

“Thoughts without words”: Silence, Violence, and Memorial in Woolf’s Late Works

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1. **D**iscussing the paintings that hang in Pointz Hall in *Between the Acts*, the retired colonial officer, Bart Oliver, wonders why it is that the English are so apparently uninterested in and uninformed about visual art. His sister, Lucy Swithin, argues that it is not that they are uninterested but that “we haven’t the words”: “Behind the eyes; not on the lips; that’s all.” Her point baffles her brother: “Thoughts without words,” he muses, “can that be?”¹
2. The short answer to Bart Oliver’s question, in the light of neuroscientific research such as that popularized by Antonio Damasio, is “yes.” According to Damasio, sensation *is* thought; in terms of brain function, an “image” is “a mental pattern in any of the sensory modalities; e.g. a sound image, a tactile image, the image of a state of well-being”.² In addition to such images, Damasio writes in *The Feeling of What Happens*, “there is a presence of you in a particular relationship with some object”³: “the presence of you is the feeling of what happens when your being is modified by some object”.⁴ Language, Damasio holds, “is a translation of something else, a conversion from nonlinguistic images which stand for entities, events, relationships, and inferences”.⁵
3. Virginia Woolf many times identified the matrix of her art as “thoughts without words.” In “On Re-Reading Novels,” an essay first published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1922, but also posthumously in a heavily revised version, she proposes that “the ‘book itself’ is not form which you see, but emotion which you feel”.⁶ And in several reflections on her own creative process, we can identify some version of this idea: thought begins, she tells Vita Sackville-West in 1926, “without words”: “A

1 V. Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 38.

2 A. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, 9.

3 *Ibid.* 10.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.* 107.

6 V. Woolf, *Collected Essays*: 2, 126.

sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it”⁷; in a letter of 1930 to Ethel Smyth, she explains that “one’s sentences are only an approximation, a net one flings over some sea pearl which may vanish; and if one brings it up it won’t be anything like what it was when I saw it, under the sea”.⁸ For Woolf, perception precedes conception: the “greatest book in the world,” she reflected in her diary in 1926, would be “made entirely solely & with integrity of one’s thoughts,” captured before they become “works of art”.⁹ A novel, she tells Sackville-West in 1928, begins not with a conception but with the feeling that “it exists on the far side of a gulf, which words can’t cross”.¹⁰ “Behind the eyes; not on the lips,” as one might say. And at times, in an “apparently involuntary rush,” ideas and scenes bubble forth into a novel, which is precisely how she describes in “A Sketch of the Past” making up *To the Lighthouse* while walking round Tavistock Square—“so that my lips seemed syllabbling of their own accord as I walked”.¹¹

4. Cognitive neuroscientific research inevitably has pressured philosophy insofar as philosophy concerns itself with consciousness and the experience of being. (The recent work of Catherine Malabou is an especially provocative example of the intersection of these fields.) Interesting as this nexus is, my focus here is more specific. Having many years ago written a book subtitled “The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf’s Fiction,” in which I treated the categories of silence and emptiness as not only fundamental to Woolf’s aesthetic but also as philosophical, and in which I argued that Woolf’s interrogations of being resonate most closely with those carried out by Martin Heidegger at roughly the same period, I have *always* thought of Woolf “among the philosophers”; indeed, I think of Woolf *as* a philosopher. If Kierkegaard or Nietzsche are philosophers, then so is Woolf. (And if they are not philosophers, I wonder what they are.) I want here to return to those categories of emptiness and silence within the context of Woolf’s last writings, the *nachlass*—a gathering of fragments and unfinished texts including the drafts of her posthumously published *Between the Acts* (which novel I have argued remains a draft), of her memoir, “Sketch of the Past,” of brief fictions such as “The Symbol,” stray paragraphs in her writing notebook such as that headed “London in War,” and the several drafts of her projected “Common History book” begun in 1940, which she titled “Reading at Random.” I propose that the resonances among these fragments and drafts suggest they may be treated as a seamless text within which we see Woolf freely working out—to use her own language—“what I might call a philosophy”.¹²

