to say to them this book is bad, this picture is feeble, or whatever it may be, without giving far more pain and rousing far more anger than a man would do who gave the same criticism.¹⁵

Yes, because the criticism of a woman invokes once more that earliest, most devastating criticism—the mother's.

It is during this . . . period of purposefully expanding competence and knowledge, when our willful "I'ness" is growing sharp and distinct, that we discover an additional basis for that combination of resentment and need which is destined to form part of our permanent stance toward female authority: *Woman is the first teacher. She is our first guide into the realm of socially pooled human experience that constitutes the human world.*¹⁶

That accurate criticism of our early, necessarily flawed first steps into the human world rankles forever for men, who lack the adult experience of making peace with the critic by becoming a mother. So civilization itself rests upon man's continuing conviction that he has surpassed his mother, that *he* now dominates *her*:

For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he going to go on giving judgement, civilising natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is?¹⁷

Virginia Woolf does not ask the second question in *A Room of One's Own*: she does not wonder there why women agree to play that degrading and time-consuming role of magnifying mirror for men. But in another essay, written in 1940 when the pressure to understand the sources of difficulty in individual and international relationships had grown even greater, she comes close to an answer. "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" asks us to "think peace into existence," an urgent plea echoed almost forty years later by Dorothy Dinnerstein, when she asks us to "fight what seems about to destroy everything earthly you love—to fight it not passively and autistically, with denial; and not unrealistically, with blind force; but intelligently, armed with your central resource, which is passionate curiosity."¹⁸ In "Thoughts on Peace," Woolf resolves to continue "mental fight," or "thinking against the

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current, not with it." But what is the current? Slowly and painstakingly she defines it in this brilliant, brief essay: patriotic propaganda, projection, denial of our own unconscious aggression. "Who is Hitler? What is he? Aggressiveness, tyranny, the insane love of power made manifest. . . . Destroy that, and you will be free."¹⁹ Against those attempts blindly to deny our own complicity in the murderous global situation, Woolf urges us to confront and try to understand our unexperienced or unarticulated impulses, which she names "subconscious Hitlerism." These forces intertwine oppression with submission; they embody the relationship between victim and oppressor which perpetuates destruction and oppression in our world. To undo that complex, perhaps even obscurely satisfying system, Woolf suggests, one must "think against the current" of society's basic structure; one must "switch off" the "instincts."

In her understanding that a supportive relationship exists between "instincts" as different as aggression and nurturance, Woolf has come close to identifying the source of the personal and social difficulties which produce oppression and war. Yet this passage in "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" can be obscurely troubling; students of mine have objected that in her attribution of the "murderous" instinct to men and the mothering instinct to women, Woolf embodied the very oppressive sex-role stereotyping she sought to combat. Rather, Woolf describes both drives as social products, "fostered and cherished by education and tradition," and explores the way in which the behavior of men and women must change "for the sake of humanity, for the peace of the world." Paradoxically, in order to call a halt to the rampant power-mongering of men, women must themselves relinquish some of their circumscribed, but highly valued, power. Woolf's analogue to the difficult struggle to limit male instincts is surprisingly apt; "child-bearing should be restricted, the maternal instinct subdued."²⁰ This is important not in order that women have less power, but that men be given more responsibility of a specific kind; that men learn to exercise the power of mothering, which is life-giving, nurturant, rather than death-dealing and destructive. "We must create more honorable activities for those who try to conquer in themselves their fighting instinct, their subconscious Hitlerism," Woolf argues. Thinking "against the current," she envisions a society in which men no longer need to exercise power over others (particularly, but not exclusively, women) in order to prove their superiority to the omnipotent mother. Why? Woolf's analysis is not explicit, yet she *suggests* that men will learn to be nurturant themselves, through sharing with women the

experience of child care. Then, no longer alienated from an internal source of nurturance and security, men will no longer need to "enslave."

What of women, however, "slaves who are trying to enslave," who primp in shop windows, staring entranced at their reflected seductive glory, "women gazing; painted women; dressed-up women; women with crimson lips and crimson fingernails"?²¹ How can it help them if the maternal instinct is subdued? Will that free them from their seemingly inexplicable complicity in their own oppression? To answer that, we must backtrack once again to explore the origins of that complicity, the mother-monopoly on child care. Such a situation produces unarticulated, sometimes unconscious ambivalence toward the mother; adult women, under the influence of such long-lasting feelings, may find themselves curiously eager to contribute to their own oppression. Having, as infants, channeled toward the mother all the rage and hatred resulting from unmet needs, and from the inevitable ambivalence toward carnal mortality, as adults women may feel an unconscious gratification at the oppression of women. Any woman who is humiliated, controlled, or ill-treated may unconsciously experience her situation, with strange zest, as the humiliation, control, or ill-treatment which she herself unconsciously wished to inflict in her first relationship—with her seemingly all-powerful, uncontrollable mother. Similarly, since women quickly associate the positive feelings arising in their childhood relationships with the father, men (even when tyrannical) may seem to adult women to be more rational, more moral, more fully human than women. The result of the mother-monopoly is a singularly efficient collusion between men and women to maintain the male power monopoly and the institutions of female oppression.

