

LANDSCAPES OF MEMORY: THE CARTOGRAPHY OF LONGING

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Landscapes of Memory: The Cartography of Longing* examines three disparate twentieth century writers—Toni Morrison, Marilynne Robinson, and Virginia Woolf—who use similar fictive strategies for the reclamation and revision of the past. The term “landscape of memory” refers to and draws upon Freud’s topology of the mind as a conceptual model—his depiction of the ego as a psychic space that incorporates lost loves mirrors the function of a landscape of memory—both are psychic spaces, constructs of the imagination, and enclosed topographies for the perpetuation of relationships with places and people from the past. A study of the elaboration of human longing, this dissertation explores the age-old desire to resurrect beloved people and places we have lost to time, confirming the notion that literature, from antiquity to modernity, contains a quest for the reclamation or recuperation of something or someone lost to time or death. Virginia Woolf, Marilynne Robinson, and Toni Morrison all utilize a confluence of landscape and memory to bridge this gap between material and immaterial dimensions in order to resurrect the dead and to rewrite the past. Discussion of the performative nature of memory, landscape, and language, as well as the quest for the lost beloved in literature is included with analysis of the use of elegiac writing and narratives of mourning by Woolf, Robinson, and Morrison as fictive strategies for such reclamations. Individual chapters are prefaced with autobiographical and biographical material as a lens for the performative nature of memory and landscapes in their fiction, while the rest is explication of textual landscapes and charting the topology of memory in selected texts.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this to the women in my family, those generations of influence, beloved gemstones strung along my own Ariadne's thread: my grandmother, Frances Coleman Webb, my great aunt, Florence Camilla Coleman, my aunt, Ann Webb Gholson, my mother, Frances Webb Strong, my sisters, Virginia Strong Smith and Florence Strong Pruitt, and my nieces, Camilla, Caroline, Hannah and our multi-faceted Suzanne, in whom I see all who have gone before, and because of whom nothing is lost.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

### VIRGINIA WOOLF

CDB	The Captain's Death Bed and other Essays
CR	The Common Reader
SCR	The Second Common Reader
D I - V	The Diary of Virginia Woolf I-V
L I-VI	The Letters of Virginia Woolf I-VI
BA	Between the Acts
CSF	The Complete Shorter Fiction
CE	The Collected Essays
MB	Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing
MB 1 <sup>st</sup> Ed	Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings
ME	The Moment and Other Essays
MDP	Mrs. Dalloway's Party
MDR	The Mrs. Dalloway Reader
ND	Night and Day
Orlando	Orlando
PA	A Passionate Apprentice
AR	A Room of One's Own
TG	Three Guineas
TTL	To the Lighthouse

TVO        The Voyage Out

TW         The Waves

AWD        A Writer's Diary

#### MARILYNNE ROBINSON

DOA        The Death of Adam

HK         Housekeeping

HIS        The Hum Inside the Skull – A Symposium

LIS        Language is Smarter than We Are

MN        Marguerite de Navarre

WBS        A World of Beautiful Souls

#### TONI MORRISON

CWTM      Conversations with Toni Morrison

SOS        Song of Solomon

TMC        Toni Morrison: Conversations

WMM      What Moves At the Margin

ITT        Inventing the Truth: the Art and Craft of Memoir

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

*Let us look for a third tiger. This one  
will be a form in my dream like all the others,  
a system, an arrangement of human language,  
and not the flesh-and-bone tiger  
that, out of reach of all mythologies,  
paces the earth. I know all this; yet something  
drives me to this ancient, perverse adventure,  
foolish and vague, yet still I keep on looking  
throughout the evening for the other tiger,  
the one not in this poem.*

J. L. Borges, “The Other Tiger”

My interest in landscapes began during a graduate course I took with Professor Elizabeth Meese here at the University of Alabama which had as its focus the relationship between region and writing—topography and typography—and ultimately, between material and immaterial dimensions. For the purposes of the course, a region was construed broadly to include body, gender, family, class, race, art and imagination, and spaces we inhabit, often simultaneously, making us plural at the outset. I soon realized that the boundaries circumscribing these things are, for the most part, arbitrarily assigned and easily transgressed. Some students concentrated upon the self or the body—more unconventional regions, to be sure. For myself, as the readings continued, landscape captured my attention, not the usual landscape-as-setting, but a metaphysical landscape used to bridge the gap between material and immaterial dimensions.

It was in the work of Henry David Thoreau that I learned to see the performative nature of natural and other landscapes in literature. Thoreau's visual perceptions in *Walden* provided a sense of scale and context that altered my traditional view of landscape-as-setting, revealing the multidimensional and mystical nature of landscapes: the multiplicity of landscapes within a landscape, nested like Russian dolls. Thoreau's images of his time on the pond convey visual perceptions capable of communicating much more than words, erasing the concrete boundaries one assumes for the world:

Paddling gently to one of these places I was surprised to find myself surrounded by myriads of small perch...In such transparent and seemingly bottomless water, reflecting the clouds, I seemed to be floating through the air as in a balloon, and their swimming impressed me as a kind of flight or hovering, as if they were a compact flock of birds passing just beneath my level...their fins, like sails, set all around them. (179)

He envisions earth and sky as equally insubstantial dimensions divided only by the gossamer film of a lake's surface. In the absence of circumscription, other conventions are questionable and, without that traditional mode of seeing, open to speculation that provides multiple possibilities. Landscape is Thoreau's metaphysical tool for the expression of the possible, even the ineffable. He often alludes to, but does not often speak directly of or attempt to analyze, the numinous in landscape:

A field of water betrays the spirit that is in the air. It is continually receiving new life and motion from above. It is intermediate in its nature between land and sky. On land only the grass and trees wave, but the water itself is rippled by the wind...It is remarkable that we can look down on its surface. We shall, perhaps, look down thus on the surface of the air at length, and mark where a still subtler spirit sweeps over it. (178)

Even as he suggests the sentience of landscape, even as he suggests transcendence, he insists that we "wedge our feet downward" through the layers of "delusion and appearance" (92). Our vision must "penetrate the surface of things" to find a firm identity rooted in the world: "In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and occasions are now

and here. God himself culminates in the present moment...we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us” (91). Landscapes are then a container for conveying a higher purpose and are home to metaphysical energies.

Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* reveals a landscape so overwhelming that it is capable of erasing the self as the boy Jim lies blissfully contemplating the joy he feels in his grandmother’s prairie garden: “Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great” (14). Here is an alternative Eden, a metaphysical place that is not heaven or hell but a union with natural landscape accessed by a negation of the self. While away at college, Jim’s memory is infused with that landscape; he realizes that “the best days are the first to flee” (169). While studying Virgil’s poetry, he discovers the concept of *patria* (169)—not a nation or province, but a simple neighborhood where the poet grew up—and Jim co-opts the idea to describe the beloved friends and landscapes he keeps in his memory:

[W]henver my consciousness was quickened, all those early friends were quickened within it, and in some strange way they accompanied me through all my new experiences. They were so much alive in me that I scarcely stopped to wonder whether they were alive anywhere else, or how. (168)

This expression of *patria*—the human tendency to internalize beloved people and places lost to time—appears elsewhere in other forms, often connected to the desire to be one with natural landscapes and the use of landscapes to express such metaphysical notions.

This idea of a “landscape of memory” refers to and draws upon Sigmund Freud’s conceptual model of the topology of the mind. In “The Ego and the Id” (1923), he elaborates upon the structure of mourning as the initial stage of the structure of the ego; his contention is that upon losing another human being that one has loved, the ego incorporates that other into its

own structure: “By taking flight into the ego, love escapes annihilation” (5). It is clear that for Freud, internalizing and sustaining lost loves is crucial to ego formation.

In “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud’s notion of melancholia, known as “unsuccessful mourning,” provides another dimension for the reader’s apprehension of the landscape of memory, for the melancholic continues a relationship with the lost beloved indefinitely. Described as an *intratopographical* process, melancholy creates, within a single region, system, or agency, an *analogue* of the psychic topography as a whole, resulting in a hidden life of enclosed topography (Abraham and Torok 14, my emphasis), so that the mind of the melancholic serves as reliquary for the beloved. This clinical description sketches a conceptual model for the construction of a landscape of memory.

Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, and Marilynne Robinson not only describe characters that are immortalized in such “enclosed topography,” but they themselves also, in essays and interviews, describe communications with their own dead. They use memory to revive and then to harbor those they love; like the ego, their landscapes are psychic spaces, constructs of the imagination that obtain materiality to provide enclosed topographies for the perpetuation of relationships, places, and people from the past. If Freud’s notion that human beings are able to internalize lost loves within the ego is plausible, then a landscape of memory is notionally real. To inhabit, there must be a habitat, physically inhabitable or not.

In *Nightwood*, by Djuna Barnes, the character Robin Vote is “newly ancient,” the embodiment of memory—a passport to a past that is still vibrating (42); her every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience; her flesh “will become myth” (37). Yet she is also the embodiment of past landscapes, having “a sort of ‘odour of memory’ like a person who has come from some place that we have forgotten and would give our life to recall” (118).

Robin is a confluence of memory and landscape, described through the recollections of others and through representations of landscape, even *as* landscape(s):

The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry, overcast with the odour of oil of amber, which is an inner malady of the sea. (34)

Robin is “strangely aware of some lost land in herself” (45) and seems to be “listening to the echo of some foray into the blood that had no known setting” (44). As landscape, Robin is the reflection of each character’s longing for the sanctuary of the past. In Robin’s absence, her lover Nora is convinced that a lost part of her self lives only in Robin’s memory. In order to survive her abandonment, Nora encrypts Robin, who still lives, projecting her into death, where she can be preserved against change: “To keep her...Nora knew now that there was no way but death. In death Robin would belong to her” (*Nightwood* 52). Nora is compensated when Robin is returned to her through “death”. She creates not-Robin, the absence of Robin resurrected as “other” to inhabit the landscape of Nora’s memory.

Absence has weight, becomes substantial in *Nightwood*. The transvestite philosopher, Dr. O’Connor, tells a grotesque story about a decapitated horse which reveals his obsession with the memory of something lost and demonstrates the use of imagery to convey a metaphysical space:

Once in the war I saw a dead horse that had been lying against the ground. Time and the birds, and its own last concentration had removed the body a great way from the head. As I looked upon that head, my memory weighed for the lost body; and because of that missing quantity even heavier hung that head along the ground. So love, when it has gone, taking time with it, leaves a memory of its weight. (108)

In this novel, there is always a sense of something unfinished, of something inaccessible, and the reader strains to see it, to reach it, to find out. The characters of *Nightwood* live in a kind of middle condition, a limbo between night and day, male and female, Eden and exile—what was

and what might be. They are compelled to move but are frozen, remain in stasis—like someone running in place in a bad dream or ghosts haunting the same streets and houses over and over again.

Sensations like this are conveyed to the reader in an oblique manner, through the use of imagery, as in Dr. O'Connor's story of being trapped in a cellar with a cow during a wartime bombing. Barnes uses imagery to convey the dissonant sensation of simultaneous movement and stasis that seems to pervade the novel and to create a metaphysical space or signify a place that defies definition:

I put my hand on the poor bitch of a cow and her hide was running water under my hand, like water tumbling down from Lahore, jerking against my hand as if she wanted to go, standing still in one spot; and I thought, there are directions and speeds that no one has calculated, for believe it or not that cow had gone somewhere very fast that we didn't know of, and yet was still standing there. (23)

Here one may glimpse an unmapped landscape, a hidden dimension, a place that is unseen but known, and a desirable but unreachable destination for *Nightwood's* characters. Each remains trapped in amber, along with the meaning, affection, and direction they seek. Each seeks respite in a landscape of memory that is not a sanctuary, but a limbo; mark it on the map between heaven and hell.

### An Other Country

The past is always present; for some it lives within their memories, but for others, it is the place where they live. According to Gertrude Stein in *Paris France* (1940), “writers have to have two countries, the one where they belong, and the one where they live really. The second one is romantic, it is separate from themselves, it is not real but it is really there” (2). Doris Lessing calls this place *myth-country*, insisting that the use of “myth” does not imply untruth but

instead “a concentration of truth” (Rubenstein 16). Consider James Joyce, who left his life in Ireland in 1902 to live a life of exile in Paris. When asked if he would ever return, he replied, “Have I ever left? . . . Every day I am walking along the streets of Dublin” (25).

It is not unusual for Jeanette Winterson’s characters to find themselves living more than one life—literally. Villanelle, the protagonist of *The Passion* (1987), discovers her other life by accident, realizing that each time she makes an important decision some part of her continues the life she left behind while the rest of her goes on. In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), those whose “emanations are very strong . . . create themselves afresh outside their own body,” travelling not forward or backward in time, but across in time, to something they “might have been” (169)—writing the possible, utilizing the impossible.

In *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), Margaret Atwood says “A book is another country” (173). She turns to *Alice through the Looking Glass* for a discussion of the construction of alternate worlds or metaphysical landscapes:

[First] Alice is on one side of the mirror—the “life” side, if you like—and the anti-Alice, her reflection and reverse double, is on the other, or “art” side. Like the Lady of Shalott, Alice is a mirror-gazer: the “life” side is looking in, the “art” side is looking out. But instead of breaking her mirror and discarding the “art” side for the hard and bright “life” side, where the “art” side is doomed to die, Alice goes . . . *through* the mirror, and then there is only one Alice, or only one that we can follow. Instead of destroying her double, the “real” Alice merges with the other Alice—the imagined Alice, the dream Alice, the Alice who exists nowhere. And when the “life” side of Alice returns to the waking world, she brings the story of the mirror world back with her, and starts telling it to the cat . . . The act of writing takes place at the moment when Alice passes through the mirror. At this one instant, the glass barrier between the doubles dissolves, and Alice is neither here nor there, neither art nor life, neither the one thing nor the other, though at the same time she is all of these at once. At that moment time stops, and also stretches out, and both writer and reader have all the time not in the world. (56-57)

In his intensive study of the literary principles behind the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges, Ronald Christ says that the message behind the author’s essay “After Images” is that it is not enough to hold the mirror of metaphor up to the world and play tricks with reflections; one must go the next

step through the mirror—“Alice-fashion”—to transform metaphor into metaphysic, one must reveal the fantasy as transformed into an “inescapable reality of the mind” (14). Borges continually pushes the limits of metaphor, moving past the exploitation of rhetorical metaphors towards “the new,” as expressed in “After Images” (1924):

To transform a blaze into a tempest, as Milton did, is the work of a wizard. To change the moon into a fish, into a bubble, into a kite—Rossetti did that, making the mistake before Lugones—is less tricky. But there is someone superior to the trickster and the magician. I am speaking of the demi-god, of the angel, whose deeds change the world. To annex provinces to Being, to imagine cities and spaces of contiguous reality, that is a heroic venture. (28)

That heroic aesthetic venture is the subject of this study.

### Mapping the Landscape of Memory

Like cartographers who make maps using their imaginations and first or second-hand memories, writers often write about places they’ve never been, places that never existed until they appeared upon the page. In James Cowan’s *A Mapmaker’s Dream: The Meditations of Fra Mauro, Cartographer to the Court of Venice* (1996), a sixteenth-century monk works diligently to create a map of the world without ever leaving his cell. His dream is to “derive meaning from the perfect use of mystery” (xviii). Merchants, explorers, scholars, ambassadors, missionaries and other travelers bring him tales of adventure—of fantastic people and exotic, distant lands—which take him on a journey beyond known frontiers. Fra Mauro says that mapmakers are entitled to speculate “since they readily acknowledge they are rarely in possession of all the facts” (11) and are always dealing with second-hand accounts: observations, impressions and memories. Cartographers “*imagine* coastlines, bluffs, and estuaries” to give expression to “what lies beyond the purview of our hearts and minds” (17), rendering the imagery of landscapes from

memory. Mapping memory is like writing memory; both endow it with materiality—a kind of reality.

If we use the cartographer and the explorer analogously, we can visualize a conceptual model of a landscape of memory and understand how it might come into being. The explorer/writer, having been/seen “there,” relates the tale from a mental map of her construction—a landscape rendered from memory. The cartographer/reader, in order to “see” this landscape in the mind’s eye, must construct her own mental map. Like Fra Mauro, her information is second-hand—she must use *her* memory and *her* imagination to construct *her* landscapes, to chart *her* map, resulting in a map of mutual construction. Both writer and reader strive to make sense of disparate, yet, somehow common, knowledge; like “oar and rowlock,” each is traveling in the same direction, “gazing at maps that their eyes chart in each other’s hearts” (Cowan 7), resulting in a common destination.

#### From Metaphor to Metaphysic

This study examines the use of landscape and memory to bridge the gap between material and immaterial dimensions in order to resurrect and rewrite the past. *Landscapes of Memory* is, at heart, a study of the elaboration of human longing—the age-old desire to resurrect beloved people and places we have lost to time. Margaret Atwood hypothesizes that “*all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead” (156). Writing such as this provides an Ariadne’s thread, a “series of fossilized footprints” that create a “path” (Atwood 158)—or a map.

In “Beatrice’s Last Smile” (1945), Jorge Luis Borges suggested Dante imagined the *Divine Comedy* to bring the dead Beatrice back to life “in order to imagine that he was with her” (304). Borges says Dante’s rendering of the “eternal turning away of her face” emphasizes his knowledge of how fleeting her return will be (304). Woolf, Morrison, and Robinson continue that historic literary trope of the quest for the lost beloved. Not content with a glimpse, they continually look back. Unlike Lot’s wife, however, they are not turned to salt; instead, their visions crystallize into psychic sanctuaries to house their loves, returned to them by the power and continuity of their mourning. The secret to this transfiguration is confluence.

In *One Writer’s Beginnings* (1983), Eudora Welty tells the story of her life and her craft, stressing the power of memory and love. She says of her parents: “I glimpse our whole family life as if it were freed of that clock time which spaces us apart so inhibitingly” (102). During these personal reminiscences, she stresses their comingling with her craft and her own literary concept of “confluence”:

It is our inward journey that leads us through time—forward or back, seldom in a straight line, most often spiraling. Each of us is moving, changing with respect to others. As we discover, we remember, remembering, we discover; and most intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge. Our living experience at those meeting points is one of the charged dramatic fields of fiction. I’m prepared now to use the wonderful word *confluence*, which of itself exists as a reality and a symbol in one. It is the only kind of symbol that for me as a writer has any weight, testifying to the pattern, one of the chief patterns, of human experience. (102)

To demonstrate the nature and power of confluence, she shares an excerpt from her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Optimist’s Daughter* (1969), which is steeped in landscape. Laurel dreams of travelling by train with her deceased husband; as they ascend a summit above the merging of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, the panoramic landscape is revealed to be freighted with meaning, for everything they see is at the point of coming together:

[T]he bare trees marching in from the horizon, the rivers moving into one...she looked up with him and saw the long, ragged, pencil-faint line of birds within the crystal of the zenith, flying in a V of their own, following the same course down. All they could see was sky, water, birds, light, and confluence. It was the whole morning world.