7 V. Woolf, *Letters*: 3, 247.

8 V. Woolf, *Letters*: 4, 223.

9 V. Woolf, *Diary*: 3, 102.

10 V. Woolf, *Letters*: 3, 529.

11 V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 81.

12 *Ibid.*, 71

5. At the end of the 1930s, this woman who had once written that the most apt description of her “so-called novels”¹³ might be “elegy”¹⁴ was fascinated by the prospect of her own approaching demise, and as such the categories of silence and emptiness so characteristic throughout her fiction took on a newly powerful valence within a historical moment that seemed very much to Woolf a reiteration of the late summer of 1914. If her novels are elegies both private and public—*Jacob’s Room* understood, for example, as at once a Catullan farewell to her beloved brother Thoby, dead at twenty-six, and as a memorial gesture to the carnage of the trenches—then as the events of 1938 brought back the mood of 1914, she strove in her writing for yet another form of remembrance. She had written *Jacob’s Room* while the Cenotaph was being constructed in London; that monument’s empty tomb finds its correlative in the empty spaces of her fiction—what Ann Banfield has shrewdly described as unobserved, unpeopled spaces, unoccupied perspectives.
6. I contend that the emptiness so familiar to readers of Woolf’s fiction enshrines a space intended to be crossed by the reading consciousness. Cerebral space, as Malabou explains, is constituted “by cuts, by voids, by gaps”,¹⁵ and in her narrative structures Woolf requires the reader to make what we might call synaptic leaps. The “work” of art is both substantive and verb. The act—the *work*—of reading produces the *work* of fiction through the mind’s transit across the spaces in the text. In the phrase famously uttered by Andrew Ramsay to explain to Lily Briscoe what his father’s work is about—“subject and object and the nature of reality”¹⁶—I hear an ironic critique of what Martin Jay has usefully termed “Cartesian perspectivalism”.¹⁷ The mechanistic order of independently existing entities is a paradigm subtending a philosophy that values mastery, the monocular, unity, monotheism, that generalizes at the expense of the liminal, the eccentric, the “other” of its discourses. In terms of Western epistemology, it is a philosophy that depends upon a subject remaining perspectively central. Nishitani Keiji, who was a student of both Nishida Kitaro and of Heidegger, critiques Western attempts to decenter the subject as tending to cling to its position at the center of a world of objects. Woolf’s effort, it seems to me, is to disperse subjectivity through the total field of the text, throughout a network wherein there is no privileged vantage point. The art historian Norman Bryson explains that for Nishitani, the

concept of the entity can be preserved only by an optic that casts around each entity a perceptual frame that makes a *cut* from the field and immobilizes the cut within the static framework. But as soon as that frame is withdrawn, the object is found to exist as part of a mobile continuum that cannot be cut anywhere.¹⁸

13 V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 70.

14 V. Woolf, *Diary*: 3, 34.

15 C. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 36.

16 V. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 26.

17 M. Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity”, 4.

18 N. Bryson, “The Gaze in the Expanded Field”, 97.

7. To exemplify what he means, Bryson chooses an example that has particular resonance for readers of Woolf:

If the object is, say, a flower, its existence is only as a *phase* of incremental transformations between seed and dust, in a continuous exfoliation or perturbation of matter: at no point does the object come under an arrest that would immobilize it as Form or *eidōs*.¹⁹

8. In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf recalls the “shock” of recognizing that “the flower itself was part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower”.²⁰ Bryson continues that for Nishitani, “an object’s presence can be defined only in negative terms. Since there is no way of singling out an object *x* without at the same time including it in the global field of transformations, what appears as the object *x* is only the difference between *x* and the total surrounding field”.²¹ In Woolf’s fiction, structured emptiness, gaps, make visible the necessary *work* of reading to produce the work of art. In the world of her fiction, language is itself a “cut” in the field of all that is.
9. In her essay on Walter Sickert of 1934, Woolf postulates that a “zone of silence” is at the middle of every art²². The silent, empty spaces of her fiction, I suggest, depend upon the dynamics of the act of reading to enact what is elegiac. If she is the great poet of absence, creating works of art that are acts of remembrance, then this art works in concert with the reading mind: the empty space calls forth an echo. Such spaces are Jacob Flanders’s shoes, held up by his mother; the attic room — “an emptiness about the heart of life”²³—to which Clarissa Dalloway withdraws; the “center of complete emptiness” around which flourish “curves and arabesques”²⁴ that Lily Briscoe must attempt to put on her canvas; the empty center around which the six figures of *The Waves* arrange themselves after the death of Percival; and the empty room at the heart of Pointz Hall, described as a vase holding the “still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence”²⁵. As Anthony Uhlmann has written recently about modernist fiction, art is the organization of sensation—or what Woolf described to Roger Fry as “emotion put into the right relations”.²⁶ “Art [...] works,” says Uhlmann,

through gaps in knowledge, fragments of sensation and perception, comprising viewpoints that are connected through transversal lines. The sign itself is a fragment, a provocation which forces us or urges us to think, to trace connections which exist, but an understanding of whose functioning is elusive [...] in literature as in life, one does not have adequate knowledge of a line of causation. There are events and gaps between them. There are signs that require interpretation. The links have to be forged, or gaps have to be leapt across, and this is done through thought.²⁷