If women give up the power of exclusive mothering, Woolf's essay implies, they will gain something. The later analysis of Dorothy Dinnerstein tells us more fully what that gain will be. Freed from the exclusive position of caretaker, women will be freed as well from the exaggerated burden of rage and hostility such a position inevitably invites. They will no longer enjoy seeing other women humiliated, for they will no longer feel within themselves the unconscious desire to humiliate that powerful mother: they will no longer revere men and despise women, for they will no longer be able conveniently to split their love from their hate, making men the sole recipients of those loving feelings. In short, both women and men will be forced to integrate what has previously been split, to learn to tolerate ambivalence.

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Making one's peace with ambivalence is the task, too, of many of Virginia Woolf's characters: Clarissa Dalloway, Lily Briscoe, even Virginia Stephen as she portrays herself in *Moments of Being*, learning to know and let go of her powerful mother. In this complex and delicate endeavor of peacemaking, once again the mirror encounter plays a crucial role. And once again, it appears in its varied embodiments: we see women gazing into looking-glasses, into faces of friends, into their own souls for that important reflection of the self. Jeanne Schulkind sees such a revelatory reflection as the accomplishment of Woolf's fiction, the enabling act of her autobiographical writing.

In the first section [of the memoir essays] Julia Stephen, Virginia's mother, is an enigmatic, revered, perhaps slightly resented, certainly distant figure who, though dead some dozen years, remains for the daughter a powerful, almost obsessive presence, but is not after all very credible. When Virginia Woolf writes again of Julia in "A Sketch of the Past," long after the cathartic experience of writing *To the Lighthouse*, she does so with perception and understanding gained partly, no doubt, through abandoning the unwitting subterfuge of reverence and honestly confronting her feelings toward her mother in all their ambivalence and complexity. As a result, both Julia Stephen and Virginia Woolf are much more fully realized. . . .²²

Once again, the mirror encounter is a moment of relationship; embodied here in Woolf's recurrent portraits of her mother in both memoir and fiction, a successful mirror encounter results in both selves being "more fully realized." Apperception produces accurate perception. Freed from her need to feel only love for her mother, able now to see her as in some ways deficient (because she could be cold; because she willingly was overburdened; because she at times assumed the role of martyr), Virginia Woolf created a portrait of her in "A Sketch of the Past" which overflows with her mystery, her "extraordinary excitement." We see her: "for there she was."²³

Much of Virginia Woolf's ambivalence toward her mother resulted from Woolf's need for more care than her busy, burdened mother seemed able to provide. "I see now," Woolf wrote in "A Sketch of the Past," "that she was living on such an extended surface that she had not time, nor strength, to concentrate, except for a moment if one were ill or in some child's crisis, upon me, or upon anyone. . . ."²⁴ That relationship between caring and being cared for is also of central significance in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The novel's climactic moments turn on a rearrangement of those roles: Septimus Smith breaks out of his un-

willing dependence on Doctors Holmes and Bradshaw with a gesture of defiant independence—"I'll give it you!" he shouts as he leaps from the window—and Clarissa Dalloway allows herself respite from her duties as nurturant hostess for a moment of soul-solacing meditation on death and the meaning of life.

If one of the accomplishments of Woolf's fiction and memoirs might be described as the acceptance of her mother's infallibility, one of Clarissa Dalloway's accomplishments during the long day we spend with her is a confrontation both with her own fallibility and with the strength of other people to whom she can turn for care. The contrast between two mirror encounters reflects this change in Clarissa. In the first mirror encounter, Clarissa's traditional attitude toward herself dominates. She faces the looking-glass "always with the same imperceptible contraction! . . . tries to be the same always, never showing a sign of all the other sides of her, faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions. . . ." ²⁵ Septimus' suicide gives Clarissa another perspective on herself, however; when she hears of his death she feels a moment of empathic oneness. "She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. . . . He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun." ²⁶ Paradoxically, Septimus opens Clarissa's eyes to the beauty and fun of life by showing her the opposite: death, pain, her own flawed character. He acts as a mirror, revealing to her those "other sides" of herself: "She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable. She had wanted success." ²⁷