And they themselves were a part of the confluence. Their own joint act of faith had brought them here at the very moment and matched its occurrence, and proceeded as it proceeded. Direction itself was made beautiful, momentous. They were riding as one with it, right up front. It's our turn! she'd thought exultantly. And we're going to live forever.

Left bodiless and graveless of a death made of water and fire in a year long gone, Phil could still tell her of life. For her life, any life, she had to believe, was nothing but the continuity of its love. (103)

Laurel believes this just as she believes that the confluence of the rivers will keep happening, even when she cannot see them. For Welty "the greatest confluence of all is memory—the individual human memory"; she considers her own as "the treasure most dearly regarded" in her life and work" (104). Welty reminds the reader that in the human memory "time, also, is subject to confluence. The memory is a living thing—it too is in transit. But during its moment, all that is remembered joins, and lives—the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead" (104). Welty uses landscape to convey the mirror image of confluence in nature and memory to express the continuity of love and a kind of life after death to her characters and to her readers.

*Landscapes of Memory* examines analogous confluences of landscape, longing, and memory in the works of three twentieth-century writers—Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, and Marilynne Robinson—where mothers, lovers, brothers, and one's sense of innocence, origin, and even of identity are recoverable through memory, landscapes, and the power of love. As Atwood notes, authors have written the dead to life for centuries, but the authors in this study were chosen for their particular method of preserving what they love within landscapes of memory, where the beloved are constantly resurrected from the dead, the past, and the imagination to ease the longing of the narrator, the author, and vicariously, the reader.

Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, and Marilynne Robinson reach for the ineffable, pushing language to its limits, exploiting the gap between material and immaterial dimensions with the metaphysical use of memory and of language. When they are successful, metaphor becomes metaphysic, cartography becomes geography, and the beloved are returned from the past to reside in the perpetual present of memory, where one may revise the past, continue relationships, resolve conflicts, and alter the future.

### Marilynne Robinson

In her introduction to her 1998 essay collection, *The Death of Adam*, Marilynne Robinson characterizes herself as a revisionist intent upon the remythologization of our language. This announcement echoes her insistence upon the remystification of language first introduced in 1987 in her *New York Times Book Review* “About Books” essay, “Language Is Smarter Than We Are,” and described in topological terms:

The Ancients imagined creatures neither much superior nor much inferior to themselves, sphinxes, satyrs, nymphs and the like...interactions were said to occur where things happened that eluded their generally impressive powers of explanation. Myths of this kind do not dispel mystery, rather they preserve it. They create for it a sort of grove or precinct. (BR8)

Or, one might say, myths of this kind create a kind of *landscape* for mystery.

We cannot in good faith sketch serpents in where the cartography of our understanding frays. But perhaps we can develop language that will acknowledge that it does fray, and where it does, and that those things we do not understand are not mere gaps to be closed by extensions of existing ways of thinking, but are sphinxes, riddles, their solutions likely to be astonishing and full of implication. (BR8)

To remystify language, we must acknowledge that nothing predates it, that it is the great repository of memory: “each word a cellule coded with its own history” (BR8). Most compelling

is her statement about the mystical powers of language to conjure “the first great cosmic decrees”:

Merely say the earth is at the center of the universe, and the planets spring into place around it, and angels mass just clear of their rotations, and hum as they hum, and shine as they shine, and the whole is so pleasing to contemplate that if there is beauty in truth, only infidels could object. Sound or unsound, ideas mimic system. They have their penumbra of corollary and implication. They create the conditions of their own survival, which may or may not conduce to the survival of the host organism. (BR8)

Robinson maintains that her nineteenth-century icons felt, as she does, that the world can only be understood metaphorically, and that “all metaphors are inadequate” but, if you “press them far enough,” as she felt they did, “you are delivered into something that requires a new articulation” (Schaub 231). Consider the terms of her admiration for Dickinson, Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, and Emerson in a 1984 *New York Times Book Review* Symposium piece, “The Hum Inside the Skull”:

Nothing in literature appeals to me more than the rigor with which they fasten on problems of language or consciousness—bending form to their purposes, ransacking ordinary speech and common experience...I think they must have believed everything can be apprehended truly when seen in the light of an esthetic understanding...that they wished to declare...the senses bathed in revelation—true serious revelation. (30)

Like the nineteenth-century transcendentalists that she identifies with, Robinson stretches metaphor towards the expression of a metaphysical concept that language cannot convey in its entirety.

Robinson likes to elaborate upon what she calls the classic American mode of writing using topological language in an interview with Tace Hedrick in 1992:

[P]eople go on a journey that leads to a kind of realization that is just at the limits of their ability to comprehend or articulate, and after that, there’s a new openness where earlier experience becomes impossible, and you’re abandoned into a new terrain without being able to use your old assumptions about how to find your way. (6)

Left with an incomplete understanding, one must become Emerson's transparent eyeball to see above and below the light of one's limited understanding. Robinson feels that myth must be constructed by and preserved within language to convey the vestige—mermaids and sphinxes and large white whales.

### Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison is also a revisionist and intent upon a remythologization, of African American history and literature. An example of what she considers to be her own revisionist technique can be found in her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (1984), in which she describes how nature performs as the chorus in her book *Tar Baby*:

[A]ll of nature thinking and feeling and watching and responding to the action going on in *Tar Baby*, so that they are in the story: the trees hurt, fish are afraid, clouds report, and the bees are alarmed. Those are the ways in which I try to incorporate, into that traditional genre the novel, unorthodox novelistic characteristics—so that it is, in my view, Black, because it uses the characteristics of Black art. (60)

Morrison says that the key is not just that books be written by Black people or written in a dialect; but that they contain something "special and identifiable" that she has to search for (60). *Song of Solomon's* simultaneous blend of the "acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world" without allowing one to take precedence is, in Morrison's philosophy, "indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world" (61). Morrison's use of superstition and magic reflects their practice by African Americans, and they are characterized by Morrison as a way of knowing things that is discredited because of the discredited people they sprang from, but that actually is a way of knowing just as credible as Western belief systems.

For Morrison, the “presence of the ancestor” is a defining characteristic of Black writing and art; this ancestor may be an elder who offers wisdom and guidance and without whom the main characters could not succeed, or a deceased ancestor who acts as a spiritual guide and to whom one owes respect and remembrance (61). In *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* (2008), La Vinia D. Jennings underscores the importance of the ancestor in Morrison’s work and in the African American tradition:

All African traditional societies believe in an afterworld where the ancestors—living-dead—reside when their earthly lives expire. Benevolent familial advisors if the living properly honor them, ancestors serve active religious roles in which they instruct their surviving lineage whose remembering of them and active calling of their names indefinitely extend their personal immortality in the afterworld. The living-dead ancestor and living relative reciprocally insure the continued life of one another, respectively, in the metaphysical and physical worlds. (9)

Jennings says, “Morrison conflates the office of the living-dead ancestor with the living elder...to create a hybrid, an ‘ancestral presence’ that mediates” (10) between the two entities and the two worlds.

As a classics scholar, Morrison is well-acquainted with the power of myth and, as Jennings has noted, she is well-versed in the ability of one civilization to overwrite the contributions of others, especially the erasure of Africa’s culture, subsumed by slave cultures:

An aesthetic goal of Morrison’s fiction is to dust off the survivals of West and Central African traditional civilizations that Christianity obscures in the Western hemisphere. It is a challenging recuperation because the Middle Passage and American slavery from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries fostered countless cultural suppressions and erasures for inestimable Africans and African Americans. Reflecting reality in its situation of West and Central African traditional religious beliefs as buried but not dead in the African-American personal and collective (un)conscious, Morrison’s fiction exposes an African palimpsest upon which European-American culture superimposes itself. (2)

Morrison herself listens to the ancestors and, in the absence of reliable historical data about her forebears, she relies upon the ineffable for her revision of the past, a kind of racial recollection passed down by her ancestors.

In her 1993 Nobel Lecture, Morrison says the “vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers and writers” and that it “arcs toward the place where meaning may lie” (202-3). She quotes Abraham Lincoln’s speech after the fall of Gettysburg in 1863: “The world will little note nor long remember what we say here. But it will never forget what they did here” and applauds the “life-sustaining” properties of his words that “refused to encapsulate the reality of 600,000 dead men in a cataclysmic race war” (203). Language, Morrison insists, must defer to “the uncapturability of the life it mourns” (203).

### Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf’s essays and her autobiographical *Moments of Being* offer conceptual lenses for the examination of her determinedly revisionist role in literature and the performative nature of memory and landscape in her life and work. Many critics have identified Woolf’s love for and knowledge of Greek myth and its presence in her work; however, Hermione Lee, in her biography entitled *Virginia Woolf*, reveals young Virginia’s early ambition to remythologize literature, tracking this process not only in the novels, but in her essays, biography, and autobiography.

Woolf’s “The Narrow Bridge of Art” (1927) begins with her comment upon the change and uncertainty of the age she lives in, which may influence her desire to remythologize the present by summoning the past:

The mind is full of monstrous hybrid emotions. That the age of the earth is 3,000,000,000 years; that human life lasts but a second; that the capacity of the human mind is nonetheless boundless; that life is infinitely beautiful and yet repulsive...that science and religion have between them destroyed belief; that all bonds of union seem broken, yet some control must exist—it is in this atmosphere of doubt and conflict that writers have now to create... (*Granite and Rainbow* 12)

Woolf herself is a hybrid of sorts, an avowed agnostic with mystical tendencies; next to Aldous Huxley, her father Leslie Stephen was the most famous agnostic of his day while Woolf's mother Julia Stephen was the household "angel."

In "An Agnostic's Daughter's Apology: Materialism, Spiritualism, and Ancestry in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*" (2003), Mark Gaipa makes a forceful argument for Woolf's use of that novel to reconcile the opposition between science and religion. En route, her father's agnosticism is ultimately validated, with significant revision: it is fused with elements of her mother's and her own mysticism. While Woolf writes the novel, Gaipa says, she realizes that materialism is necessary to mysticism as a "trigger for vision" and that she uses the novel "to renovate the Ramsays' agnostic household" (3), and by extension, the Stephen household.

Woolf distills her father's agnosticism to its essence only to "rehabilitate" it by re-conceptualizing it (and him, in the character of Mr. Ramsay) as open to a belief in spirit; she refashions her mother's "angel" into Mrs. Ramsay, whose spirit is open to the materialism within her family's agnostic home. Woolf "draws upon both spiritualism and materialism, in equal measures" (Gaipa 3), providing glimpses of both worlds: one where spirit is the only reality alongside another that is spirit-deprived. Such contrasts in perception were prevalent features of the zeitgeist:

[The] confidence and power of naturalism to transform mankind was derided by critics as itself a false faith: the naturalists had repudiated the church only to worship science and their slavish obedience to empiricism blinded them to the higher realities of mankind. It was spiritualists, committed to the reality of an unseen world, who largely fashioned the criticism of materialism as complacent, limited, dogmatic. (9)

Because both explore "conflicting spiritualist and materialist perspectives," Gaipa parallels Woolf's novel to her father's essay "What Is Materialism?" (AA 5), which includes the very objects Lily identifies with Mr. Ramsay's philosophy in *To the Lighthouse* (8):

Whenever she “thought of his work” she always saw clearly before her a large kitchen table. It was Andrew’s doing. She asked him what his father’s book was about. “Subject and object and the nature of reality,” Andrew had said. And when she said Heavens, she had no notion of what that meant. “Think of a kitchen table, then,” he told her, “when you’re not there.” (23)

Stephen addresses “subject and object and the nature of reality” in his essay, calling upon a table to illustrate how, from our individual acts of perception, we formulate “a common object-world” (8). Yet he maintains that there are “limits to our perceptions” which we should not strive to surpass or we “land...into insuperable difficulties” (129). Anything beyond our world was inconceivable to Leslie Stephen, because any “beyond” that we conceive is merely a projection of what we see in this one: “I cannot get into a world outside of all experience... We cannot peep behind the curtain [which] is the reality. The effort to look behind it is an effort to get out of ourselves. It only plunges us into the transcendental region of antinomies and cobwebs of the brain” (143-44). Woolf defies her father in *To the Lighthouse* and steps into what Gaipa calls the “metaphysical breach” (10), as the restless spirits in her novel persist in their attempts to glimpse a deity behind the curtain of material appearances:

It seemed now as if, touched by human penitence and all its toil, divine goodness had parted the curtain and displayed behind it, single, distinct, the hare erect; the wave falling; the boat rocking, which, did we deserve them, should be ours always. But alas, divine goodness, twitching the cord, draws the curtain;...he covers his treasures in a drench of hail, and so breaks them, so confuses them that it seems impossible that their calm should ever return to or that we should ever compose from their fragments a perfect whole or read in the littered pieces the clear words of truth. For our penitence deserves a glimpse only; our toil respite only. (127-28)

But Woolf does an about-face, administering the *coup de grace* with the appearance of Mrs. McNab the housekeeper, who has her consolations without believing in the hereafter; and whose experience within the empty house is somehow more profound than the experience of the restless spirits philosophizing as they stride along the shore in Woolf’s typescript:

[Mrs. McNab's] message to a world now beginning to break into the voluntary and irrepressible loveliness of spring was transmitted by the lurch of her body and the leer of her smile and in them no less than in the bleat of lamb and the bud of cowslip were the broken syllables of a revelation more confused but more profound (could one have read it) than any accorded to solitary watchers, pacing the beach at midnight, and receiving as they stirred the pool, revelations of an extraordinary kind. (qtd. in Gaipa 29)

In "Time Passes," Woolf uses parenthetical remarks to indicate the exclusion of a speaking subject, and the language of the material world is given precedence over that of the spiritual—Gaipa says this "pivotal moment" grants Mrs. McNab a revelation from within the house that surpasses that of the visionaries on shore, reversing Woolf's opposition to her father's materialism (24). Once the site of materialist obscurity after the death of Mrs. Ramsay and her children, Gaipa sees the empty house as renovated into the site of revelation, so that "metaphysical revelation lies instead within the here and now"—is "immanent in the world, not transcendent" (25).

In "An Agnostic's Apology," Leslie Stephen claims that the vision of a spiritual beyond is a comforting extension of our lives into the universe (25), a definition that resonates in his daughter's notion that we read "to extend our intercourse beyond our own time and province" because there are wonders in this world, "halcyons and undiscovered lands, men with dogs' heads and eyes in their chests" (CR 64). Perhaps Gaipa's most convincing claim for immanent revelation and his most astute observation about Woolf's intentions is that in order "to grasp the world beyond ourselves, we must turn to the sweeping evolutionary view of nature" (25) that she provides in her work.

### Final Comments

Marilynne Robinson, Toni Morrison, and Virginia Woolf reach beyond the capacity of words, exhausting language as we know it; sensing or intuiting or imagining, they attempt to

articulate the ineffable. Each has developed a philosophy and technique for the transgression of conventional literary boundaries. Their metaphysical fictions alter the perceptions of their readers and convey meaning through a variety of strange landscapes. While their goals and their metaphysics differ, these authors are similar in their use of the confluence of memory and landscape for revelation and for the revision of the past.

Every story is homage, a letter, a postcard to an invisible other, a *map* of the memory of its author. These maps reveal what authors treasure and often direct by indirection. Tattooed with S-curved rivers, cross-hatched railroad tracks, chicken-scratch lakes, conical mountains, arching bridges, peaked roofs and the points of the compass, such maps lead us only to the labyrinthine mazes of the narrative mind. But suddenly, surfacing within the parchment, as if written with invisible ink, an “X” rises and marks the spot where the treasure lies buried, veiled within the repository of the text, of the memory, waiting to be resurrected by the reader. For all of the emphasis upon geography and topography within these texts, the maps instead offer recovery, preservation and perpetuation of the lost, valuable, fabulous thing—love, innocence, or Eden. It is the crossing, the railroad, the circuitry and transience of life that tells the tale, whether the destination is Thoreau’s pond, Cather’s “patria”, Robinson’s “Carthage,” Morrison’s “clearing,” or Woolf’s “St. Ives.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### VIRGINIA WOOLF: WISH YOU WERE HERE

*I am so composed that nothing is real unless I write it...I know by this time what an odd effect Time has: it does not destroy people—for instance, I still think perhaps more truly than I did, of Roger, of Thoby; but it brushes away the actual personal presence.*

Virginia Woolf in Quentin Bell's *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*

In her essay “Modern Fiction” (1919), Virginia Woolf reminds the reader that there is no such thing as the “proper stuff of fiction,” for “everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought, every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss” (CR 154). Antithetical to the archconservative Victorians that preceded her, Woolf’s philosophy embraces only one guideline, that the works must fill the reader with a vision of “the infinite possibilities of the art” because “no *method*, no experiment, even of the wildest – is forbidden,” with one prohibition, that against falsity or pretence (154). Woolf’s work demonstrates her revisionism through her continuing experimentalism. Her essays and reviews reflect her admiration for those who transgress conventional literary boundaries, such as the Brontes, whose “untamed ferocity” was “perpetually at war with the accepted order of things” (CR 156). Woolf’s letters and diaries reveal her intention, from an early age, to revise, or as she calls it, to “revolutionise” (L II 429) traditional literary forms.

Hermione Lee, in her critically acclaimed study, *Virginia Woolf*, identifies the seed of the author’s singular brand of revisionism in her early years and tracks its flourishing throughout her

career. Lee begins with a chapter titled “Biography” wherein she analyzes Woolf’s philosophy about and innovations to that genre:

Fiction is often her version of biography. *Orlando* makes an explicit game out of this relationship, and suggests to her the possibility of more such fictive biographies. *Orlando*’s biographer is written in as a character in pursuit of his/her subject, always self-consciously referring back to the conventions, which are not always adequate for the task at hand. (8)

Woolf’s letter to Vita Sackville-West – “it sprung upon me how I could revolutionise biography in a night” (L III 429) – reveals another rationale for the writing of *Orlando*. Revision occurs in that novel during the process of writing about writing. Lee reminds us that like the protagonist, the book begins as one thing and ends as another, because “Orlando is the hero who turns into a heroine in a biography which turns out to be a fiction” (13). *Orlando*’s narrator characterizes writing as a disease where everything is something else, just as love of literature is an illness, the fatal nature of which was to substitute a phantom for reality (74). Everything in *Orlando*, indeed, in much of Woolf’s work, is something else.