19 *Ibid.*

20 V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 71.

21 N. Bryson, “The Gaze in the Expanded Field”, 98.

22 V. Woolf, “Walter Sickert: A Conversation”, 236.

23 V. Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 30.

24 V. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 182.

25 V. Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 26.

26 V. Woolf, *Letters*: 3, 133.

27 A. Uhlmann, *Thinking in Literature*, 32.

10. As 1938 appeared to Woolf to be “1914 but without even the illusion of 1914”²⁸, she raged against the “unreality” of violence:

Its odd to be sitting here, looking up little facts ... with a sparrow tapping on my roof this fine September morning when it may be the 3rd Aug 1914 ... What would war mean? Darkness; strain: I suppose conceivably death. [...] All that lies over the water in the brain of that ridiculous little man. Why ridiculous? Because none of it fits. Encloses no reality. Death & war & darkness representing nothing that any human being from the Pork butcher to the Prime Minister cares one straw about. Not liberty, not life [...] merely a house-maids dream. And we woke from that dream & have the Cenotaph to remind us of the fruits.²⁹

11. The violence of war is “unreal” as an abstract notion, a generalized mentality which destroys the individual freedom it purports to protect even before the physical body has been harmed. But her own death was a path away from such “unreality.” “Why not change the idea of death into an exciting experience?—as one did marriage in youth?” she asked herself in her diary in January 1939.³⁰ With everything become meaningless as the populace sank into common feelings, she wrote that it would be “interesting [...] to describe the [...] gradual coming of death [...] a tremendous experience, & not as unconscious at least in its approaches as birth is”.³¹ In 1940, personal death could be brought very close as the bombers flew over Sussex and she and Leonard lay down under a tree: “I thought, I think, of nothingness”.³² She could imagine, then, how it might be to be killed by a bomb:

I’ve got it fairly vivid — the sensation: but cant see anything but suffocating nonentity following after. I shall think — oh I wanted another 10 years — not this — & shant, for once, be able to describe it. It—I mean death; no, the scrunching & scrambling, the crushing of my bone shade in on my very active eye & brain: the process of putting out the light — painful? Yes. Terrifying. I suppose so — Then a swoon; a drum; two or three gulps attempting consciousness — & then, dot dot dot.³³

12. To be “real,” death must be one’s own, but thought *about* death cannot escape the unreality of abstraction. Nishida Kitaro argues that it is knowledge of subjective death that makes one an individual:

In facing its own eternal death the finite self faces absolute infinity, the absolute other. It realizes its eternal death by facing absolute negation. And yet even this realization has the structure of an absolute contradiction. For to realize one’s own death is simultaneously to realize the fundamental meaning of one’s own existence. Only a being that knows its own eternal death truly knows its sheer individuality. Only a true individual, a true person, can achieve this realization of the inherent contradiction of self-existence. A deathless being is not temporally unique, and that which is not temporally unique is not an individual. The self truly realizes its own temporal uniqueness as it faces its own eternal negation.³⁴

28 V. Woolf, *Diary*: 5, 170.

29 *Ibid.*, 166.

30 *Ibid.*, 200.

31 *Ibid.*, 230.

32 *Ibid.*, 311.

33 *Ibid.*, 327.