To many readers, Clarissa's self-condemnation may seem unduly harsh, and it may seem impossible that Woolf would blame Clarissa for Septimus' depression and suicide. Nor does she: the novel shows both characters to be the victims of "subconscious Hitlerism," the vicious circle of oppression and complicity which characterizes patriarchal society. Yet Woolf's introduction of Clarissa's self-criticism, during this meditation on Septimus' suicide, points again to the importance of confronting ambivalence in the struggle to know oneself. Clarissa's transcendence of that "pointed, dartlike, definite" persona makes her mysteriously stirring. "What is this terror? What is this ecstasy?" Peter Walsh thinks: the ambivalence of his "extraordinary excitement" bespeaks the final, full reflection of Clarissa Dalloway.

The struggle to reclaim a full image of the self is Lily Briscoe's struggle, too, in *To the Lighthouse*. Mrs. Ramsay's death changed the shape of the world for Lily, and of her self as well:

. . . once the looking-glass had held a face; had held a world hollowed out in which a figure turned, a hand flashed, the door

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opened, in came children rushing and tumbling; and went out again. Now, day after day, light turned, like a flower reflected in water, its sharp image on the wall opposite.²⁸

Active involvement in family life and in the world has been sadly cut short with Mrs. Ramsay's death. More ominous still, Lily's own secure possession of her self—that self which greets her in the mirror—has receded with the death of that mirroring mother figure. Lily struggles against this loss of self as she paints her picture, attempting to re-create her own image as she imaginatively creates one for Mrs. Ramsay. "Alone. The grey-green light on the wall opposite. The empty places. Such were some of the parts, but how bring them together? she asked." Lily remembers the light cast by that poignant, empty mirror; with the death of Mrs. Ramsay life seems both empty and fragmented, no longer unified and made vital by her powerful creativity. "Suddenly [Lily] remembered . . . There had been a problem about a foreground of a picture. Move the tree to the middle, she had said. She had never finished that picture. She would paint that picture now."²⁹ Lily's own loneliness, the sad light cast by the empty mirror, the emptiness at the heart of life: all of these aspects of life without Mrs. Ramsay prompt Lily to take refuge in her art. But art is more than just a refuge. Confronted and relived in the lengthy and difficult course of her painting, Lily's needy feelings no longer overwhelm her. Freed of her dependence on Mrs. Ramsay to mirror—and so create—her, Lily is freed from her compulsion to serve the same role for others. The most memorable sign of this is her refusal to play magnifying mirror for grief-stricken Mr. Ramsay, her choice to "praise his boots when he asked her to solace his soul."³⁰

Lily learns to solace her own soul in *To the Lighthouse*, to grow out of a dependence on Mrs. Ramsay which is exaggerated, even destructive, precisely because of the woman's monopolistic position as mothering source of life energy for her family and friends. "The whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on [Mrs. Ramsay]. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it, nobody would do it."³¹ Woolf questions this myth of "the sterility of men" in *To the Lighthouse*, showing us a collaborative effort of creative insight embodied in Mr. Ramsay's trip to the lighthouse and Lily Briscoe's painting. Through their separate tasks, the man and woman learn together to live as adults, without Mrs. Ramsay's support. Having been cared for, they can now care for others.

To the Lighthouse and *Mrs. Dalloway* employ several varieties of the mirror encounter familiar to us already. We see the looking-glass itself,

whether reflecting a face or poignantly empty; we also see characters acting as mirrors for each other, reflecting repressed or denied aspects of the self in a powerfully nourishing way. Both novels, like Woolf's own memoirs, move beyond the dissatisfying state of incomplete or limited encounter with a mirror, or with the mirroring face of another, to the more complex and satisfying experience of being in relation—Clarissa with Septimus' spirit, Lily Briscoe with Mr. Ramsay, Lily and Mr. Ramsay with the spirit of Mrs. Ramsay. Mirror encounters assist the characters in their attempts to accept the full, varied life of the self. Clarissa Dalloway imagines herself "a grown woman coming to her parents who stood by the lake, holding her life in her arms until it became a whole life, a complete life. . . ."³² Her mirrors—both the mirroring lake and the metaphoric mirrors of her parents' faces—allow her to gather that large globe of experience together in a meaningful whole. That rich accumulation of self-knowledge, that ability to respond to what is seen with the whole pressure of history and environment and conscious awareness which we call apperception, is the true gift of the satisfying mirror encounter.