Analyzing Woolf’s approach to “life writing” during the 1910s and 1920s, Lee finds her making up “imaginary” biographies while simultaneously attacking traditional biography, as she does in “An Unwritten Novel” and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (Lee 8). Woolf equates Victorian biography with the public lives of great men, including her father, Leslie Stephen, and finds them “censored, reverential” (Lee 9). As Lee observes, for Woolf’s generation, this meant a “tug of war between fact and fiction” and complicated Virginia Woolf’s great passion, “getting to the ‘soul’ ” (10), so that her revisionism was a means to that end:

Facts have their importance...that is where the biographer comes to grief. The biographer cannot extract the atom. He gives us the husk. Therefore as things are, the best method would be to separate the two kinds of truth. Let the biographer print fully completely, accurately, the known facts without comment; Then let him write the life as fiction. (*Notebooks*, as cited in Lee 10)

By Lee's account, Woolf is a biographer from "the moment she starts to write," a natural innovator who uses fiction to create "intuitive biographical portraits" for the yet-to-be-narrated lives of women (14):

At twenty she starts a comical character sketch of her friend Violet Dickinson, as "Aunt Maria," and goes back to it again in 1907. Virginia Stephen calls herself Violet's "Bio- or mytho-grapher," and *Friendship's Gallery* is a spoof love-letter-cum-biography, an early *Orlando*. Its jokes (some purely personal) are about what you do as a biographer "when you are writing the life of a woman." The semi-serious attempts to describe "the flight of her mind" ("Did she reason or only instincticise?") dissolve into a fairy-tale . . . told to make a child sleep. (Lee 13)

Lee is tracing the evolution of biography under Woolf's hand. From the beginning, Woolf embellishes biography and alters the life on record to present the life perceived. Her off hand terminology, "instincticise," foreshadows her intuitive future style, and the term "mytho-grapher" is particularly apt, for as we shall see, Woolf tends to mythologize.

Next, Lee documents this trend in Woolf's "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn" (1906), which contains "arguments about the rival merits of archival and imaginative research," which is then followed by "Memoirs of a Novelist" (1909), wherein the true life of a Victorian woman novelist is discovered beneath the "official, censored life written by her woman friend" (Lee 14). Of course, Lee finds evidence of a veiled autobiography in these early stories, but more, the seeds for "the kind of biography that will shape itself to women's lives" (14) and into Woolf's ultimate formula for that genre. The parallel strands of fact and fiction appear and remain a substructure in her work, beginning with this work in biography, later saturating other genres as well.

Lee goes on to describe Woolf's passion for the lives of the obscure and her increasing interest in "marginal undervalued literary forms like memoirs, letters and journals" (Lee 13), the sole artifacts of the obscured lives that Woolf wants to excavate in her works. Woolf's unusual

style takes another leap with her essays on “great women of their time,” wherein “she makes the dead come most alive” by imagining women subjects from their archives, resurrecting women like Mary Wollstonecraft and Dorothy Wordsworth with amazingly intuitive biographical portraits (Lee 14). Although Lee concedes that these essays belong to a period “when such emotional, anecdotal manners in essay-writing were more acceptable,” she insists that they “go beyond the conventions of the time” because they prove that “the imagination can have historical authority” (14-15). The expansive Dorothy Wordsworth piece is a case in point, where Woolf describes a hike Dorothy takes with her brother and Coleridge in search of a waterfall:

At last they reached the waterfall. And then all Dorothy’s powers fell upon it. She searched out its character, she noticed its resemblances, she defined its differences, with all the ardour of a discoverer, with all the exactness of a naturalist, with all the rapture of a lover. She possessed it at last—she had laid it up in her mind for ever. (CE 205)

Dorothy *possesses* the waterfall as a visual memory. Lee seizes upon this description to insist that this is “what Woolf does with her human subjects” (14), describing her remarkable ability to observe and the explicit power of her memory to capture and keep perceptions that she will revivify in writing.

When Arnold Bennett criticizes *Jacob’s Room* (1922) by saying that her characters could not “survive in the mind,” Woolf turns to her diary in self-scrutiny, analyzing her work in terms of Katherine Mansfield’s notion that writing should be deeply felt: “I daresay it’s true however that I haven’t that ‘reality’ gift. I insubstantise, willfully to some extent, distrusting reality – its cheapness. But to go further, have I the power of conveying true reality? Or do I write essays about myself?” (D II 248). Bennett’s reality is merely surface, not the “true reality” that lies beneath, a reality Woolf defines in her response to Bennett’s criticism. The infamous essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924) is considered by some to be her literary manifesto and contains her trademark imaginative biographies. There is the semi-fictional Mr. [Arnold] Bennett, who

only concerns himself with the surface of life, and the mythological Mrs. Brown, “an old lady in the corner opposite” with whom all novels begin (*CDB* 102). Open to interpretation by different readers, Mrs. Brown allows us to see the world through her eyes, without our enculturation and habit. It is Woolf’s belief that writers write novels because “they are lured on to create some character which has thus been imposed upon them” (94). Mrs. Brown is just such a character and therefore embodies “the spirit we live by, life itself” (119). A Mrs. Brown character appears often in Woolf’s work, in one form or another, such as the unnamed old woman in the park in *Mrs. Dalloway* or Mrs. McNab, the housekeeper, in *To the Lighthouse*.

In *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Woolf introduces biographical portraits of an “ancient old lady” and Shakespeare’s “imaginary” sister to illustrate not only the reality of women’s lives, but also to inspire speculation, to persuade one to consider what they *could* be, paving the way for a revision in the reader’s mind, an alteration of her perception. Recall Woolf’s conviction that the “proper stuff” of fiction is to reveal “the infinite possibilities of the art and remind us that there is no limit to the horizon” (*CR* 154), and it is evident that this dictated much of her experimentation. In Woolf’s time, women were forced to censor their biographies because of gendered codes of morality, often using allusion and symbolism to convey their meaning, so much so that Hermione Lee claims that for them biography came to mean “one story hidden under another” (Lee 15). Lee goes so far as to imply that Woolf’s repeated use of the term “biography” in *Three Guineas* (1938) is intended as a signal to read between the lines, that it operates like “an oracle, a cryptic text from which a hidden and very important message has to be decoded” (15). As if to emphasize Woolf’s sensitivity to the difference between female and male autobiography, Lee analyzes the “disclaimer” that precedes her reading at the “Memoir Club” in 1936:

I am not the most widely lived or the most richly memoried. Maynard, Desmond, Clive and Leonard all live stirring and active lives; all constantly brush up against the great; all constantly affect the course of history one way or another... Who am I that I should be asked to read a memoir?... My memoirs, which are always private, and at their best only about proposals of marriage, seductions by half-brothers, encounters with Ottoline and so on, must soon run dry. (as cited in Lee 16)

Of course, women's memoirs were private; most women's lives were lived in anonymity. Woolf sarcastically points to the anonymity of her own life compared with the public lives of men—their education, employment, institutional affiliations—for she lived a very public life. As a writer, publisher, business owner, she knew and influenced many people, great and obscure. Therefore, the diminutive “I” she describes sounds more like another imaginative biographical portrait designed to highlight the obscurity of the lives of *other* women. Woolf's stories, novels and essays operate much like an image she often employs: that of the fishing net, where what is visible on the surface—the floating corks—is intended to signal, however obliquely, the deeper meaning—the sunken net (*MB* 135); this deeper meaning is never stated, only suggestive of alternative outcomes. Woolf creates the condition, provides the lens, and invites us to see the hidden and improbable or to speculate upon what is possible.

Woolf's most compelling work in biography came after the death of her brother Thoby from typhoid in 1906. Both Thoby and their cousin Violet Dickinson are ill with typhus upon their return from a family trip to Greece. Virginia writes daily to Dickinson, who is convalescing at her own home on Manchester Street. When Thoby dies, Violet is still so ill that Virginia cannot include the news of Thoby's death for fear of worsening her condition. Therefore, Virginia Woolf keeps her dead brother alive for weeks in these letters (Lee 226):

Every day, for almost a month, she wrote her detailed reports on Thoby's progress. He was arguing or flirting with his nurses, he was reading reviews of Fred Maitland's *Life* of Leslie (published almost on the day of Thoby's death), he was having his “little ups and downs,” he was beginning “to curse a good deal,” he was looking forward to jelly and

pointing out “the virtues of a mutton chop.” Only when Violet saw a review of Maitland which mentioned Thoby’s death did Virginia end the pretence. (Lee 226)

Lee says, “Probably these extraordinary, detailed, inventive letters were making the fact of Thoby’s death bearable to her,” but more importantly, “they mark the beginning of her *keeping* Thoby by turning him into fiction” (227). Mitchell Leaska comes to a similar conclusion in his biography of Woolf: “[A]fter his death, Thoby came into her full possession” (123).

Lee is careful to characterize this act as a process of literary—as opposed to religious—consolation that continued in Woolf’s later work (227). To exemplify this, Lee quotes from Woolf’s very next essay on Sir Fulke Greville’s life of Philip Sidney, published six months after Thoby’s death, that “allowed her to say what she would have thought sentimental in autobiographical terms; it consoled her to write it” (227). Woolf describes Sidney as “detached from time and matter, like a Greek statue,” insisting that he should have become a statesman and a poet, and when he died, “at the age of thirty-two, his death was but the final harmony of a life that was too short, but that was complete; indeed the shortness of such lives seems in some way a necessary part of their perfection” (as quoted in Lee 227). Woolf praises her brother in a similar fashion some thirty-five years later in her autobiography, recalling Walter Lamb’s eulogy at his funeral, the final speech of Fortinbras in *Hamlet*, “Let four captains / Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage, / For he was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal” (V. II). She goes on to say: “Publicly, he would have been, had he been put on, a judge certainly. Mr. Justice Stephen he would be today...with several books to his credit; one or two on law...a distinguished figure” (*MB* 140). Then she adds, “He would have been more of a character than a success, I suppose; had he been put on” (140). In a compelling observation, Lee notes that unlike Woolf’s feelings about her parents, Woolf’s feelings for Thoby thereafter were not painfully obsessional, they were “intensely sad, but calm”, implying that this difference can be

attributed to her discovery that writing could keep Thoby with her, that she herself could “put him on” (227). Although her relationship with Vanessa was the most intimate, her feelings for Thoby seem almost romantic. In her autobiography, she says she cannot describe herself without describing them (*MB* 125), and in fact, in that work, there is as much, in some cases more, detailed information about Thoby as there is about her family, even her beloved Vanessa, who outlived him by decades.

### Autobiography

Woolf writes to Hugh Walpole in December of 1932 that of all literature she loves autobiography the most: “In fact I sometimes think only autobiography is literature—novels are what we peel off, and come at last to the core, which is only you or me” (L 2687). In her own autobiography, *Moments of Being* (1985), Woolf explores the origins of the beliefs and intuitions that shaped her life, her art, and her metaphysic. The centerpiece in that autobiographical collection, “A Sketch of the Past,” begins with Woolf’s first childhood memory of the purple, red, and blue anemones on her mother’s dress as she sat in her lap while they made the trip to their summer home, Talland House, at St. Ives in Cornwall, in the 1880s (64). The next, which she deems her most important memory, is of the landscape itself:

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

Woolf writes *Moments of Being* some thirty years after her last visit to St. Ives, thus demonstrating the ceaseless impact of that landscape and the parallel intensity of her feelings.

The specifics of this memory move from abstract to particular, with impressions of the pale yellow blind, the green sea, and the silver of passion flowers where all is globular and semi-transparent. The cawing of rooks seems “to fall from a great height” and is always associated with the waves breaking and the splash of the waves (66). These original impressions surface repeatedly in her work, usually to indicate what is real or true; consider Bernard’s memory in this passage from *The Waves*:

But for a moment I had sat on the turf somewhere high above the flow of the sea and the sounds of the woods, had seen the house, the garden, and the waves breaking. The old nurse who turns the pages of the picture-book had stopped and had said, ‘Look. This is the truth.’ (213)

It appears time after time in her work and in her diaries; before a return trip in March of 1921, she enthuses, “Why am I so romantic about Cornwall? One’s past I suppose...almost 40 years of life, all built on that, permeated by that: how much so I could not explain” (D II 103). Woolf insists that her childhood memories are more real for her than any present moment, memories so strong and so persistent that they can rise to the surface to displace the present. As she writes “A Sketch of the Past,” she literally puts her claim to the test for her would-be reader; gazing “through” her English garden at Monk’s House, she *sees* the nursery or the beach at St. Ives, landscapes so tangible that she feels as if she is there (67). Hermione Lee suggests that this is because her “memory of that childhood was so close and clear to her that it felt, all her life, more like a continuing existence than a memory” (97). Woolf says as much in “A Sketch of the Past”:

[I]s it not possible—I often wonder—that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? And if so, will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap into them? I see it—the past—as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. There at the end of the avenue still, are the garden and the nursery. Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen to the past. I shall turn up August 1890. I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start. (*MB* 67)

Writing is obviously her “device” for time travel, and St. Ives her destination. In her own analysis, Woolf suggests that perhaps these memories endure because she is “hardly aware” of herself, “but only of the sensation” operating as “only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture” (67). Suggesting that perhaps this impersonality is characteristic of all childhood memories and may account for their strength, she says that “later we add feelings to much that makes them more complex; and therefore less strong; or if not less strong, less isolated, less complete” (67). Intense feeling keeps memory illuminated and alive over time. Woolf illustrates this process in *To the Lighthouse* when Lily Briscoe has a memory of and relives the intense feelings stirred in her by the once passionate, now separated couple, the Rayleys:

(Suddenly, as suddenly as a star slides in the sky, a reddish light seemed to burn in her mind, covering Paul Rayley, issuing from him. It rose like a fire sent up in token of some celebration by savages on a distant beach. She heard the roar and the crackle. The whole sea for miles round ran red and gold...And the roar and the crackle repelled her with fear and disgust, as if while she saw its splendour and power she saw too how it fed on the treasure of the house, greedily, disgustingly, and she loathed it. But for a sight, for a glory it surpassed everything in her experience, and burnt year after year like a signal fire on a desert island at the edge of the sea, and one had only to say “in love” and instantly, as happened now, up rose Paul’s fire again. (175-76)

Here is a landscape of memory, an embodiment of intense feeling that lives on after the reasons for it have long passed. As Arnold Weinstein points out, although the Rayleys’ marriage may be dead, “the fire on the beach rages on,” making it clear that Woolf believes “that human feeling resists the law of entropy; it lives like a signal fire on a desert island, even if the human participants have long disappeared” (282). For Weinstein, human feeling is “the motor force of art” and the ultimate marriage to envision in *To the Lighthouse* is that of art and the return of the dead (282-83). “Art” he says, “is recovery. It is the overcoming of time and the capturing—

live—of human feeling” (283). So that a book or a painting can function like memory, and not only keep, but also perpetuate, intense emotion.

Woolf’s “moments of being” are extraordinary moments, usually embedded in many more moments of non-being. Ultimately, they are revelations, similar to Wordsworth’s epiphanies, wherein the self is transcended and its boundaries blur or disappear. In her introduction to the 1985 version of the collection, Jean Schulkind provides a succinct description of a “moment of being”:

The idea of a privileged moment when a spiritually transcendent truth of either personal or cosmic dimensions is perceived in a flash of intuition is, of course, a commonplace of religious experience and in particular of mystical traditions of thought, as well as a recurrent feature of philosophies from Plato onwards. But in these memoirs Virginia Woolf sets this belief in a uniquely personal context and shows it emerging, almost inevitably, from her own intense and highly individual susceptibility. (*MB* 17)

Schulkind notes that, like Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquility,” the meaning unfurls only after the moment has passed and has been made into a scene, or a symbol or a sensory image. Thus, memory is the test of the enduring quality of a moment of being and is invaluable in extending the dimensions of the moment (21) and in the erasure of temporal and spatial boundaries so important to Woolf’s metaphysics. The idea of “susceptibility” is equally important for becoming a “container” of rapture. For Woolf, these moments represent what is real behind appearances; the self merges with reality and all “limits of the physical world cease to exist” (*MB* 18). Belief in these moments of being motivated and determined the direction of Woolf’s experiments with literary forms (20). In “A Sketch of the Past,” we see her instinctive responses to experience taking root in her literary method:

These scenes, by the way, are not altogether a literary device...I find that scene making is my natural way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged; representative. This confirms me in my instinctive notion—it is irrational; it will not stand argument—that we are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality; at some moment, without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in

floods reality; that is a scene—for they would not survive entire so many ruinous years unless they were made of something permanent; that is a proof of their “reality.” (142)

Woolf’s definition of reality varies, but she often uses the term when describing a transcendent vision of unity, as in *To the Lighthouse*, when Mrs. Ramsay revels in the synthesis her dinner has wrought, in a unanimity she experiences with her guests and the world that “partook of eternity” (105). Mrs. Ramsay senses “a coherence in things, a stability, something...is immune from change and shines out...in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby...she had the feeling...of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures” (105). In her foreword to the 1981 printing of the novel, Eudora Welty said that *To the Lighthouse* was not only “‘about’ the very nature of reality, it is itself a vision of reality” (xii). Moments of being encompass these visions, but are also contained by them.