34 K. Nishida, “The Logic of the Place of Nothingness and the Religious Worldview”, 67.

13. The crisis of Woolf's last years is, of course, the world crisis of the second World War. But there is for Woolf a crisis of writing itself, a crisis that pervades her fiction, her autobiographical writing, and her critical writing as the war begins. Jacqueline Rose points out that the carnage of the first war had robbed "death of its contingency, turning it into an experience which, regardless who is actually hit, regardless that is of whether you live or die, everyone has to share".³⁵ For Woolf, therefore, according to Rose, death became "more than elegy, more than mourning, more than a fear or pull to which she finally succumbs. Rather it is something through the eyes of which [...] she sees".³⁶
14. What is the relation of writing to reality for Virginia Woolf? In the memoir, she questions why she spends her time writing when she might be doing something "useful" should war come.³⁷ It is not only that "nothing is real to me unless I write it down"; it is also that "thinking is my fighting"³⁸, this "pitter-patter of ideas" her "whiff of shot in the cause of freedom".³⁹ In "Sketch of the Past" she tries to analyze "what I might call a philosophy"⁴⁰, and almost a year later in her diary she reflected that because she was isolated in the flooded Sussex countryside, "no longer in the movement," she should "see if the art, or life, or creed, the belief in something existing independently of myself, will hold good".⁴¹
15. Working out that "creed," a belief in the independent existence of something other than herself, preoccupies Woolf in the writings of what turned out to be her last years. If we take seriously her idea that her novels are elegies, we might see them as embodying the emptiness and silence that are the only proper memorial to the dead, a recognition of the radical nihilism of death stripped of religion's sentimental comforts. This embodiment of the void depends upon reading, the relation between writer and reader shaping in the act of reading what is not on the page. In her last works her elegy is for a civilization she sees as about to die, and she figures that civilization as the "song" at the heart of literature.
16. In September 1940, Woolf began to draft what she referred to as a "Common History book," giving it the title "Reading at Random." It is possible to see in this project a speculative and highly condensed version of the trajectory described by Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In that work, Habermas outlines the emergence of a public sphere from the "momentous shift" occurring just prior to the French revolution by which private individuals came together as a public demanding "public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion".⁴² In the relations between writer and reader, Habermas sees the origins of modern subjectivity and the growth of a public sphere rooted in the critical reflec-

35 J. Rose, "Virginia Woolf and the Death of Modernism", 85.

36 *Ibid.*, 79.

37 V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 79.

38 V. Woolf, *Diary: 5*, 285.

39 *Ibid.*, 239.

40 V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 72.

41 V. Woolf, *Diary: 5*, 263-264.

42 J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 25-26.

tions of individuals in dialogue with one another about what they read. As “general opinion” becomes “public opinion” in the late eighteenth century, the dangers inherent in Enlightenment rationality were articulated by thinkers such as Mill and Tocqueville, who spoke out against the threat to individuality posed by the political public sphere.

17. In Woolf’s drafts, she names the motive force of literature “the song,” and suggests that human speech perhaps originated in imitation of bird-song. The first chapter of her project, titled “Anon,” concerns the anonymous traveling singer at the door of the cottage: the “song” is “a call to our primitive instincts. Rhythm—Sound. Sight”.⁴³ In *Between the Acts*, the song is heard in snatches as the nameless villagers of the pageant’s chorus pass in and out among the trees. In a very brief fragment from 1939 headed “London in War,” Woolf noted that everyone in the bombed city was “feeling the same thing: therefore no one is feeling anything in particular.” As a sign of “the prelude to barbarism,” she noted that “It is as if the song had stopped.” In “Reading at Random,” the anonymous singer is eventually absorbed by the playwright, and then “the playwright is replaced by the man who writes a book. The audience is replaced by the reader. Anon is dead”.⁴⁴ The book to which a writer’s name is attached brings into being the “private,” Woolf suggests. Habermas argues that “the subjectivity of the privatized individual was related from the start to publicity” and thus to the emergence of the “public sphere”.⁴⁵ In Woolf’s analogous version of this trajectory, reader and writer depend upon one another in symbiosis. She identifies Burton’s 1621 *Anatomy of Melancholy* as where the reader first appears, “for it is there that we find the writer completely conscious of the reader”.⁴⁶ With this new form, new faculties of subjectivity are enabled: “Now the reader is completely in being. He can pause; he can ponder; he can compare ... He can read directly what is on the page, or, drawing aside, he can read what is not written”.⁴⁷ As a comment on this notion, let us again refer to Uhlmann:

art requires us to understand what is not present in, or goes beyond the linguistic signifier, what is in the idea rather than in the word. Paradoxically, then, rather than this inhibiting someone who writes literature, it might very well be understood to open possibilities: that words might be so related that they invoke moments of immediate understanding in a reader, moments of understanding, which are intended to exceed the expression of words, getting beyond words through words, by making use of signs — such as the music of language or powerful images, for example.⁴⁸

18. To “read” what is not written depends upon the relation between writer and reader, and it is the reader’s absence, precisely, that precipitates the crisis of Woolf’s last writings, rendering her incapable of finding a satisfactory form in any of the genres she is working in during 1939-1941. So,

43 V. Woolf, “Reading at Random”, 374.

44 *Ibid.*, 398.