Yet in stressing Woolf's interest in that fictional confrontation with the self and acceptance of its ambivalent nature, I have not meant to suggest that the mirror encounter plays a wholly positive role in her fiction, receiving its critique only in her feminist essays. Individuals suffer from painful, hostile, or sterile meetings with that reflecting face or mirror, and Woolf shows the awful aridity of a similarly unsatisfying mirror encounter in her devastating short story, "The Lady in the Looking-Glass." Tempting though it may be to read this as autobiography—for the thin, patrician woman whose mirrored reflection provides the subject of this story *does* bear some resemblance to Virginia Woolf—accuracy compels us to read this rather as an alternative autobiography. We have not the record of a life, but the nightmarish description of a life that could have been, had things been different. Instead of the vivid, vital woman with the choking, hooting laugh, we see the pale, elusive "spinster"; the contrast reminds us of the course of Woolf criticism itself, which Roger Poole argues has been crippled by its inability to respond empathetically, showing us the invalid gentlewoman of Bloomsbury when we ought to have seen the lively, creative presence.³³ Sympathetic understanding too often deserted Woolf's family, friends, and critics, in Poole's view. Similarly, sympathetic understanding eludes that evocative looking-glass in Woolf's story. Mystery and fable, glimpses of travel, love, memory—the ambivalence of life itself—characterize Isabella as long as she strays in her

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garden, out of the mirror's range. Facts fail to explain her, nor do poetic phrases about "convolvulus and travellers' joy" comprehend her. Yet when she comes into the mirror, she loses both mystery and meaning:

At once the looking-glass began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to leave only the truth. It was an enthralling spectacle. Everything dropped from her—clouds, dress, basket, diamond—all that one had called the creeper and convolvulus. Here was the hard wall beneath. Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody.³⁴

Many of Woolf's stories turn on a moment of unexpected vision, when the world is revealed to us in a startlingly new form and meaning. "Moments of Being" and "The Searchlight" show the transforming power of different kinds of love; "Solid Objects" and "Kew Gardens" explore the revelatory potential of a new spatial perspective; "Lappin and Lappinova" and "The Legacy" consider the distorting power of a personal mythology. "The Lady in the Looking-Glass" shows a similar demystification of experience, and its moment of revelation possesses an unmistakably positive zest: "It was an enthralling spectacle."³⁵ Yet here we find what David Ferry has called, in another context, a "hostility" between the manifest and hidden meanings of the story, "as if the 'surface' meanings . . . were a beautiful and intelligible message, apparent at once, and as if hidden in that message there were clues to a 'deeper' meaning, still more beautiful though in some ways at odds with the message one had read at first."³⁶ The single-sentence paragraph with which the story ends provides such a clue to multiple meanings, for it splits the agency in the story between an observer, who appreciates the mirror's demystification of Isabella, and a looking-glass which acts with sinister, semi-human powers. "People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms."³⁷ Woolf's conclusion suggests that the human responsibility for Isabella's "unmasking" ends with the placement of the looking-glass; the pitiless revelation which follows must be blamed not on a human observer, but on an inanimate object. Therein lies the subterranean significance, the brilliant tautology of "The Lady in the Looking-Glass." Woolf's story enacts a psychoanalytic apothegm: the perceiver's state of mind colors what is perceived. Here, where the perceiver is literally a piece of furniture, we are not—on some level—surprised to find the object of perception wooden, without

thoughts, friends, or human preoccupations. This mirror encounter replaces apperception with perception.

The antagonistic pleasure that the observer takes in such a dehumanizing substitution of depleted for full experience is puzzling at first; it would seem more natural for the observing narrator and her character to band together as potential victims of the frightening, inhuman force of the looking-glass. Yet when we remember that "[the] precursor of the mirror is the mother's face," we are less puzzled by this development.³⁸ The brutally unresponsive mirror reminds us of a mother's face; frequently unresponsive, with the almost sinister expression of sadness in repose, the faraway fixity: "How monotonous, they would say, and the same type always!"³⁹ There is "enthraling" pleasure in seeing a woman whose desk is stuffed with letters from friends, whose life revolves around charity visits and dinner-table conversations, whose days are interrupted intermittently with thoughts of the "futility and evanescence of things"—a woman, in short, very much like Julia Duckworth Stephen—receive the same treatment from her mirror that Woolf herself may have at times received from her mother's unresponsive face. Psychoanalysts tell us that a baby whose mother's face is fixed in a mood of her own will be threatened with "chaos," and will "organize withdrawal, or will not look except to perceive, as a defense. A baby so treated will grow up puzzled about mirrors and what the mirror has to offer. If the mother's face is unresponsive, then a mirror is a thing to be looked at but not to be looked into."⁴⁰ In short, one will take care not to "leave looking-glasses hanging in [one's] rooms."⁴¹ The zest which one senses in the demystification of Isabella is that inevitable pleasure at the humiliation of the mother, an emotion which will be inescapable as long as society permits, or decrees, the mother-monopoly on child care.