Hermione Lee emphasizes the very personal basis of Woolf’s published work, attributing it to the death of her mother when she was thirteen and the subsequent deaths of her father, sister, and brother within the space of a decade. They enter and shape her novels, essays, and stories, where they “come alive” like the subjects of her biographies (17). Lee identifies Woolf’s preoccupation with memory as an attempt to recuperate her past using scenes and moments:

The “Sketch of the Past” rescues [Woolf] from time’s swallowing maw, and explains how she does so, by the same process that makes biography come alive: making lives vivid through scenes and moments. But in [Woolf’s] autobiography, “scene making” is not a device. It is something she receives, something that happens to her... This, [Woolf] tells us, is how her autobiography is written. Again and again, she marks the past by returning to the same scenes, the rooms, the landscapes, the figures of her life, like the ghosts revisiting their haunted house in her story of that name. Back she goes to the scenes of childhood: the blind tapping on the window of the bedroom at St. Ives, the light house beam going round, the sound of the waves breaking on the shore. (Lee 20)

Schulkind says that Woolf’s memories of certain images involving sights, sounds, and odors have permeated the innermost fibers of her being to assume a symbolic significance (*MB* 22). Consider her memories of St. Ives—hearing the splash of waves breaking or seeing the light;

although these experiences occur on a purely sensual level, they have that enduring force for Woolf that makes them moments of being (22). However, Schulkind attributes even more significance to memory because it is “invaluable in extending the dimensions of the moment; memory is the means by which the individual builds up patterns of personal significance to which to anchor her life and secure it against the ‘lash of the random unheeding flail’” (*MB* 21). Mitchell Leaska suggests that the past contained the only world that truly mattered to Virginia Woolf, that region of memory where “past and present merge and blur” (10). Woolf “insubstantiates” the present, continually returning to and transubstantiating the past through the memory of her passion: “One must do with seeds; the germs of what might have been, had one’s life been different” (*MB* 135). Woolf records a comparable view in her 1925 diary, “I can only note that the past is beautiful because one never realizes an emotion at the time. It expands later, & thus we don’t have complete emotions about the present, only about the past... That is why we dwell on the past, I think” (D III 5). Memory extends the dimensions of the moment, allows perpetual ingress; Woolf’s metaphysic depends upon this manipulation of temporal and spatial boundaries.

A moment of being can be dangerous when manifesting as a “sledge-hammer” blow or a sudden shock, but, as Woolf explains, “as one gets older one has a greater power through reason to provide an explanation; and that explanation blunts the sledge-hammer force of the blow” (*MB* 72). The desire to explain it transforms it into revelation; the disruption is ameliorated by the rapture Woolf experiences when she writes it down, thereby gathering the severed parts and making it whole and real and without the power to harm her:

It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what... From this I reach what I might call a philosophy... that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that... all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art; *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the

truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.

This intuition of mine—it is so instinctive that it seems given to me, not made by me...It proves that one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions. Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool. And this conception affects me every day...these moments of being of mine were scaffolding in the background; were the invisible and silent part of my life as a child. (72-73)

Since *Hamlet* and a Beethoven quartet are the expressions of human artists and humans “are” the words, then the obverse is that those things could be said to have existence, that landscapes, art, and music are the “truth”. Woolf’s belief that we are all connected is expressed clearly in her journal on 1 July 1903:

I read some history: it is suddenly alive, branching forwards & backwards & connected with every kind of thing that seemed entirely remote before. I seem to feel Napoleon’s influence on our quiet evening in the garden for instance—I think I see for a moment how our minds are all threaded together—how any live mind today is of the very same stuff as Plato’s and Euripides. It is only a continuation & development of the same thing. It is this common mind that binds the whole world together; & all the world is mind. Then I read a poem say—& the same thing is repeated. I feel as though I had grasped the central meaning of the world & all these poets & historians & philosophers were only following out paths branching from that center in which I stand. (*A Passionate Apprentice* 178-79)

Lorraine Sim identifies Woolf’s commitment to a metaphysical reality that subsists behind everyday experiences in this passage (38), a commitment that resulted in its expression as a form of “Romantic pantheism” in her fiction and nonfiction of the 1920s—“the view that the divine inheres in, and emanates through, the physical world” (41). Any analysis of Woolf’s beliefs is complicated by her mystical approach to her own atheism; as Sim reminds us, her “sense of the numinous is secular, and her abstract reality is distinguished from mysticism by its rootedness in lived experience” (41). This rootedness takes the form of “reality” as inherent in nature. Consider how purposefully she uses conventional religious terminology when sharing her relationship to the summer landscape at Monk’s House in 1928:

Often down here I have entered into a sanctuary; a nunnery; had a religious retreat; of great agony once; & always some terror: so afraid one is of loneliness: of seeing to the bottom of the vessel. That is one of the experiences I have had here in some Augusts; & got then to a consciousness of what I call 'reality': a thing I see before me; something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest & continue to exist. Reality I call it. And I fancy sometimes this is the most necessary thing to me: that which I seek. But who knows—once one takes a pen & writes? How difficult not to go making 'reality' this and that, whereas it is one thing. Now perhaps this is my gift; this perhaps is what distinguishes me from other people; I think it may be rare to have so acute a sense of something like that—but again, who knows: I would like to express it too. (D III 196)

Sim identifies visibility as “an important trope in Woolf’s negotiations between abstract and empirical reality” because Woolf interprets her abstract sense of “reality” through visual metaphors as if it is something “potentially apprehended through physical vision”—when only “intellectual vision” can grasp it (43).

In her analysis of Woolf’s metaphysic, Sim juxtaposes the traditional interpretation of Plato’s metaphysical dualism with that of Walter Pater. Basically, Sim reviews traditional interpretations of Plato which argue that for him the physical world is a realm of illusion and that the senses are not to be trusted. She then presents Pater, who views Plato as intimately engaged with the sensible world and understanding of the active relationship between intellectual insight and physical vision. Presenting Pater’s argument that Plato was a philosopher of the “unseen” for whom the visible world really existed (44), Sim is persuasive in arguing that Woolf, more than familiar with Pater’s work (even said to have affectionately parodied his concept of the fictional “self” in *Orlando*), belongs in the same category. Woolf certainly demonstrates her understanding of the distinction between intellectual insight and physical vision: “truth is various; truth comes to us in different disguises; it is not with the intellect alone that we perceive it” (“On Not Knowing Greek” *CE* 47). In an explication of Woolf’s aforementioned entry in *Diary III*, Sim says that Woolf’s sense of reality refers to a “single, nonmaterial principle or

essence,” even though both the downs and sky make her conscious of it; she concludes, and rightly, that the support of the physical is dependent upon this emotional realm. She tracks Woolf’s investigations of the nature of “reality” to *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and the essay “Modern Fiction”, where it is presented as something that takes many forms and is defined as synonymous with “life” or “truth” (CR 41). In *A Room of One’s Own* “reality” is:

[N]ow to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech—and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. Sometimes, too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. (99)

As Sim explains, “reality” is presented as “occupying the visible and the invisible, the audible and silent realms” (41); she describes Woolf’s “reality” as “paradoxically single in nature, the one abstract ‘pattern’ behind appearances, yet...also complex and multifarious in terms of the numerous things within the material world through which she apprehends it and which partake of that unity” (42). Sim also notes Woolf’s consciousness “that writing about reality might dissipate its wholeness” but finds that Woolf’s confidence in “her special gift enables her to present the fragments of daily appearances in terms of their underlying unity”—a capacity Sim connects to Woolf’s assertion in “A Sketch of the Past” that putting things into words makes them real and whole (MB 72).

### Landscapes of Memory

Landscapes of memory are a common occurrence in Woolf’s life, surfacing often to displace the environs of the present moment, a phenomenon that she replicates in her work, most notably in *Orlando*. Woolf manipulates landscape as memory in key scenes throughout *Orlando*, when, fueled by loneliness and longing, the landscape of Orlando’s present is

overwhelmed by another from a past life. One instance begins as the newly female Orlando gazes upon a bald mountain-side in the Turkish landscape while longing for England. A shadow appears on the barren rock, deepening into a hollow:

As she looked, the hollow deepened and widened, and a great park-like space opened in the flank of the hill. Within, she could see an undulating and grassy lawn; she could see oak trees...a summer's day in England. After she had gazed entranced for some time, snow began falling; soon the whole landscape was covered and marked with violet shades instead of yellow sunlight... All was so clear and minute that she could see a daw pecking for worms in the snow. Then, gradually, the violet shadows deepened and closed over...all was swallowed up...nothing left...a thousand vultures seemed to have picked bare. (150-51)

Her longing for England is the catalyst for the appearance of a landscape of memory which contains not only the English landscape and wildlife, but presents its transformation with the seasons. After she returns to her estate in England, Lady Orlando takes a stroll on her lands, reminiscing about the Turkish landscape. Looking up into the clouds a track appears with “camels passing in single file through the rocky desert among clouds of red dust; and then, when the camels had passed, there were only mountains, very high and full of clefts and with pinnacles of rock, and she fancied she heard goat bells ringing in their passes, and in their folds were fields” (249). In Woolf's own life, transient landscapes appear often and without provocation. They are so ubiquitous that she forms a theory about them and enters it into notes for her autobiography on 19 July 1939:

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...It is then that I am living most fully in the present. (MB 98)

As if to substantiate or give a visual impression of this extra dimension, she reproduces the concept in *Orlando*. For example, the chapter on the Great Frost:

[T]here could be seen, congealed at a depth of several feet, here a porpoise, there a flounder. Shoals of eels lay motionless in a trance, but whether their state was one of

death or merely of suspended animation which the warmth would revive puzzled the philosophers. Near London Bridge, where the river had frozen to a depth of some twenty fathoms, a wrecked wherry boat was plainly visible, lying on the bed of the river where it had been sunk last autumn, over laden with apples. (36)

When Orlando is in a melancholy mood he looks into these frozen waters and thinks of death (45), and when he and Sasha skate on the ice, they skate upon the past, and a third dimension is added as the gulls skate upon the ether in tandem:

All the time they seemed to be skating on fathomless depths of air, so blue the ice had become; and so glassy smooth was it that they sped quicker and quicker to the city with the white gulls circling about them, and cutting in the air with their wings the very same sweeps that they cut in the ice with their skates. (53)

This layering of landscapes parallels that of Orlando's experiences, which roughly equate with his selves, which are separate but the same, just as the stratification of the known landscape into new dimensions is illustrated when Orlando and Sasha swing across the river and the birds overhead swing simultaneously (54).

Orlando's obsession with Sasha becomes a desire for "another landscape and another tongue" (47) because language is inadequate to express his new feelings, but landscape provides—"yet instantly bethought him how she was like the spring and green grass and rushing waters" (54). However, she betrays Orlando, leaving him for a Grand Duke, leaving him with gadfly memories of his rejection. The heartless Sasha returns to Orlando centuries later, transfigured within a landscape of memory. While shopping in a London department store, the now Lady Orlando experiences memories of different moments in her life each time the lift door opens; finally, she falls into a melancholy reverie in the linen department. There her senses respond like Proustian triggers conjuring landscapes of memory that contain Sasha as a memory made material:

“Sheets for a double bed,” she said to a man at the counter...she looked just as...handsome, as rosy...as [he] had done that day on the ice, when the Thames was frozen and they had gone skating—

“The best Irish linen, Ma’am,” said the shopman, spreading the sheets on the counter,—and they had met an old woman picking up sticks. Here, as she was fingering the linen abstractedly, one of the swing-doors...opened and let through...a whiff of scent, waxen, tinted as if from pink candles, and the scent curved like a shell around a figure...furred, pearled, in Russian trousers—a girl, by God! but faithless, faithless!

“Faithless!” cried Orlando (the man had gone) and all the shop seemed to pitch and toss with yellow water and far off she saw the masts of the Russian ship standing out to sea, and then, miraculously...the conch which the scent had made became a platform, a dais, off which stepped a fat, furred woman, marvelously well preserved, seductive, diademed, a Grand Duke’s mistress...began walking...toward her.

“Oh, Sasha!” Orlando cried. Really she was shocked that she should have come to this; she had grown so fat; so lethargic...[Orlando] bowed her head over the linen so that this apparition of a grey woman in fur, and a girl in Russian trousers with all these smells of wax candles, white flowers and Russian sailors that it brought with it might pass behind her back unseen. (300-3)

Not only does this passage illustrate the rising of a landscape of memory to overwhelm the present moment, but also the way in which it operates to keep the beloved, to continue conversations or resolve unfinished issues from the past. The resolution here is that a memory that once gave pain is now resolved, as Orlando no longer desires the fickle Russian; the only thing in the room that Orlando wants is “bath salts” (304). Orlando comments upon the Proustian nature of these memories: “[T]his is the oncome of middle age. How strange it is! Nothing is any longer one thing!” (304-5), meaning that she can pick up a handbag and think of the old woman frozen in the ice, or smell a pink candle and see a girl in Russian trousers; one might add that she can heal an ancient wound with an apparition held in memory.

### Metaphysics

Landscapes of memory are able to manifest themselves regardless of Woolf’s desires; the most intriguing aspect of such landscapes is that they communicate with her:

St. Ives gave us all the same that “pure delight” which is before my eyes at this very moment. The lemon-coloured leaves on the elm tree; the apples in the orchard; the murmur and rustle of the leaves makes me pause here, and think how many other than human forces are always at work on us. While I write this the light glows; an apple becomes a vivid green; I respond all through me; but how? Then a little owl chatters under my window. Again, I respond. Figuratively I could snapshot what I mean by some image; I am a porous vessel afloat on sensation; a sensitive plate exposed to invisible rays...Or I fumble with some vague idea about a third voice; I speak to Leonard; Leonard speaks to me; we both hear a third voice. Instead of labouring all the morning to analyse what I mean, to discover whether I mean anything real, whether I make up or tell the truth when I see myself taking the breadth of these voices in my sails and tacking this way and that through daily life as I yield to them, I note only the existence of this influence; suspect it to be of great importance...I will some time try to work out; and return to the surface; that is St. Ives. (*MB* 133)

In Woolf’s work, these indescribable, unspoken communications are transmitted to and from “this influence” via landscape: elements of weather or nature, often trees, flowers and small creatures are all a part of a unity, a “reality” that responds and elicits an answering response from Woolf. Apparently, her “susceptibility” is also a variable that determines the way she perceives and receives the communiqué; one must be able to receive the communication, the revelation, in order to apprehend it. Woolf makes it real by putting it into words, exploring this experience through her characters.

In “A Summing Up” (1944), from *The Mrs. Dalloway Reader*, the hosts, the house, and the party guests thrill Sasha, but most of all, the beauty of the garden and the night sky move her to a rapture that dusts the landscape with gold:

[T]he branch of some tree in front of her became soaked and steeped in her admiration for the people of the house; dripped gold; or stood sentinel erect. It was part of the gallant and carousing company, a mast from which the flag streamed. There was a barrel of some kind against the wall, and this, too, she endowed. (60)

Sasha is communicating with the landscape, with the tree and barrel, by endowing them with a gold veneer, or perhaps apprehending it as she would with a setting sun. Peering over the garden wall, she realizes the illusion; there “was London again; the vast inattentive impersonal world;

motor omnibuses; affairs; lights before public-houses; and yawning policemen” (60). After seeing London under this aspect, Sasha can no longer bestow the cloud of gold, so her vision and therefore her feelings are completely altered. Longing for the return of her golden vision, she asks herself “which view is the true one?” and the items (once golden, then not) are at once, “half lit up, half unlit” as if to form a tentative reply (61). It is only when fused with a personal memory that their meaning is apprehended:

Now the tree, denuded of its gilt and majesty, seemed to supply her with an answer; became a field tree—the only one in a marsh. She had often seen it; seen the red-flushed clouds between its branches, or the moon split up, darting irregular flashes of silver. But what answer? Well that the soul—for she was conscious of a movement in her of some creature beating its way about her and trying to escape which momentarily she called a soul—is by nature unmated, a widow bird; a bird perched aloof on that tree. (61)

Sasha has communicated with the tree, which has responded. The response is translated through her experience with and memory of another tree. It would appear that in this incarnation of the process, the soul is the intermediary. Once more, we have elements of landscape, whether urban or natural, communing with humans—in this case, through the human soul. Natural elements appear in service of this phenomenon often in Woolf’s stories.

The short story “Happiness” begins as Stuart Elton returns home after a metaphysical experience in Kew Gardens endows him with a “very valuable possession,” a newly acquired “sense of being” (78). As he struggles to comprehend what has happened, the distracted fellow is forced into a conversation with his annoying neighbor, Mrs. Sutton. Furious with her and fearful that she will disperse the residue of this ecstatic experience, Elton struggles to appear casual. As he stoops to flick a white thread off his trousers, a landscape of memory suddenly rises in his consciousness with a “slide and avalanche of sensation” that seems “like a petal falling from a rose” (77). Overwhelmed, he occupies himself with analyzing his experience and,

finding no words, searches for visual images that might express his present state. Two figures “flash into his mind simultaneously—a flag in a breeze, a trout in a stream” :

[A] trout in a stream, poised, balanced, in a current of clean fresh clear bright lucid tingling impinging sensation which like the air or the stream held him upright so that if he moved a hand or...said anything he dislodged the pressure of the innumerable atoms of happiness which closed and held him up again. (78)

The actual blow by blow of the event is never given, but obviously Mr. Elton is affected by invisible presences—*nonhuman* forces—with joyous results. He struggles to hold on to that connection, returning to Kew in his memory, “to the magnolia tree, to the lake, to the river” and a sense of “mastery” he felt there (79). Ultimately, he defines happiness as a metaphysical state:

In happiness there is always this terrific exaltation. It is not high spirits; nor rapture; nor praise, fame or health...it is a mystic state, a trance, an ecstasy which, for all that he was atheistical, sceptical, unbaptised...had[,] he suspected [,] some affinity with the ecstasy that turned men priests...him it set free. It freed him from all dependence upon anyone upon anything. (80)

Woolf’s depictions of these moments are often ambiguous; therefore, critics such as Mitchell Leaska and Mark Spilka leap to the assumption that these allusions to rapture are sexual. However, here it is clearly defined as a sacred or religious experience, as “the ecstasy that turned men priests” (80). Although Mrs. Sutton emphasizes his unmarried state, saying he is all “alone,” Elton comes to understand that he revels in it. Since the origin of his joy is a force that is not human, no human can take it from him. However, because Elton is human, and the nonhuman “it” is inexplicable, he dreads the possibility of abandonment:

Why, some branch might fall; the colour might change; green turn blue; or a leaf shake; and that would be enough; yes; that would be enough to shiver, shatter, utterly destroy this amazing thing this miracle, this treasure which was his had been his was his must always be his, he thought getting restive and anxious and without thinking about Mrs. Sutton he left her instantly...Yes; it was all right. He had it still. (80)

Natural landscape has the power to convey what we cannot consciously grasp; in this case, an ecstatic sense of being perhaps brought on by a sense of fusion with “it.”