45 J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 50-51.

46 V. Woolf, “Reading at Random”, 429.

47 *Ibid.*, 429.

48 A. Uhlmann, *Thinking in Literature*, 11-12.

in June 1940: “It struck me that one curious feeling is, that the writing ‘I’, has vanished. No audience. No echo. That’s part of one’s death”.⁴⁹ And later that month: “No echo comes back. I have no surroundings”.⁵⁰

19. To have “no surroundings” suggests something more than just homelessness: it speaks to the absence of perspective, the absence of even provisional subjectivity. In *Between the Acts*, “the only thing to continue the emotion was the song” but it has become inaudible. The song is specifically connected by Woolf to building, to shelter. Heidegger describes dwelling as “*the basic character of Being*”⁵¹: “we do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell”.⁵² “To enjoy singing,” Woolf wrote in “Reading at Random,”

To enjoy hearing the song, must be the most deep rooted, the toughest of human instincts comparable for persistency with the instinct of self-preservation. It is indeed the instinct of self preservation. Only when we put two and two together—two pencil strokes, two written words, two bricks do we overcome dissolution and set up some stake against oblivion. The passion with which we seek out those creations and attempt endlessly, perpetually, to make them is of a piece with the instinct that sets us preserving our bodies, with clothes, food, roofs, from destruction.⁵³

20. The political philosopher Iris Marion Young’s feminist critique of Heidegger points out the masculine bias of his privileging of “building as the world-founding of an active subject”.⁵⁴ Heidegger makes a distinction between *preservation* and *construction*, and then, Young argues, ignores the former in favor of the latter. In seeking to reinstate the importance of preservation as an aspect of building, Young casts light on Woolf’s notion of writing making a dwelling, and it is perhaps in that notion that we may find an explanation of how Woolf’s “philosophy” involves the putting of emotion into right relations to create a dwelling for absence, a dwelling for the loss that death entails for those who remain.

21. In the 1930s, Woolf began to move away from the formalism espoused by Roger Fry, renouncing to some extent its isolation of aesthetic experience, its insistence on the aesthetic as a realm completely separate from other experience. A crucial moment in her thinking about formalist theories was her engagement with Percy Lubbock’s 1921 book *The Craft of Fiction*. She was troubled by the question of how the formalism promulgated by Fry in relation to painting could apply to her own narrative art. She wrote to Fry in 1924 that form in fiction was not the same as form in painting: “I say it is emotion put into the right relations”.⁵⁵ Lubbock had written that “the book itself” was analogous to “the statue itself,” an idea that maintains a separation between perceiving subject and art object. For Woolf, as we have seen, “the book itself” was “not form which you see, but emotion which you feel.” Although she published her thoughts on Lubbock

49 V. Woolf, *Diary*: 5, 293.

50 *Ibid.*, 299.

51 M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 160.

52 *Ibid.*, 148.

53 V. Woolf, “Reading at Random”, 403n4.

54 I. M. Young, “House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme”, 253.

55 V. Woolf, *Letters*: 3, 133.

in the 1922 essay “On Re-Reading Novels,” she was not satisfied with her response. After her death, Leonard Woolf published a version of the essay based upon a typescript Woolf had continued to revise. There she developed thoughts she had begun to articulate to Fry in the mid-1920s:

First, when we speak of form we mean that certain emotions have been placed in right relations to each other; then that the novelist is able to dispose these emotions and make them tell by methods which he inherits, bends to his purpose, models anew, or even invents for himself. Further, that the reader can detect these devices, and by so doing will deepen his understanding of the book, while, for the rest, it may be expected that novels will lose their chaos and become more shapely as the novelist explores and perfects his technique.⁵⁶

22. Returning to the idea of her works as elegy, my suggestion is that Woolf’s philosophy failed her as the second World War got underway. At the very end of *Between the Acts*, “[t]he house had lost its shelter” and two figures find themselves without surroundings in a “night before roads were made, or houses.” Deciding not to publish the work, Woolf described it as “too silly and trivial,” perhaps because she recognized that she had not yet found a dwelling for what she wished to preserve.