"Age had brushed her, even as a mermaid might behold in her glass the setting sun on some very clear evening over the waves."⁴² Woman's half-beast, half-human nature; her vanity; her incorrigible complicity in her own oppression: all of these qualities which our muse evokes originate in the important fact that our first mirror encounter will characteristically be with a woman. The two salient qualities of mirroring—that it is largely something women do, and that it can provide psychological sustenance—are both defined and limited by our cultural situation. So, now as in 1929, for women the mirror encounter is too often depleting rather than sustaining. Like Isabella in "The Lady in the Looking-Glass," like Virginia Woolf before her critics,

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women find themselves ignored, humiliated, or stripped of full self-hood when they confront their image in others' eyes. Most brutal of all, the same experience awaits them when the reflecting gaze is their own. That depletion or denial of a woman's identity is the ultimate product of the mother-monopoly's pathological legacy, the hatred and fear of women. Similarly, the sustenance that men find in their mirror encounters with women reflects the love and respect for men which the same mother-monopoly ultimately fosters.

In her fiction and essays, Virginia Woolf addresses these experiences, exploring the ways in which the mirror encounter bespeaks our earliest relationships and reveals the primary problem of gender relations, that vicious circle of oppression and complicity she calls "subconscious Hitlerism." Mirror scenes in Woolf's fiction reveal subterranean themes of confrontation with ambivalence, transfer of the caretaking role, and revenge for unresponsiveness, for these are all aspects of the adult woman's struggle to achieve a more satisfying relationship with her mother and, thereby, with herself.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's description and critique of the magnifying-mirror relationship of women to men addresses a new interest in contemporary feminist theory: the sociocultural implications of the mother-monopoly. However, it also anticipates the insights of psychoanalytic theory in its understanding that a relationship exists between the maternal "instinct" and the "instinct" of male aggression, and in its exploration of the varied ways the mirror encounter can nurture or deplete an individual's sense of self. Woolf was aware, of course, of the harmony between her work as an artist and the work of psychoanalysts, for she wrote of her accomplishment in *To the Lighthouse*, "I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts [sic] do for their patients."⁴³ In her treatment of the mirror encounter, Virginia Woolf did more than "unravel" some "psychological puzzles," however. Her work as a feminist in the early years of this century gives shape and substance to the work of feminist theorists today.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1925), p. 264.

² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1929), p. 35.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," *Moments of Being* (New York: Harcourt, 1976), p. 69.

⁵ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 35.

⁶ D. W. Winnicott, "Mirror-Role of Mother and Family," *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1974), pp. 130-38, p. 130. In the discussion

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of the psychoanalytic significance of the mirror encounter which follows I draw my understanding from Dr. Winnicott's formulations in this article.

- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- ⁸ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), p. 240.
- ⁹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 36.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- ¹¹ Winnicott, "Mirror-Role of Mother and Family," p. 130.
- ¹² Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977), p. 33.
- ¹³ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 33–34.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, pp. 171–172.
- ¹⁷ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 36.
- ¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid," *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1970), pp. 243–48, p. 243.
- Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, p. vii.
- ¹⁹ Woolf, "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid," p. 245.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 247.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.
- ²² Jeanne Schulkind, "Introduction," *Moments of Being*, pp. 11–24, p. 13.
- ²³ The phrases are, of course, from *Mrs. Dalloway* (p. 296); the experience is an important one in several of Woolf's works, as my discussion which follows will show.
- ²⁴ Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," p. 83.
- ²⁵ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 55.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 283–84.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 282.
- ²⁸ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 194.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 220.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- ³² Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, pp. 63–64.
- ³³ Roger Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978).
- ³⁴ Virginia Woolf, "The Lady in the Looking-Glass," *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), pp. 87–93, p. 93.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ David Ferry, cited in Max Byrd, *London Transformed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1978), p. 122.
- ³⁷ Woolf, "The Lady in the Looking-Glass," p. 93.
- ³⁸ Winnicott, "Mirror-Role of Mother and Family," p. 130.
- ³⁹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 290–91.
- ⁴⁰ Winnicott, "Mirror-Role of Mother and Family," p. 132.
- ⁴¹ Woolf, "The Lady in the Looking-Glass," p. 93.
- ⁴² Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 264.
- ⁴³ Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," p. 81.