Katherine C. Hill-Miller notes that even in the cityscape of London, Woolf herself receives “mystical insight into something even more abstract and powerful than what she had come to call ‘life itself’: some sense of seeing into ‘reality’; some vision so intense and inexpressible that, for lack of a better word, she called ‘it’” (75-77). Here lies the inspiration for Woolf’s metaphysic, a belief system and practice that evolved over time because of this “influence”:

I have some restless searcher in me. Why is there not a discovery in life? Something one can lay hands on & say, “This is it?”... And shall I die before I find it? Then (as I was walking through Russell Sqre last night) I see the mountains in the sky: the great clouds; & the moon which is risen over Persia; I have a great and astonishing sense of something there, which is ‘it’—It is not exactly beauty that I mean. It is that the thing is in itself enough: satisfactory; achieved. (D III 62)

Woolf the atheist senses the mystical as it is expressed through nature, but the underlying meaning often eludes analysis, coming only in glimpses when our susceptibility is high; like Woolf’s diary entry of 1926 about the soul: “As for the soul...one can’t write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes: but look at the ceiling, at Grizzle...& the soul slips in” (D III 62). The underlying power or entity beneath the landscape manifests in a similar fashion, slipping into consciousness unnamed, since we really have no way of identifying it.

In her essay “Between Being and Nothingness: The *Astonishing Precipice* of Virginia Woolf’s *Night and Day*” (2003), Ann-Marie Priest explores the two worlds of Katharine Hilbery in Woolf’s *Night and Day*: the everyday world of social life and interaction where she is confined by her assigned identity and the “shadowy other realm” in which she is liberated from the identity she loathes. Katharine inadvertently falls into trances that not only transport her into a different world more real to her than her conscious life, but also transform her into someone more real *to her* than her waking, actual, self:

If she had tried to analyse her impressions, she would have said that there dwelt the realities of the appearances which figure in our world; so direct, powerful, and unimpeded were her sensations there, compared with those called forth in actual life. There dwelt the things one might have felt, had there been cause; the perfect happiness of which here we taste the fragment; the beauty seen here in flying glimpses only. (*ND* 116)

Priest observes that reality and illusion change places so that Katharine exists “experiencing fully all that in ‘actual life’ comes to her only in fragments”; she lives a “chiaroscuro” existence—simultaneously absent and present (67-68). Katharine is alienated by the English language because it defines her as a bounded entity, so she becomes enamored by the impersonality of numbers and symbols that will never categorize her. “Throughout the novel, mathematics (and the stars, which she likens to mathematics in their impersonality) function as a key signifier of her other self, her dream world,” (Priest 69) and looking up at the stars, “the whole of her seemed dissolved in silver and spilt over the ledges of the stars for ever and ever indefinitely through space” (*ND* 164); she experiences “nonbeing”—yet another state that language cannot accommodate. Priest insists that even dissolved into the night sky, even though she no longer exists, Katharine “still exists, elsewhere and otherwise” (70), at once a star and a woman. When she attempts to explain all of this to Ralph, “she could not reduce her vision to words, since it was no single shape...but rather a general excitement, an atmosphere, which, when she tried to visualize it, took form as a wind scouring the flanks of northern hills and flashing light upon cornfields and pools” (*ND* 359). To express it in “tangible form” Priest explains, Katharine must first translate it into images, then words, and then, because they are inadequate, she must immediately “unsay” the words, leaving only the trace of the description. The descriptors then, say what is not without saying what is, just as the mathematics she prefers to language “represent her by not representing her” (71). Both Katharine and Ralph are able to read each other’s “mystical compositions” (her mathematics and his drawings) and to communicate using this non-

language; however, in a compelling statement on the nature of obsessive love, Ralph's most meaningful communication with Katharine takes place in her physical absence:

[H]e could see her...He heard her voice...This time she could not escape him. The illusion of her presence became more and more complete. They seemed to pass in and out of each other's minds, questioning and answering. The utmost fullness of communion seemed to be theirs...[Her faults] merged themselves into the flawless union that was born of their association. They surveyed life to its utmost limits. (*ND* 327)

Ralph's imaginary world contains a phantom Katharine that he defines and controls, a mirror image of the condition she originally rejected in the "actual" world. In *his* other world, Ralph changes her hair and even her height, until she is a kind of marionette. Ralph's admission that "you're the thing I make up" alienates Katharine (*ND* 359). But even Ralph is disturbed by his own revelation: "There may be nothing else. Nothing but what we imagine" (324). As Priest points out, while both realize that his love for her shadow is greater, Katharine's is the greater realization because she understands the power of imagination (74)—"no reality could equal the imagination she had formed" (385). Then, an image occurs that will reappear in future novels as the substantiation of a revelation, a glimpse of "reality" or the essence of life, as Katharine feels that she holds "in her hands for one brief moment the globe which we spend our lives trying to shape, round, whole, and entire from the confusion of chaos" (428); this idea of apprehending or holding the moment seems a prototype for Woolf's future concept of a "moment of being". Priest sees *Night and Day* as a natural follow up to Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), as developing a prototype of an alternative mode of subjectivity and a space of possibility, a prototype that becomes more viable in late works, becoming a mode of being (80).

## Immortality

Arnold Weinstein attributes Clarissa Dalloway's conviction that she will never fully die to her connection to the "simpler, only seemingly inanimate things" that delight and excite her (227). Flowers, light, heat, water, trees, and air incite and reveal those "visionary moments" when the "tired phenomenal world sheds its skin, reveals its hidden beauty and mystical aura" (227)—in other words, they are like words for the world when it communicates with us.

Clarissa's immortality is explicated as she walks along her beloved city landscape:

Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking toward Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there...part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. (*MD* 9)

Here we see Woolf's use of natural landscape as a visual metaphor, as a template for conceptual thinking, for the perception of mythical or mysterious energies. The sentience of the landscape and the diffusion of the personality are also recurring motifs. This is a conception of survival after death that becomes a theory as Clarissa elaborates upon it during an omnibus ride with Peter Walsh:

[S]he felt herself everywhere; not 'here, here, here'; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman on the street, some man behind a counter—even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death...perhaps—perhaps. (*MD* 152-53)

As if reflecting the author's narrative need to prove things "scientifically," Walsh goes on to evaluate Clarissa's theory, finding the results mysterious (153). While his actual interactions with his friend could be uncomfortable, even painful—like a "sharp, acute, uncomfortable grain"—their lasting bond proves itself in her absence (153) through memory:

[I]n the most unlikely places, it would flower out, open, shed its scent, let you touch, taste, look about you, get the whole feel of it and understanding, after years of lying lost. Thus she had come to him; on board ship; in the Himalayas; suggested by the oddest things...always in this way coming before him without his wishing...recalling some field or English harvest. He saw her most often in the country, not in London. (153)

In landscapes of memory, Clarissa remains with Peter forever; in this way, she is immortal. In "Reality and Virginia Woolf" (2003), Brian Phillips argues that Woolf's mysticism involved not transcendence of the world, but getting beyond the self in discovering the real world (425). He reminds us that Woolf's notion of a diffuse personality is not merely the theoretical condition for artistic creativity; it is the beginning of a mystical idea, an attempt to escape the cell of self-knowledge, a longing for real things (425). The desire to escape one's personality and be diffused in a wider reality, whether in the world of objects or the pages of a novel, is "partly a suicidal wish," but Phillips insists that it is also very "readerly"—asking us to consider the "ideal of sympathetic imagination" that passed from 18<sup>th</sup> through 19<sup>th</sup> century literary criticism, which holds that an effort of imaginative sympathy, what we might call "suspension of disbelief,"

makes it possible for the mind to break through the barrier that separates it from its object, and for a moment to inhabit the object in an act of whole identification... In entering an object outside the self, the imagination is able to perceive the inmost nature of the object with a fullness that reason cannot match; but the absorption of the mind in what lies outside the self necessarily requires the self to be, at least temporarily, extinguished... It is a mystical, impersonal aspiration, almost always associated with literary creativity, and it accords deeply with Woolf's sense of character, inwardness, and impersonality in fiction. (426-27)

Shortly after Virginia Woolf's death, Vita Sackville-West contributed to a memorial piece in *Horizon* magazine in which she recalls a profound experience she shared with Virginia on their trip to France in September 1928, one she later characterized as a "revelation both intimate and beautiful and, at the same time terrifying" (Trautmann 32):

Virginia liked sitting among the vines or going for walks among the unfamiliar French lanes, but what I remember most vividly is one night when a superb thunderstorm broke over Vezelay and we sat in darkness while the flashes intermittently lit up her face. She was, I think, a little frightened, and perhaps that drove her to speak with a deeper seriousness than I had ever heard her use before of immortality and personal survival after death. (322)

While Vita never explains this conversation, perhaps the immortality Woolf spoke of that night is expressed in her fiction: one survives within others, within places, and within objects. How else could one achieve "immortality and personal survival after death"? This appears to be the belief system behind her personal metaphysic: that one continues to exist within beloved landscapes and in the memories of beloved people just as these people and places survive within her memory and writing.

Regardless, this idea of communion or fusion with landscape becomes a recognizable, essential component in her writing. Michael Cunningham provides a fascinating interpretation of this phenomenon in his novel *The Hours* as his character Virginia Woolf sits down to write:

At this moment there are infinite possibilities, whole hours ahead. Her mind hums. This morning she may penetrate the obfuscation, the clogged pipes, to reach the gold. She can feel it inside her, an all but indescribable second self, or rather a parallel, purer self. If she were religious, she would call it a soul. It is more than the sum of her intellect and her emotions, more than the sum of her experiences, though it runs like veins of brilliant metal through all three. It is an inner faculty that recognizes the animating mysteries of the world because it is made of the same substance, and when she is very fortunate she is able to write directly through that faculty. (35)

Cunningham skillfully depicts the “susceptibility” noted by Hermione Lee, balanced by the “skepticism” Woolf shares with her characters; think disavowals of “God” by Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay despite their ecstatic mystical experiences (so like those of Virginia Woolf).

In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay sits by the window knitting as the lighthouse beam strokes the room, provoking a metaphysical experience. By “looking” and forgetting her “self” and a resulting loss of “personality,” she is able to become “the thing she looked at,” which in this case is the light; looking into the light is “like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart” and this process purifies her; then it strikes Mrs. Ramsay that “if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one” (63). Trees, streams, and flowers operate much like words; consider Woolf’s own revelation about words that “cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them; to foretell them as if they developed what one is already feeling” (93). Words and elements of landscape link together to express complex meaning, even to shine a light upon what one already knows. Mrs. Ramsay, carried away by this affinity, this fusion with “inanimate things,” repeats two phrases: “It will end, it will end” and “It will come, it will come,” and then, she blurts out, “We are in the hands of the Lord” and is immediately annoyed with herself, launching into a schizophrenic theological argument: “Who had said it? Not she” (63); she knows that “God” does not exist, because there is too much suffering in the world, and “trapped into saying something she did not mean,” she is then purified of “that lie” by the light (64-65). Her attention is drawn back into the beam of light that strokes her and the room and the landscape; she watches, as if hypnotized:

[A]s if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness,

intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough! (65)

Here again is that religious or mystical experience: “the ecstasy that turned men priests” (*MDR* 80). Weinstein identifies this passage as the “fusion of the human and the natural” as the light itself strokes the floor and the woman and the sea, “silvering” all of them so that they are inseparable; he suggests that perhaps “Woolf is telling us that the most intense sensations we experience are ultimately impersonal and anonymous, that they come about when our bounded organism bursts out, fuses with not-self, knows ecstasy” (268). “*Jouissance*,” he continues, “thought of as the self’s most extreme pleasure, may signal...the self’s ecstatic eclipse, its triumphant escape from its own bonds” (268); so that indifference becomes the criterion for ecstatic fusion with the natural. Schulkind seems to agree that for “Virginia Woolf, when self merges with reality, all limits associated with the physical world cease to exist” (*MB* 18). In her 1926 diary, Woolf records the element of strangeness, indifference, or alienation that often accompanies such experiences and makes them more successful:

A sense of my own strangeness, walking on the earth is there too: of the infinite oddity of the human position; trotting along Russell Sqre with the moon up there, & those mountain clouds. Who am I, what am I, & so on: these questions are always floating about in me; & then I bump against some exact fact—a letter, a person, & come to them again with a great sense of freshness. And so it goes on. But, on this showing which is true, I think, I do fairly frequently come upon this ‘it’; then feel quite at rest. (D III 62-63)

Phillips states that for Woolf, impersonality is “not the extinction of personality, it is the diffusion of the self into the work.” This self is not an insistent ego, but that which will “embody its thought in art, and sink into every page” (422). Phillips says that Woolf has seen this “self” in Shakespeare, whom she says one can sense everywhere in his work: “We are forever about to discover him; we are forever missing him” (422). As Woolf says in her essay “Personalities”

(1948), “The people we most admire most as writers then, have something elusive, enigmatic, impersonal about them... In ransacking their drawers we shall find out little about them. All has been distilled into their books” (171). Indeed, once recognized, this fusion can be found in most of her work, and this concept of uniting with landscape is more literal in other novels and in her diaries, as here:

The sun streams (no: never streams floods rather) down upon all the yellow fields & the long low barns; & what wouldn't I give to be coming through Firlie woods, dusty and hot, with my nose turned home, every muscle tired, & the brain laid up in sweet lavender, so sane & cool, & ripe for the morrow's task. How I should notice everything—the phrase for it coming the moment after & fitting like a glove; & then on the dusty road, as I ground my pedals, so my story would begin telling itself; & then the sun would be down, & home, & some bout of poetry after dinner, half read, half lived, as if the flesh were dissolved & through it the flowers burst red and white. (D II 133)

Here Woolf writes a metaphysical fusion of the flesh, the written word and the landscape in a single phrase. These fusions of self with not-self (or “reality,” as Woolf calls it) are tantamount to sacraments in Woolf's metaphysic.

A similar fusion takes place in *To the Lighthouse* as the red and white flowers—transient metaphors indicating the metaphysical—appear during Mrs. Ramsay's extended trance (it covers four pages of the text). Mrs. Ramsay must consult with landscape in order to interpret her inarticulate feelings, to discover the “something [she] wants” (118-19). During her concentration upon the lighthouse beams, she falls into a state of “not self.” In this searchlight mode, she begins a rumination analogous to ritual—chanting, rhythmic swaying, visions—that transports her into another dimension, culminating in a multi-tiered vision fused with elements of landscape:

There is something I want—something I have come to get, and she fell deeper and deeper without knowing quite what it was, with her eyes closed...slowly the words they had said at dinner, “the China rose is all abloom and buzzing with the honey bee,” began washing from side to side of her mind rhythmically, and as they washed, words, like little shaded lights, one red, one blue, one yellow, lit up the dark of her mind, and seemed leaving their

perches up there to fly across and across, or to cry out and to be echoed; so she turned and felt on the table beside her for a book. *And all the lives we ever lived / And all the lives to be, / Are full of trees and changing leaves*, she murmured... (118-19)

This passage is a kind of “synesthetic perception,” hearing color and seeing sound, used more prolifically in *The Waves*. The words that Mrs. Ramsay recalls are from “Luriana Lurilee” by Charles Elton, a poem about love, longing, childhood memories and their relation to landscape, and surviving after death (as quoted in *TTL*). The words rock metronomically, communicate *as* color and *as* light, so to illuminate, they become birds; words and birds are made equal in their ability to contain meaning; they echo and resonate. That transformation acts as a template as one life becomes many future lives and lives become trees with changing leaves as Mrs. Ramsay reads from “Luriana Lurilee”: “*And all the lives we ever lived / And all the lives to be, / Are full of trees and changing leaves*” (119). As Mrs. Ramsay reads, the passage changes tack—Woolf manipulates the sense of proportion and scale by telescoping the reader’s vision—the narrator zooms in on the red and white flowers and Mrs. Ramsay shrinks in Alice-fashion, then climbs the gigantic flowers like trees, only backwards:

[S]he felt that she was climbing backwards, upwards, shoving her way up under petals that curved over her, so that she only knew this is white, or this is red. She did not know at first what the words meant at all. *Steer, hither steer your winged pines, all beaten Mariners* she read and turned the page, swinging herself, zigzagging this way and that, from one line to another as from one branch to another, from one red and white flower to another... She was climbing up those branches, this way and that, laying hands on one flower then another.... (119-121)

In this surreal landscape where flowers overwhelm humanity, language begins to lose meaning; Mrs. Ramsay remembers only that red is red and white is white; otherwise, everything is something else. She cannot recall the meaning of the poetry she is reading because elements of landscape have thoroughly fused with her reality.

William Browne's "Siren's Song" is about communications from the dead, from another landscape beneath the sea. The mariners are invited to explore "Love's undiscover'd mines," to experience "Perfumes far sweeter than the best / Which makes the Phoenix' urn and nest," and ultimately, "Then come on shore, / Where no joy dies till Love hath gotten more" (as quoted in *TTL*). All myth and mystery, the mines promise invaluable discoveries, the perfumes of the urn and nest of the Phoenix, everlasting renewal or rebirth, and the invitation to shore speaks to the endurance of emotional experience. Mrs. Ramsay's book has become a bizarre landscape, has grown gigantic, and she "swings" as she turns the page, zigzagging as she reads, tacking like a boat at sea. Finally, the lines of text become branches on a tree, become flowers that are the red and white flags of Woolf's metaphysic. Still Mrs. Ramsay reads on, reciting Shakespeare's sonnet "From You I Have Been Absent in the Spring":

"Nor praise the deep vermillion in the rose," she read, and so reading she was ascending, she felt, on to the top, on to the summit. How satisfying! How restful! All the odds and ends of the day stuck to this magnet; her mind felt swept, felt clean. And then, there it was, suddenly entire; she held it in her hands, beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the essence sucked out of life and held rounded here—the sonnet... *Yet it seem'd it winter still, and you away, / As with your shadow I with these did play*, she finished.

"Well?" she said, echoing his smile dreamily, looking up from her book.

*As with your shadow I with these did play*, she murmured, putting the book on the table. What had happened, she wondered, as she took up her knitting... (121-22)

The quote from Shakespeare's sonnet is taken from the context: "Nor did I wonder at the Lily's white, / Nor praise the deep vermillion in the Rose; / They were but sweet, but figures of delight, / Drawn after you, you pattern of all those," and seems a foreshadowing of Mrs. Ramsay's death and the longing created by her physical absence. It ends with: "Yet seem'd it Winter still, and, you away, / As with your shadow I with these did play." The elements of landscape are like the shadow of the lost beloved. Mrs. Ramsay's satisfaction lies in the fact that the essence of life has been captured in poetry and is therefore forever alive.