23. “Preservation,” Young writes,

entails remembrance, which is quite different from nostalgia. Where nostalgia can be reconstructed as a longing flight from the ambiguities and disappointments of everyday life, remembrance faces the open negativity of the future by knitting a steady confidence in who one is from the pains and joys of the past retained in the things among which one dwells. Nostalgic longing is always for an elsewhere. Remembrance is the affirmation of what brought us here.⁵⁷

24. Lucy Swithin says to a young man whose name she cannot remember, “We live in others, Mr...we live in things”.⁵⁸ Things, as Heidegger tells us, are what are near to us, but nearness is not a matter of distance. Technology has abolished every possibility of remoteness and yet has brought us no nearer to things. To illustrate what is a thing, Heidegger presents a simple jug and raises the very Woolfian question of what it means to say that a thing is empty. At Pointz Hall, the empty room awaits the presence of the family and their guests, and is figured as a vase standing at the heart of the house “holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence.”⁵⁹ Heidegger says that the thingness of the jug consists in the void that holds, that void shaped by the jug. Science would tell us that it is not empty but science does not explain “the thingness of things”: the jug’s nature as jug consists in holding and pouring. In another meditation, Heidegger says that “space” cannot be conceived as “something that faces man.” “Space” is not “an external object nor an inner experience.” If dwelling is the fundamental nature of Being, then to “say that mortals *are* is to say that *in dwelling* they persist through spaces by virtue of their stay among things and locations”.⁶⁰

56 V. Woolf, *Collected Essays*: 2, 129-30.

57 I. M. Young, “House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme”, 275.

58 V. Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 49.

59 *Ibid.*, 26.

60 M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 156.

25. In a draft of *Between the Acts*, Woolf wrestles with this relation between human and thing, with the crossing of the distance between them:
- who observed the dining-room? Who could [possibly] note the silence of emptiness? This presence certainly requires a name, for without a name what can exist? And how can silence be observed by a thing which has no existence? Yet by what name is that to be called which enters rooms?⁶¹
26. Heidegger may provide an answer: “I am never here only, as this encapsulated body; rather, I am there, that is, I already pervade the room, and only thus can I go through it”.⁶² Woolf’s fiction strives for what Merleau-Ponty described as “the ideal of a language which in the last analysis would deliver us from language by delivering us to things”,⁶³ but he also acknowledged that “language and culture defeat any attempt to conceive them as a system capable of revealing the genesis of its own meaning. This is because *we* are the language we are talking about. That is, we are the ground of language through our own body. It is through our body that we can speak of the world, because the world in turn speaks to us through the body”.⁶⁴ Or as Woolf put it in “A Sketch of the Past,” “we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself”.⁶⁵
27. To put emotions into right relations was to create a form even for the emptiness of death, but when Woolf could no longer rely on the collaborative presence of the reader, as she believed by 1941 she could not, the belief in something existing independently of her self faltered. In the face of the overwhelming generalization demanded by war, death became a cliché, as it does in the typescript of an unfinished short fiction called “The Symbol,” dated March 1st 1940, a day on which Woolf also wrote in a letter to Ethel Smyth “we have no future”.⁶⁶ In “The Symbol,” a woman sits writing a letter and observes on a distant mountainside a party of young men fall to their death. As she sees this, the pen falls from her hand. When she later takes up her letter again, “There seems to be no fitting conclusion” and death calls forth only “the old clichés”.⁶⁷ To create that dwelling for the radical emptiness of individual death, Woolf’s writing depended upon the reader. As opposed to what Habermas has criticized as Derrida’s notion of writing’s “*absolute readability* [...] in the absence of every possible audience”,⁶⁸ the dwelling Woolf’s writing creates depends upon its connection to the embodied reality of the act of reading. As she remarked in a late 1940 entry in her diary, “What is the value of a philosophy that has no power over life?”⁶⁹ As memorial, I would argue that Woolf’s writing often functions in a manner very similar to the profound memorials of the later twentieth century that have moved away from nostalgia toward remembrance, paramount among which is Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Wash-

61 V. Woolf, *Pointz Hall*, 61.

62 M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 157.

63 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 4.

64 *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

65 V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 72.

66 V. Woolf, *Letters*: 6, 475.

67 V. Woolf, “The Symbol”, 290.

68 J. Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 66.

69 V. Woolf, *Diary*: 5, 340.

ington DC. What Peter Ehrenhaus has said of the opponents to Lin's memorial could well be applied to those who resist seeing Woolf among the philosophers: "Expecting 'speech', they find silence, and mis-hear silence's call".⁷⁰

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