Not all of Woolf's literary visions/fusions are transcendent or ecstatic, and some landscapes of memory demand a blood sacrifice. Septimus, the war hero, suffers through visions taken from Woolf's personal experience with the descent into madness. Clarissa revels in the cacophonous music of the park and the surrounding city, but Septimus is unnerved by it; sitting on a bench in Regent's Park, the natural and urban landscape combine to form a cryptic symphony that only he can perceive:

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. A child cried... a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion. (*MD* 22-23)

The same trees that represent the continuation of Clarissa's life ensnare Septimus with the fibers of his own body and manipulate him like a puppet. Madness ensnares him just as the trees do. In an earlier version of this chapter that is now the short story "The Prime Minister," Woolf is direct about casting Septimus as a Christ figure: "He was Christ," who must be sacrificed so that others may receive "his extraordinary gift" (*MDR* 73) and goes willingly to his death. In the final version of this chapter, before he actually commits suicide, Septimus visits the park again, where he has an ecstatic vision of transfiguration:

The supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; first that trees are alive; next there is no crime; next love, universal love, he muttered... painfully drawing out these profound truths...so deep were they, so difficult...but the world was changed by them for ever... Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock.

He lay back in his chair, exhausted but upheld. He lay resting, waiting, before he again interpreted, with effort, with agony, to mankind. He lay very high, on the back of the world. The earth thrilled beneath him. Red flowers grew through his flesh; their stiff leaves rustled by his head. (*MD* 67-68)

Like Christ on the cross at Gethsemane, Septimus, “high on his rock,” exhausted and in agony, must rest before he speaks to those around him, before interpreting to mankind again (68).

Septimus, the priest or prophet or hierophant, attempts the translation of the incomprehensible—what Woolf refers to as “it” or the third voice that speaks through landscape—a dimension he perceives that others cannot. Though impaled with red spiked flowers and crowned with their stiff thorn-like leaves, Septimus is resurrected from the dead: “I have been dead, and yet am now alive” (69), but he is frightened to see this new life with its impending visions. When he opens his eyes, natural elements speak to him: “sunlight fawned at his feet. The trees waved, brandished” (69), invited him to see:

We welcome, the world seemed to say; we accept; we create. Beauty, the world seemed to say. And as if to prove it (scientifically) wherever he looked at the houses, at the railings, at the antelopes stretching over the palings, beauty sprang instantly. To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy...the sun spotting now this leaf, now that...dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper...all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere. (69)

In a manner similar to that of Woolf’s “third voice,” the natural world is speaking to Septimus: the leaf quivers, the sun spots this leaf, endows it with gold. This beauty is “truth” and is apparently only available to those with a certain susceptibility or ability to “see” the world. Truth, an ecstatic vision of life and beauty, has the effect of X-ray vision; Septimus can see *inside* words, like the “feeling” Woolf describes of “the transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them; to foretell them as if they developed what one was already feeling” (*MB* 93). Septimus watches in amazement as his wife Rezia mentions time and suddenly, the “word ‘time’ split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells...hard, white, imperishable words, and flew to attach

themselves to their places in an ode to Time; an immortal ode to Time” (69-70). When Septimus begins to sing this unnamed ode, his beloved friend and comrade Evans is raised from the dead.

During his vision, the landscape changes from city park greenery to bleak desert, with Septimus as a kind of prophet trudging the sands, an iron-black figure looming on the horizon, larger than life, “colossal” with foreknowledge of the fate of man and the weight of the lamentation of “millions” (70). Woolf manipulates proportion and scale so that the figure of Septimus is *made* “colossal” by the perpetually bleak landscape, tragic for its emptiness and the weight of man’s fate.

His increasing slide into madness convinces Rezia to consult his physician, which he views as an act of treason. In his meeting with Sir William, Septimus sits muttering messages about beauty: “Communication is health; communication is happiness” (93), as if anticipating Sir William’s “Health we must have; and health is proportion” (99); both echo Virginia Woolf’s essay on Montaigne in *The Common Reader*:

These essays are an attempt to communicate a soul. On this point at least he is explicit. It is not fame he wants...no statue in the market-place...he wishes only to communicate his soul. Communication is health; communication is truth; communication is happiness. To share is our duty; to go down boldly and bring...those hidden thoughts which are the most diseased; to conceal nothing; to pretend nothing; if we are ignorant to say so; if we love our friends to let them know it. (*CR* 64-65)

Writing the soul is essential; therefore both she and Montaigne feel that “to communicate is our chief business” and one must keep close to human nature—so “complex and infinitely mysterious” (*CR* 64). Even reading, Woolf claims, has communication as its goal, not knowledge or understanding, but “to extend our intercourse beyond our own time and province” because there are wonders in this world, “halcyons and undiscovered lands, men with dogs’ heads and eyes in their chests” (64). Most intriguing, she says, is the possibility that “we are asleep in this world; possibly there is some other which is apparent to beings with *a sense which*

*we now lack*” (64, emphasis mine). Perhaps this is the other world that Katharine Hilbery of *Night and Day* occupies, or the world that Rachel apprehends through music in *The Voyage Out*.

It is clear that Woolf intuitively senses another world in her own life, as is evidenced by a 1926 diary entry:

[F]or all of this, there is a vacancy & silence somewhere in the machine... If I never felt these extraordinarily pervasive strains—of unrest, or rest, or happiness, or discomfort—I should float down into acquiescence... If I could catch the feeling, I would: the feeling of the singing of the real world, as one is driven by loneliness & silence from the habitable world... But anything is possible. And this curious steed, life; is genuine— Does any of this convey what I want to say?—But I have not really laid hands on the emptiness after all. (D III 260)

Sally Minogue uses this quote to illustrate that “it is only through the interstices of fullness and vacancy that [Woolf] can show a glimpse of what, by its very nature, she cannot ‘catch’” (284).

Mrs. Dalloway is a case in point: Clarissa has a vague idea about this other world but is buffered by a kind of filter, protected by a “shallowness” that subdues her desire to question too deeply, while Septimus has no such filter or constraints and is driven mad by his visions (Minogue 283).

Emphasizing Woolf’s tendency to juxtapose the joy and the horror in life, Minogue says that it is “a highly precarious balancing act of living a life while seeing that for what it is” (283), echoing Clarissa’s sense that it is “very, very dangerous to live even one day” (*MD* 8).

Still, Clarissa takes her plunge into life, experiencing a rapture that keeps her sane; for her realizations come in small doses, in fleeting moments. Septimus takes another kind of plunge, committing suicide; when Clarissa learns of his death, she intuitively senses that it was intended as preservation, intended to keep his “treasure”:

She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away... A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling, the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death.

But this young man who had killed himself—had he plunged holding his treasure? “If it were now to die, ‘twere now to be most happy,” she had said to herself once, coming down in white. (184)

Hill-Miller says Clarissa recognizes that Septimus’ death embodies conflicting heroic impulses: his suicide is an act of senseless abandon, like the coin in the Serpentine, and also an act of defiance and an attempt at communication—it is an effort to maintain an inviolable core of self (149). Clarissa does not pity Septimus, feeling instead “somehow very like” him and glad that he threw “it” away because he made her “feel the beauty” (186) – he lives on in Clarissa. Her recitation from Shakespeare’s *Othello* refers to her “treasure,” her most precious memory of her first, and perhaps only, great love:

The strange thing, on looking back, was the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally...she could remember going cold with excitement, doing her hair in a kind of ecstasy...and dressing, and going downstairs, and feeling as she crossed the hall “if it were now to die, ‘twere now to be most happy.” That was her feeling—Othello’s feeling, and she felt it, she was convinced, as strongly as Shakespeare meant Othello to feel it, all because she was coming down to dinner in a white frock to meet Sally Seton! (34-35)

Afterwards when they are alone, Sally kisses her—“the most exquisite moment of her whole life”—and she felt that “she had been given a present” and told to keep it, something “infinitely precious” which she describes as radiant, “the revelation, the religious feeling!” (36). Although she has lost this relationship, the memory is eternal, and her ecstatic union is now with the landscape of memory that preserves it.

## Essays

Phillips extols the strength of Woolf’s essays, saying that they are deceptively simple, superior to her novels and present in her other works (428), but he is most compelling when he traces the mysterious wiring in her mechanism for argument:

In proving her simple propositions Woolf adjourns to a line of reasoning in which, while the appearance of conventional continuity is maintained, the stress is slipped a little off its object. It falls, as she might say, here a little to the left, there a little below, with the result that the mind is made to work with scarcely any perception of effort in an unfamiliar way; some extinguished portion of the mind lights up, and an idea is apprehended in a new and unexpected way. In some of her more idiosyncratic essays, especially the great meditations on reading (“Reading,” “On Being Ill,” and “Street Haunting”) the essentials of the process are exaggerated and hence made fully evident. But the visible development of an essay like “On Being Ill” is invisibly present as a kind of submerged structure beneath her more conventional essays. The emphasis is always on the conditions that affect the operation of the mind. (428)

To explain this theory, Phillips interprets “Reading”, written in 1919 but published posthumously, as Woolf’s “most lyrical treatment of the close and painful connections between literature, reality and the self” (428). In that essay, a young girl reads histories and chronicles of discovery all day, and then holds the book up:

somehow or another...the book held so that it rested upon a background of escallonia hedges and distant blue, instead of being a book it seemed as if what I read was laid upon the landscape not printed, bound, or sewn up, but somehow the product of trees and fields and the hot summer sky, like the air which swam, on fine mornings, round the outlines of things.

These were circumstances, perhaps, to turn one’s mind to the past. Always behind the voice, the figure, the fountain there seemed to stretch an immeasurable avenue that ran to a point of other voices, figures, fountains which tapered out indistinguishably upon the furthest horizon. (*CDB* 151-53)

The lines of the page are printed upon the landscape, or as Phillips says, “upon reality” (428).

Memory and landscape are not only written about, but write and unite to provide access to the past via Woolf’s signature “avenue,” here accommodating centuries of poets as layers of time turn like pages:

If I looked down at my book I could see Keats and Pope behind him, and then Dryden...hosts of them merging in the mass of Shakespeare, behind whom...emerged, Chaucer perhaps...

But as I say, even the gardener leading his pony was part of the book, and, straying from the actual page, the eye rested upon his face, as if one reached it through a great depth of time...

Through that same layer of time one could see, with equal clearness, the more splendid figures of knights and ladies. One could see them; that is true. (*CDB* 153)

Here we see what Schulkind would call Woolf's definition of reality "as a timeless unity which lies beneath the appearance of change," a kind of spiritual continuum (*MB* 18). Past and present are one; here at least, literature and landscape are of a piece. Woolf's purpose is revealed after the reader puts the book down to go on her own chronicle of discovery: a moth hunt in the deep woods with her siblings, where they trap a moth ecstatically devouring the rum and sugar provided to trap it. After that adventure, the girl chooses another author, Sir Thomas Browne, who writes about the soul and inner discovery. As Phillips observes, "The chronicle of discovery in the world is transformed into an act of discovery in the world" (430) which parallels the young reader's next interest, internal exploration, which will perhaps be followed by self-discovery. Woolf's essay illustrates the way that "writing and reading, reality and self-consciousness are bound up" (430). He sees the soul as represented by the moth, an element of the grotesque, which represents the union of opposites, "the incandescent and the flesh" (430). But his most telling conclusion is this: "We may see in Woolf's grotesque and absurd elements, as in the inwardness of her characters, a difficult flight, not from the world, but to it" (430). And in fact, that *is* the lesson: for Woolf there is mysticism, but it is *of the world*.

Woolf gives us the ability to "see" this, as her priestess Clarissa Dalloway does when she provides certain conditions for her guests, bewitching even the cautious and solitary Mrs.

Hilbery:

For how late it was getting! And, she murmured, as the night grew later, as people went, one found old friends; quiet nooks and corners; and the loveliest views. Did they know, she asked, that they were surrounded by an enchanted garden? Lights and trees and wonderful gleaming lakes and the sky. Just a few fairy lamps, Clarissa Dalloway had said, in the back garden! But she was a magician! It was a park... And she didn't know their names, but friends she knew they were, friends without names, songs without words, always the best. But there were so many doors, such unexpected places, she could not find her way. (*MD* 190-91)

Clarissa “illuminates,” enabling her guests to “see” each other and the world under another aspect, in the light of her absurd and faithful passion. Although other party guests observe Mrs. Hilbery standing alone for most of the evening, she is preoccupied with the “inarticulate” passion the “enchanted garden” has aroused in her. “Lights and trees and wonderful gleaming lakes and sky,” Hilbery thinks, “friends she knew they were, friends without names” (190-91), leaving the reader to wonder whether she refers to the other guests or elements of landscape. The juxtaposition of “friends without names” and “songs without words” amplifies the sense of another language being spoken, another means of perception, as landscape arouses intensely mystical feelings. Hilbery is suddenly conscious of other dimensions—“there were so many doors, such unexpected places, she could not find her way” (*MD* 191)—and confused by her new vision.

From the beginning, Clarissa is portrayed as a kind of priestess, walking through London preoccupied with a confluence of past and present moments, and of the urban and natural landscapes that she loves, fusing them all in her mind through memory in a ritual of laudatory musing, so like prayer, that culminates in her desire to perform an illumination:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when... she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like... the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen like she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window... looking at the flowers, at the trees... She stiffened a little on the kerb... having lived in Westminster—how many years now? over twenty,—one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night... a particular hush, or solemnity... before Big Ben strikes... For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh... she loved; life; London; this moment of June... loving it as she did with an absurd and faithful passion, being part of it, since her people were courtiers once in the time of the Georges, she, too, was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give her party. (*MD* 3-5)

Woolf herself illuminates what we cannot articulate; she bypasses our reason, translates and communicates. The rhythmic passage above, so like chanting or a hymn—“why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it around one, tumbling it”—lifts the reader higher, with hints of great ceremony. Create the conditions for seeing the world under a certain aspect, stimulate the imagination with what is possible, and with the right susceptibility, the reader will, like Mrs. Hilbery, share the vision.

Woolf engages this idea in *Orlando*, as the protagonist gazes at the toy boats on the Serpentine while wondering about her husband who is at sea. Here everything is something else, altered by the way one looks, the way one thinks or imagines:

Now the truth is that when one has been in a state of mind (as nurses call it)—and the tears still stood in Orlando’s eyes—the thing one is looking at becomes, not itself, but another thing, which is bigger and much more important and yet remains the same thing. If one looks at the Serpentine in this state of mind, the waves soon become just as big as the waves on the Atlantic; the toy boats become indistinguishable from ocean liners. (286)

The reference to “state of mind” involves “aspect,” which can alter perception. One landscape evokes another in this passage; as Orlando watches a toy boat among the ducks on the Serpentine, the image of her husband’s brig being tossed about the Atlantic at Cape Horn rises to overwhelm her vision:

“A toy boat, a toy boat, a toy boat,” she repeated, thus enforcing upon herself the fact that it is not articles by Nick Greene on John Donne nor eight-hour bills nor covenants nor factory ants that matter; it’s something useless, sudden, violent; something that costs a life; *red, blue, purple*; a spirt; a splash; like those hyacinths...free from taint, dependence, soilure of humanity or care for one’s kind; something rash, ridiculous, “like my hyacinth, husband I mean, Bonthrop: that’s what it is—a toy boat on the Serpentine, it’s ecstasy—ecstasy.” (287-88, emphasis mine)

Here, Orlando’s imagery entwines with Woolf’s memory. The toy boat is a kind of chant, a conjuring of childhood memories. Death is that “something useless, sudden, violent; something that costs a life,” and what is preserved, “red, blue, purple; a spirit, a splash” recalls her first

memory: “of red and purple flowers on a black background – my mother’s dress” (64) and the waves at St. Ives. Both the memories are preserved and “free from taint, dependence, soilure of humanity or care for one’s kind” just as Thoby is preserved in “my hyacinth, husband I mean, Bonthrop: that’s what it is—a toy boat on the Serpentine, it’s ecstasy—ecstasy” (287-88). The second memory, of a toy boat she had as a child, enacts the process of recovery that her memories achieve for her in adulthood:

We sailed boats of course. There was the great day when my Cornish lugger sailed perfectly to the middle of the pond and then with my eyes upon it, amazed, sank suddenly; “Did you see that?” my father cried, coming striding towards me. We had both seen it and both were amazed. To make the wonder complete, many weeks later in the spring, I was walking by the pond and a man in a flat-boat was dredging the pond of duckweed, and to my unspeakable excitement, he brought up my lugger in his dredging net; and I claimed it; and he gave it me, and I ran home with this marvellous story to tell. Then my mother made new sails; and my father rigged it, and I remember seeing him fixing the sails to the yard-arm after dinner; and...[saying] something like “Absurd—what fun it is doing this!” (*MB* 77)

There is sudden disappearance of the lugger and the pain of its loss, then its recovery and the marvelous story to tell, and last but not least, the repairs, revisions, and embellishments upon it, the joy of putting the severed parts together. Like writing, it is an act of recovery.

In the process of writing, one is creating a phantom of reality, the thing one is attempting to portray, is looking at, becomes, not itself, but another thing, so that reality is manifested outside the mind. Memory works in a similar fashion. We begin with memory of the thing or things, “profusely illustrated, not only with pictures...but with scents...and with sounds” (*Orlando* 100) and with the passing of time and experience we add to it, so that by accretion, memory becomes ambered over. Orlando discovers that “every single thing, once he tried to dislodge it from its place in his mind, he found thus cumbered with other matter like the lump of glass which, after a year at the bottom of the sea, is grown about with bones and dragon-

flies...and the tresses of drowned women” (101)—this image is symbolic of memory and the way it works.

While we long for what is lost, we also long to know the secrets of our own hearts. This is the driving force behind *Orlando*, but as the protagonist learns, “the secrets of all hearts are hidden so that we are lured on for ever to suspect something, perhaps, that does not exist (293-94). Memory entices us with meaning, but as Orlando discovers, the “great fish who lives in the coral groves” will never be caught, although one “fling[s] after it words like nets” (313). Still, the desire for meaning is, perhaps, what inspires writer and reader alike, to know, to see, what happens, what it all means; words are then full of significance, “so plumped out with meaning” that they fall like ripe nuts from a tree, proving that “when the shriveled skin of the ordinary is stuffed out with meaning it satisfies the senses amazingly” (315).

### Narrative Mourning

The posthumous publication of Virginia Woolf’s *Moments of Being* (1976) inspired critics to return to and reevaluate her work in light of the author’s own words. While the elegiac nature of her work remains undisputed, some, like Tammy Clewell in “Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, The Great War and Modernist Mourning” (2004), characterize it as a “narrative form of mourning,” arguing that Woolf reinvents mourning as an ongoing experience, as a strategy to confront the legacy of war (197). Her observation that Woolf “repeatedly sought not to heal wartime wounds, but to keep them open” as a political critique on traditional mourning and her insistence that Woolf’s continuous mourning was “in no way” compensatory or personal (197) thus ignores the contents of Woolf’s autobiography. In fact, although Woolf’s disciplined social and political consciousness is ever-present in her work, it does not dominate it. Instead,

her autobiographical works, her diaries and letters, signify a life of continual bereavement, loss, another consciousness beneath the surface of her work and a more personal agenda: to write what might have been.

In critical works on the fantastical *Orlando*, the social and political features Clewell refers to can all too often overshadow the resident issues of death and loss. The very fact of Orlando's immortality seems a kind of wish fulfillment for the author, perpetuated through a series of small deaths and resurrections into multiple incarnations. Landscapes in *Orlando* undergo resurrections mirroring the parallel resurrections of the selves harbored within the continuing consciousness of the character Orlando. Using landscape as a tool, Woolf disassembles conventional paradigms of time and space, motion and stasis, reality and fantasy, and most of all, life and death, to capture and keep what she loves.

Other critics recognize Woolf's attempt to recuperate and to revise her past in her work. In *Virginia Woolf's Quarrel with Grieving* (1980), Mark Spilka presents Rachel's death in *The Voyage Out* and that of Rose Pargiter in *The Years* as emblematic of Woolf's personal reality at the time of writing. He identifies Woolf herself in the dying reveries of Rachel Vinrace, saying they "reflect her own attempted suicide shortly after finishing the novel" (2). Spilka sees Woolf in Delia Pargiter of *The Years*, angry and resentful about her mother's prolonged illness and relieved by her death. Most compelling is his characterization of "The Captain's Death Bed" (1950) as wishful thinking on Woolf's part, as her revision of her own father's deathbed scene. In that story, Captain Frederick Marryat dies surrounded by the comforts provided by his daughter, Augusta—a landscape of embroidered memory—so different from Woolf's own experience with her father's death:

'Tis a lovely day and Augusta has just brought me three pinks and three roses, and the bouquet is charming. I have opened the windows and the air is delightful. It is now

exactly nine o'clock in the morning, and I am lying on a bed in a place called Langham, two miles from the sea, on the coast of Norfolk... To use the common sense of the word I am happy. I have no sense of hunger whatever, or of thirst; my taste is not impaired...After years of casual, and latterly, months of intense thought, I feel convinced that Christianity is true...and that God is love.... It is now half-past nine o'clock. World, adieu. (37)

Spilka unfairly charges Woolf with portraying an “idyllic version of herself, saying with flowers what she felt she had failed to say to her dying father” (4). A child’s desire to limit the pain and indignity of a parent’s death seems to be universal—even those alienated by their parents in life may care for them with compassion while they are sick and dying. They may even experience irrational guilt when unable to keep the parent alive. Spilka’s statement that this story responds to “all the questions about faith, love, flowering and creative life, that she could not answer for herself” (4) is more to the point. In the absence of knowledge about what happens after death comes the desire to imagine the loved one safe, cared for, and even happy. Instead of writing the story to salvage her reputation, Woolf may, in fact, have been revising the past to make the possible a reality. While her reconstructions of the past are powered by the memory of her passion, she has said that she uses “seeds; the germs of what might have been, had one’s life been different” (*MB* 135). If indeed Spilka is correct and this story is about her father and is embroidered, for whatever reason, it is a prime example of the way Woolf revises the past using a landscape of memory.

Spilka notes that Woolf returns repeatedly to the memory of her mother’s death in her fiction, her diaries, and her autobiographical writings:

Consider the frequency with which she not only brings her mother back to life in her fictions, but in literal or spiritual ways, extends her lifeline. The portrait of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* is the famous instance...but it is only one of a series of such resurrections and extensions. (17)

The persistence of this memory and Woolf's fictive approaches to it form the basis for Spilka's book. He says that Julia Stephen's "ghostly repossessions" became the model for Woolf's repossessions by parental ghosts over the next thirty-two years.

Spilka identifies Toby as Bernard in *The Waves* and sees him as Jacob in *Jacob's Room*, where Woolf conveys absence of being *as* being, through the longing of those who remain and the empty relics of the beloved, clothing, and personal items—artifacts that suggest a kind of survival beyond death.

Most compelling from Spilka's analysis of Woolf's autobiography is his theory of the "robber bridegroom"—that Woolf's mother, Julia Stephen, continued to be obsessed with her deceased first husband, Herbert Duckworth, while married to Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen. As Leslie Stephen's wife, Julia's attentions were diffused: her stepchild Laura had behavioral problems; she had three children from her first marriage; and she had four children with Stephen, who would not even cut his own meat. Throughout her life, Julia did charitable work outside the home, caring for the sick and the poor; many of Woolf's memories are of her mother's leave-takings and exhausted returns from these visits. Julia's final defection was in death. When she died, and the thirteen-year-old Virginia was brought in to see her, the child thought she saw a man sitting on the bed; Woolf mentions it to her older stepsister Stella, who attempts to comfort the child by saying "It's nice that she shouldn't be alone" (*MB* 92). Spilka claims that in young Virginia's mind, Julia's death was a return to her first husband, Herbert Duckworth, the only person to have given her happiness. Family friends told Woolf that her undemonstrative mother had thrown herself upon his grave weeping, indicating a passionate nature undisclosed to Stephen family members. Woolf recalls inquiring about him, and Julia's response: "No two people have ever been so happy as we have been," and when he died four years after their

marriage she was “as unhappy as it is possible for a human to be” (*MB* 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. 89). Interestingly enough, Spilka uses this quote to argue for what he felt were Woolf’s feelings of abandonment by her mother. He points to the deathbed scene in *The Voyage Out*, noting that Terence characterizes his love for Rachel using the same words that Julia did when she spoke of her first husband:

So much the better—this was death. It was nothing; it was to cease to breathe. It was happiness, it was perfect happiness. They had now what they had always wanted to have, the union which had been impossible while they lived. Unconscious whether he thought the words or spoke them aloud, he said, “No two people have ever been so happy as we have been. No one has ever loved as we have loved.”

It seemed to him that their complete union and happiness filled the room...He had no wish in the world left unfulfilled. They possessed what could never be taken from them. (*TVO* 358-59)

Spilka notes that Phyllis Rose says that in death Woolf found the “ultimate room of her own”—a deathly union which he describes as “a dreamlike cure” for her grief (Spilka 10-11). Certainly inconsolable mourning, at the heart of her work, powers a sustained resurrection of the past, a constant egress into memory.

### Resurrection

*But even as we ask it we see in Heathcliff the brother that a sister of genius might have seen; he is impossible we say, but nevertheless no boy in literature has a more vivid existence than his.*

Virginia Woolf, “‘Jane Eyre’ and ‘Wuthering Heights’”

In her autobiographical *Moments of Being*, Woolf details the deaths of her mother, sister, father, and finally her brother Thoby in a decade of bereavement which resulted in their ongoing influence in her life as “invisible presences” (80). Operating like magnets, these invisible presences “attract us this way to be like that, or repel us the other way and make us different from that”; of hers Woolf says, “I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream” (80). Some critics translate these presences as symbolic of social or

political pressures, while it is obvious that Woolf understands them in a much more literal sense. When “life-writing,” Woolf insists that these presences must be analyzed, or we know very little about the subject (80); things that are immediately visible—appearances—float like corks upon the surface of a deeper reality, or meaning, beyond the scope of daily life.

Woolf offers only glimpses of her brother in *Moments of Being*, through isolated memories that expand with the passage of time: Thoby as a child, at their summer home in St. Ives, Thoby as a teenager on brief visits home from school, talking excitedly about Greek literature. Thoby was a lifeline for young Virginia after her mother’s death in 1897, and his visits constituted her happiest memories of that time. In Woolf’s memoirs she is intent upon recalling him:

I recover then today (October 11<sup>th</sup> 1940) a mild Autumn day (London battered last night) from these rapid notes only one actual picture of Thoby; steering us round the point without letting the sail flap. I recover the picture of a schoolboy whose jacket was rather tight; whose arms shot out of their sleeves. He looked sulky; grim; his eyes became bluer when he was thus on his mettle; his face flushed a little. He was feeling earlier than most boys, the weight laid on him by his father’s pride in him; the burden, the *responsibility* of being treated as a man. (136)

In sharing this “actual picture” of Thoby, she provides minute physical details—“his eyes became bluer when he was thus on his mettle”—above and beyond the descriptions of others, even her surviving sister Vanessa. There, as she recovers the memory of Thoby sailing at St. Ives, she suddenly interrupts herself:

Why do I shirk the task, not so very hard to a professional...like myself, of wafting this boy from the boat to my bed sitting room at Hyde Park Gate? It is because I want to go on thinking about St. Ives. I have the excuse that I could, if I went on thinking, recall many other pictures; bring him in again and again. And it is not only an excuse; for always round him, like the dew that collects in beads on a rough coat, there hangs the country; butterflies; birds; muddy roads; muddy boots; horses.

But it is true, I do not want to go into my room at Hyde Park Gate. I shrink from the years 1897-1904, the seven unhappy years. Not many lives were tortured and fretted and made numb with non-being as ours were then. That...was the legacy of those two great unnecessary blunders; those two lashes of the random, unheeding, unthinking flail

that brutally and pointlessly killed the two people who should have made those years normal and natural, if not “happy.”

I am not thinking of Mother and of Stella; I am thinking of the damage that their deaths inflicted...that is why I do not wish to bring Thoby out of the boat into my room. (136)

We must remember that Woolf ascribes great power to the way one thinks about or “sees” things. Her perception of Thoby as contained and protected within a landscape of memory—that of St. Ives—provides sanctuary for *both* of them. But she refuses to remember him at Hyde Park Gate, a landscape of memory that is *still* capable of destruction, as if to remember him there *will* expose him to the contagion of those years. The memory of Thoby at St. Ives provides a sanctuary, a place of purity and stability.

As Woolf relates her memory of lying in bed at St. Ives, she includes “the caw of rooks falling from a great height. The sound seems to fall through an elastic, gummy air; which holds it up; which prevents it from being sharp and distinct. The quality of the air...seemed to suspend sound, to let it sink down slowly, as if it were caught in a blue gummy veil” (66), a memory that finds its articulation in Orlando’s presentiment of Bonthrop’s arrival:

As the rooks went whirling and wheeling above her head and feather after feather fell gleaming through the purplish air, she followed them, her long cloak floating behind her, over the moor, up the hill...Then some strange ecstasy came over her. Some wild notion she had of following the birds to the rim of the world and flinging herself on the spongy turf and there drinking forgetfulness, while the rooks’ harsh laughter sounded over her. (247-48)

The Lady Orlando then hears a beating anvil, heart, clock, that becomes a horse’s hooves, as rhythmic as the waves “one, two, three, four” (250). She then hears the crack of a twig and the suck of the bog and the horse bearing the man, Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, whose “wild, dark-plumed name...which had...the steel blue gleam of rooks’ wings, the hoarse laughter of their caws, the snake-like twisting of their feathers” (250-51). He is like landscape turned flesh. Bonthrop is introduced in *Orlando* with the laughter and feathers of rooks, a wet bog, and the

sound of a horse's hooves, ultimately materializing on horseback (250-51). Thoby had an enduring love for horses, boats, birds, Greek literature, and poetry, and he delighted in spinning a tale. *Orlando's* androgynous Shelmerdine seems to have been fashioned from Woolf's memories of her beloved brother Thoby Stephen and the accumulation of the landscapes he inhabited during his lifetime.

Bonthrop is a sailor whose life "was spent in the most desperate and splendid of adventures—which is to voyage round Cape Horn in the teeth of a gale" (252). Woolf's most "actual" memory of Thoby is of their sailing together at St. Ives, "steering us in round the point without letting the sail flap" (136):

[P]erhaps once a fortnight, was an afternoon sailing... Thoby was allowed to steer us home. He had to keep the sail filled with wind, and father said, "Show them you can bring her in, my boy," father said, with his usual trust and pride in Thoby. And Thoby took the fisherman's place; and steered; flushed and with his blue eyes very blue, and his mouth set, he sat there, bringing us round the point, into harbor, without letting the sail flag. (*MB* 134)

Woolf remembers Thoby as a "schoolboy," but one who felt, "earlier than most boys, the responsibility laid on him by father's pride in him; the burden, the glory of being a man" (*MB* 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. 117). Orlando envisions Bonthrop, a soldier and a sailor, as "this boy (for he was little more) sucking peppermints, for which he had a passion, while the masts snapped and the stars reeled and he roared brief orders" (252). As captain of his ship, Bonthrop has fierce responsibilities, yet we see him sucking peppermints as the ship tosses in violent winds, placid and unruffled in the face of imminent death. After their mother's death, it is Thoby who, after a prolonged period of enforced mourning, finally calls attention to the fact that it is insensible to go on "sobbing, sitting shrouded" (*MB* 95).

Thoby had a natural gift for drawing; he once drew a bird for Virginia, but in a very unusual way: "He would take a sheet of paper, hold it at an odd angle and begin 'drawing a bird,'

at some queer place, so that I could not guess how the bird would become a bird” (*MB* 125). When asked to tell Orlando about Cape Horn, Bonthrop makes “a little model on the ground of the Cape with twigs and leaves and an empty snail shell” (257). The image of Bonthrop constructing a map for Orlando from twigs and snail shells emphasizes his boyish demeanor; their shared excitement is reminiscent of Thoby’s recitations of the Greek epics for his sister: “he was first who told me the story of the Greeks: about Hector and Troy...fitfully excitedly. I felt he was too shy to tell sitting down; and so kept walking up and down stairs” (*MB* 125-26). As Bonthrop paces back and forth he relates his adventures to Lady Orlando; in fact, the name Bonthrop “signified” for both of them “pacing the deck of his brig in unfathomable seas” (*Orlando* 260). Like a sailor returning from a long sea voyage, Thoby would return home from a long absence at school “very shy; unfamiliar; yet affectionate, glad, in his queer speechless way, to be home” (*MB* 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. 118).

Thoby, of all the men Woolf knew, had the most positive influence upon her and was her favorite companion. In *Moments of Being*, Virginia Woolf writes Thoby Stephen back to life. One of the most compelling aspects of Woolf’s memory of Thoby is her perception of his impressions of her. She devotes significant space to the passage which illustrates the way that a landscape of memory accommodates an ongoing relationship, a continuing conversation with the deceased, but with a surprising twist:

We were, of course, naturally attracted to each other. Besides his brother’s feeling (and he was protective) he had I think an amused, surprised, questioning attitude to me as an individual. I was a year and a half younger; and a girl. A shell-less creature, I think he thought me; so sheltered, in my room, compared with him; an ingenuous, eager listener...without any experience of my own with which to cap his; but not passive; on the contrary, bubbling, inquisitive, restless, contradicting. (138)

Here a perception of herself is brought to her through the memory of Thoby’s response to her. In “A Sketch of the Past” Woolf describes her gratitude for his attention and most of all for his

acceptance of her as peer. This seems to be reflected in *Orlando* when, during Bonthrop's oration, Lady Orlando would "listen to every word; interpreting them rightly, so as to see...without his having to tell her, the phosphorescence on the waves, the icicles clanking in the shrouds...and...other things she understood him to say" (257-58); there is even the same sense of pride that one finds in Woolf's autobiographical depiction of this accomplishment, when *Orlando's* narrator says that Bonthrop was "surprised and delighted to find how well she had taken his meaning" (258). Bonthrop and Orlando talk continuously when they meet and "though their acquaintance had been so short, they had guessed...everything of any importance about each other in two seconds at the utmost" (251), thus beginning a continuous conversation that goes beyond words. *Orlando's* narrator will not share the contents of their conversation with the reader, saying instead that they "knew each other so well that they could say anything they liked, which is tantamount to saying nothing" (253). So that page is left blank—the controversial blank section in *Orlando*.

Death intensified the relationship between Virginia Woolf and her brother Thoby, leaving many things unsaid because their shared experience and affinity for one another made it unnecessary:

The unspoken thought...was there, in him; in me; when he came into my backroom at Hyde Park Gate. It was behind our arguments. We were, of course, naturally attracted to each other. (*MB* 138)

Woolf sees her brother as living in another world, that of literature and imagination. Thoby sailed the sea of Shakespeare; it was where he "took his bearings," where he got the measure of the daily world—it was his world within the actual world (139). The life of the mind served to insulate them both from the intensities of Hyde Park Gate:

I thought...simply of the moment: it was a moment when we were both emerging from childhood; and every day...more of him, more of me, had emerged. Those were days of

discovery. Very exciting our discoveries were. I remember discovering one October day, when he was about to go to Cambridge for the first time, his beauty. (*MB* 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. 120-21)

Coincidentally, it is in October that the character Orlando meets, marries, and parts with Bonthrop (261), a union that gives Orlando her freedom just as Thoby the explorer provides Virginia with days of “discovery.”

Sebastian D. G. Knowles, in a 1999 analysis of *Jacob’s Room*, a novel understood to be about Thoby Stephen, talks about Woolf’s method for giving the reader another “way of seeing” (presence through absence). He also makes the argument that the narrator, and therefore Woolf, is in love with Jacob. Knowles describes the passage below as “mediation between the absence of Jacob and the presence of the narrator, compensation through discourse for knowing nothing, an awakening of desire” (111):

In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him.

Such is the manner of our seeing. Such the conditions of our love. (*JR* 72)

Knowles emphasizes that vision is inextricable from the nature of physical reality. The dead remain with us, but this is no stranger than our relationships with the living, who remain strangers throughout our lives. For Knowles, when the narrator of *Jacob’s Room* makes an investment in the conditions of love, Woolf herself makes a similar investment (111-12).

Knowles says that Woolf’s narrator, whom he equates with Woolf, attempts to distance herself with humor as a suppression of and evidence for her love for Jacob, known to be fashioned after Thoby Stephen. In the desire of her characters for Jacob, he locates Woolf’s desire, and Jacob’s death creates her absent center (110). It is true that Woolf’s response to Thoby and her

preservation and ongoing dialogue with him was different from such connections to her other familial dead; in fact, her feelings about him seem much more romantic than those she expresses for her husband Leonard.

Still, Hermione Lee was correct when she said that Virginia Woolf's response to the death of her brother Toby was different from her response to the deaths of her parents and sister. His death clearly altered her concept of reality and meant "the gods" were taking her seriously:

I would see (after Toby's death) two great grindstones...and myself between them. I would stage a conflict between myself and 'them.' I would reason that if life were thus made to rear and kick, it was a thing to be ridden; nobody could say 'they' had fobbed me off with a weak little feeble slip of the precious matter. So I came to think of life as something of extreme reality. (*MB* 137)

Reality here is associated with the negative shocks and blows one receives in life, and her approach to the negative is more combative than that of her youth.

Toby is still in intimate contact with her twenty-five years after his death. As she writes the last page for *The Waves* she makes this entry in her diary: "Anyhow it is done; & I have been sitting these 15 minutes in a state of glory, & calm, & some tears, thinking of Toby & if I could write Julian Toby Stephen 1881-1906 on the first page" (D IV 10). He is with her always, and it seems that it is to Toby that she hopes to return: "That queer ghost. I think of death sometimes as the end of an excursion which I went on when he died. As if I should come in & say well, here you are" (D III 275).

Woolf saw the past as an avenue lying behind; at the end of the avenue "still, are the garden and the nursery" at St. Ives (*MB* 67). Landscapes of memory sustained her, perhaps even protected her. During the winters of her youth at Kensington Gardens, young Virginia would slip into the vast night nursery before bed to ensure that the fire was low, because she dreaded

that “little flickering flame on the walls” (78). Years later at Monk’s House, her sister Vanessa painted the tiles over the fireplace in Virginia’s garden room with a landscape of the lighthouse at Godrevy, summoning happy memories of their summers at St. Ives in order to distract Virginia from her old fears. Woolf’s equilibrium seemed to depend upon a present veiled by the past; in July 1939, she wrote:

For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else, when the film on the camera reaches only the eye. But to feel the present sliding over the depths of the past, peace is necessary. The present must be smooth habitual...any break...turns the depth into hard thin splinters.... I write this partly in order to recover my sense of the present by getting the past to shadow this broken surface. Let me then, like a child advancing with bare feet into a cold river, descend again into that stream. (*MB* 98)

One cannot dispel the image of Virginia Woolf in 1941, setting out across her garden to the river Ouse, gone to descend again into the stream, into the past. Perhaps this journey is not from the world, but to it.

## CHAPTER THREE

### TONI MORRISON: THE PERFECT MEMORY OF WATER

*Here are your waters and your watering place. Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.*  
Robert Frost, "Directive"

Like her predecessor, the great African American scholar and writer W. E. B. Du Bois, Toni Morrison brings attention to the excision of the African American past from our national history by presenting an American historical memory haunted by ghosts never appeased or laid to rest (Matus 1). The "counter-memory" that Du Bois hoped to create for African American history, for which he turned from social science to art, comes to fruition in the fictional works of Morrison, who uses her art to revise traditional Western narrative foundations that obscure the lives of African Americans (1). Diverse critics of African American literature such as Robert B. Stepto, Henry Louis Gates, Barbara Christian, and others have long identified revision as an important trope in black fiction. In *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979), Robert Stepto characterizes the history of the African American narrative as a chronicle of revisions that gradually erode traditional definitions, while Henry Louis Gates identifies revision as a rhetorical strategy in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988). In *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985) and *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (1980), Barbara Christian recognizes revision as a way to establish a connection among generations of black women writers that provides the stimulus to refute negative images in exchange for self-definition.

Revision is presented from a black feminist perspective in Genevieve Fabre's "Genealogical Archaeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" (1988), in an analysis of Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* which stresses the importance of her ancestry with a strong emphasis on landscape:

Embracing her maiden name in tribute to one of her ancestors who "walked through the continent," Walker reenters the garden of the past with a sense of reverence and wonder for places; she reinvents the lives of the women who call her from history. She creates her own garden, a blend of symbolic properties, peopled with ancient spirits, studded with images that capture the unique quality of her heritage as artist, as black, as woman, and as southerner. (107)

Walker's approach and concerns are closest to Morrison's signature method: diligent attention to ancestors, revision of the past, enhancement of myth, the use of place as a site of memory, especially natural landscapes. In Morrison's work, the combination of these elements create a powerful metaphysical confluence for the revision of the past and the resurrection of the dead.

### Metaphysics of Myth

Morrison expounds upon the ancestors in a 1988 interview, "In the Realm of Responsibility," affirming her belief in the existence of a spirit world that complements the human world. African ancestral spirits must have earthbound relatives to remember them or they are consigned to oblivion—so the historic and spiritual contours of *Beloved* are based upon the unavoidable "restlessness among ancestor spirits" which have been unacknowledged and unaccounted for because of the dislocations of African people during the Diaspora which "swallowed their existence" (*CWTM* 246). As Morrison defines the term in a 1986 interview with Christina Davis, her "ancestor" acts "not necessarily as a parent but as an abiding, interested, benevolent, guiding presence that is yours and is concerned about you not quite like saints but having the same sort of access" (*CWTM* 227). Davis, too, insists that these "spiritual

forces” are “very *real* in their own way, although they are different from what’s usually called realism,” going on to say that because they are “different from what’s usually called realism...they’re promptly dismissed as magical” (226). Morrison replies:

Of course, that *is* the reality. I mean, it’s not as though it’s a thing you do on Sunday morning in church, it’s not a tiny, entertaining aspect of one’s life—it’s what *informs* your sensibility. I grew up in a house in which people talked about their dreams with the same authority that they talked about what “really” happened. They had visitations and did not find that fact shocking and they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable. It not only made them for me the most interesting people in the world—it was an enormous resource for the solution of certain kinds of problems. Without that, I think I would have been quite bereft because I would have been dependent on so-called scientific data to explain hopelessly unscientific things and also I would have relied upon information that even subsequent objectivity has proved to be fraudulent, you see. (*CWTM* 226-27)

Morrison’s predisposition for this alternative reality provides the reader with another perspective, one that erases traditional boundaries. Morrison says:

The gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist. It’s bridged for us by our assuming responsibility for people no one’s ever assumed responsibility for. They are those who died en route. Nobody knows their names, and nobody thinks about them. (*CWTM* 247)

Refusing to acknowledge the Western notion of the separation between the world of the living and that of the dead, Morrison insists that our relationships with our living family, with those who have died, and with those beyond death in our lineage form a continuum. As she tells Elsie B. Washington in a 1987 interview: “It’s DNA, it’s where you get your information...Also, it’s your protection, it’s your education” (*CWTM* 238); in addition, this due diligence to ancestors, recent and ancient, is also what she calls “payback” (238). Morrison compares caring for her aging grandparents, who gave her and taught her so much in her youth, to caring for the ancestors because “They were so responsible *for* us, and we have to be responsible *to* them” (238). Speaking as if there were a karmic balance to it all, Morrison says, “You can’t just *take*.

Our ancestors are part of that circle, an everwidening circle” and ignoring that has consequences: “you put yourself in a spiritually dangerous position of being self-sufficient” (238). Self-sufficiency, defined as “having no group you’re dependent on,” is a common sin (because it speeds the demise of the original culture) committed by Morrison’s displaced characters as a result of their rush to distance themselves from the horrors of slavery. As natural as that desire may be, there is fallout—the inadvertent abandonment of “some responsibilities” (247), including the necessary remembrance of the ancestors. In an attempt to rectify this situation, Morrison turns to writing:

There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there’s a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive. The act of writing [*Beloved*], in a way, is a way of confronting it and making it possible to remember. (247-48)

More specifically, she says that since there is “no place you or I can go to think about...to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of” slaves and those who did not survive the crossing, *Beloved* had to exist (TMC 1989).

In the course of a 1985 interview with Bessie W. Jones and Audrey Vinson, Morrison explains the connection between her autobiographical and revisionist techniques, identifying the predominance of the past in her consciousness:

It is difficult always for me and probably any writer to select those qualities that are genuinely autobiographical, because part of what you are doing is re-doing the past as well as throwing it into relief, and what makes one write anyway is something in the past that is haunting, that is not explained or wasn’t clear so that you are almost constantly rediscovering the past. I am geared toward the past...because it is important to me; it is living history. (CWTM 171)

The remnants of her literary heritage reside in the autobiographical slave narratives of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ironically, these surviving works by African Americans, ostensibly her most

reliable autobiographical sources, reveal little more than historical data, veiling the emotional and spiritual lives of their authors, a challenge she documents in “The Site of Memory” (1987):

In this country the print origins of black literature (as distinguished from oral origins) were slave narratives... Whatever the style and circumstances of these narratives, they were written to say principally two things. One: “This is my historical life—my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race.” Two: “I write this text to persuade other people—you, the reader, who is probably not black—that we are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery.” With these two missions in mind, the narratives were clearly pointed. (*ITT* 185-86)

Even with that understanding—that the slave narrative “milieu” dictates their purpose and style—to inform, yet veil “proceedings too terrible to relate” (*ITT* 190-91)—Morrison still requires access to that interior life for her novels. Left to her own devices, she will “possess” that life by imagining it, using “fiction to report what was real” (Zinsser 17). So-called “facts” are useless to her, because like language and power, like so-called “reliable sources,” they belong to the victors. As she tells Christina Davis, “the scholarly vocabulary used in traditional texts to describe *how* we say and how we are is a code designed for destruction, so that one’s job is to clear away the code and see what really is in the language and what are the connections” (*CWTM* 225). Morrison depends upon “[her] people” for evidence because “that was the real life,” however subverted (*CWTM* 172). Traditional, white, Western sources are untrustworthy or incapable of providing the interior life Morrison requires; besides, she finds an empirical approach to what she calls the “living organism” that is black people in this country offensive (225). Morrison will resurrect these lives and reclaim their history without the help of traditional sources:

Yes, the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance because while you can’t really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you can certainly debate it. There is a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people have been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours... You have to stake it out and identify those who have preceded you—resummoning them,

acknowledging them is just one step in that process of reclamation—so that they are always there as the *confirmation* and the affirmation of the life that I personally have not lived but is the life of that organism to which I belong which is black people in this country. (224-25)

Morrison characterizes that organism—a blend of African and American culture—as “a brand new human being” (*CWTM* 225). Although she has not lived the lives she recounts, she will summon and reclaim them relying “heavily and almost totally” on her *own* recollections, and “more important, [her] own insight about those recollections” (225). This will enable her to “imagine and to recreate cultural linkages that were identified for [her] by Africans who had a more familiar, an overt recognition (of them)” (225). Not all of these Africans were living when they “identified” these links; they comprise a kind of Yeatsian “*spiritus mundi*” for Africans. It is difficult to express because she has to “trust” something that is “ineffable”: “It is sort of like, I don’t know, a racial recollection that I just have to trust even though I cannot claim to know it all” (175). This racial recollection dictates that she look “underneath” the stories she has heard to see if there is something more, because “some of that stuff is not only history, it’s prophecy” (*CWTM* 183). Ghosts from the past prompt Morrison to rewrite them and to resurrect past landscapes for the reenactment and revision of the past.

William Zinsser identifies the animating current of Morrison’s work as memory and characterizes her as one who “quarries” the past with acts of the imagination, hearing “voices far older than her own: fragments of recollection and imagery and handed down tradition that constitute the black oral tradition” (17). In “The Site of Memory,” her excavations begin with her trust in “recollections,” her own and those of “others” (191); “recollections” might imply an image that is provoked by sensory stimuli or surfaces on its own. That image is variously the memory or a fragment of a memory or an image of undetermined origin. The image recollection may translate and define a memory, or combine with other recollections (hers or those of others),

or simply induce a memory; the ultimate result being a narrative, a revelation, a truth of some kind. Morrison's "recollections" involve more than her own personal experience, or even the recollections of other living persons known or unknown to her—it is that of others, unknown to her in actual experience, long dead, who ultimately become her characters. Make no mistake, for Morrison, these characters exist, as she herself explains in the 1985 Naylor interview:

The responsibility that I feel for this woman I'm calling Sethe, and for all of these people; these unburied, or at least unceremoniously buried, people made literate in art. But the inner tension, the artistic inner tension those people create in me; the fear of not properly, artistically, burying them, is extraordinary. (CWTM 209)

One might naturally assume that she is simply expressing respect for the dead, but Morrison, who considers belief in the existence of ghosts a "shared human response to the world" (CWTM 242), has an ongoing relationship with them:

I have to have now very overt conversations with these people. Before I could sort of let it disguise itself as the artist's monologue with herself but there's no time for that foolishness now. Now I have to call them by their names and ask them to reappear and tell me something or leave me alone even... They are such special company that it is very difficult to focus on other people. There is a temptation to draw away from living people, people who are extremely important to you and who are real. They're in competition a great deal with this collection of imagined characters. But these are demands that I can meet, and I know I can because they would not have spoken to me had I not been the one. (CWTM 209)

So they give evidence of themselves, whether images, sounds, or signs, and they speak to her from and about the past, ultimately acquiring existence through her imagination and her craft. In this way, they are Morrison's "outside" sources, consultants who suggest the possible despite the actual.

Morrison describes herself as a kind of literary medium with complete trust in her perceptions (209); in a 1988 interview about "the spiritual contours" of *Beloved* (246), Morrison is asked if parts of the novel were "channeled" (248). She replies that she got to the point in writing *Beloved* where she couldn't judge the character Sethe adequately, so she decided that

“the only person who could judge her [Sethe] would be the daughter [Beloved] she killed” (248). At which point Morrison claims, “Beloved *inserted herself* into the text” (248, my emphasis), while she herself was simply “available to a character or a presence or some information that does not come out of research” (249). Morrison states unequivocally “there is a moment somewhere in time in which that’s what you have to know. That is, ghosts or spirits are real and I don’t mean [just as a thought]” (249); so Beloved is “real” in the novel:

And the purpose of making her [Beloved] real is making history possible, making memory real—somebody walks in the door and sits down at the table so you have to think about it, whatever they may be. And also it was clear to me that it was not at all a violation of African religion and philosophy; it’s very easy for a son or parent or a neighbor to appear in a child or in another person. (249)

Memory made flesh; Beloved made “real.” Fictional biography made “history.” The fact that actual religion or philosophy holds fast in the face of Morrison’s ghosts has less to do with the concrete nature of those cosmologies than the fact that the ghosts themselves define spirituality. African Americans converted to Christianity, often by force, but their beliefs survived in the inviolate reliquaries of memory. They were not, as Zora Neale Hurston famously said in *Mules and Men* (1935), “christianized” as extensively as it was generally believed; in fact, the great masses were “still standing before their pagan altars calling the old gods by new names” (33). Morrison describes this same duality in her own family’s belief system:

Now, I have a family of people who were highly religious—that was part of their language. Their sources were biblical. They expressed themselves in that fashion... But that they combined it with another kind of relationship, to something I think which was outside the Bible. They did not limit themselves to understanding the world *only* through Christian theology. I mean they were quite willing to remember visions, and signs, and premonitions and all of that. But that there was something larger and coherent, and benevolent was always a part of what I was taught and certainly a part of what I believe. (CWTM 177-78)

This other “kind of relationship” with “something” that was “larger and coherent, and benevolent” but “outside of the Bible” appears to be Morrison’s way of describing the

extraordinary—the undocumented metaphysical forces beneath the everyday appearance of the ordinary, elemental forces that cannot be explained empirically.

When *Paradise*'s Consolata attempts to deny her ability to heal the sick and raise the dead, she says that she does not need magic because she has faith in God (244); the healer Lone Du Pres counters, “You need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don’t separate God from His elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don’t unbalance His world” (244). For Morrison, African and Christian beliefs exist in complement; like spirit and flesh, earth and supernatural elements exist in a symbiotic relationship.

### Myth, Magic, and Memory

In *Crossing Borders through Folklore* (1999), Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown studies the manipulation of folklore forms by Morrison and others as a strategy to transgress boundaries and to devise an African American aesthetic (2)—and ultimately an “African connected consciousness” (35). Billingslea-Brown defines folklore and its functions in the following way:

Folklore, a symbolic construction informed by ideology, tradition and the artfulness of everyday life, has been described by Zora Neale Hurston as “the boiled down juice of human living.” Historically it has resonated in the aesthetic sensibilities and cultural articulations of people of African descent in the Americas. Articulating the values, beliefs and ethos sustained and re-created in diaspora, the African American folk matrix enabled displaced African people to establish differential identity, affirm group solidarity, resist dominance, and [Hurston says] “recall home.” (2)

Billingslea-Brown claims that in *Mules and Men*, Hurston legitimizes folklore and folk magic as “suppressed religion” (35) by subverting “the frames that enclosed the belief system as primitive, heathen, superstition” (36). She quotes Hurston’s assertion that this suppressed religion “adapts itself” to its locale by “reclaiming some of its borrowed characteristics to itself” (35-36)—such

as African “fire worship” being represented in candles on a Christian altar or the “belief in the power of water to sanctify” that lives on in Christian rites of “baptism” (36).

According to Billingslea-Brown, Morrison and a few others “translated folk consciousness and reified a folk aesthetic through the representation of folk magic” (33). Most intriguing, however, is her statement that folk magic “ritualizes a biconceptual reality” from its position “on the border between Christian and African religious tradition, between technological and pharmacopoeic medical practice, and between healing and harming” (33). As an analytical tool, this idea of a biconceptual reality is useful. As Billingslea-Brown points out, it is this dual reality that allows Morrison to traverse “the boundaries of space, time, and history” to reenact the past, “to connect and reassemble these fragments of the African cultural heritage” and to reclaim sacred folk belief as a transformative and transgressive power (33). Folk magic becomes a device, and with it, Billingslea-Brown says, Morrison constructs alternative epistemologies and legitimates discredited forms of knowledge (33). Morrison herself compares her resurrection and revision of the past with the practical ingenuity of her displaced African and African American ancestors, including “the process by which [they] construct and deconstruct reality in order to be able to function in it” and the way they “absorb and reject information on a personal level” (*CWTM* 235):

My own use of enchantment simply comes because that’s the way the world was for me and the black people I knew. In addition to the very shrewd, down-to-earth, efficient way in which they did things and survived things, there was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities. It formed a kind of cosmology that was perceptive as well as enchanting, and so it seemed impossible for *me* to write about black people and eliminate that simply because it was “unbelievable.” It functioned as a raiment—the body that was in the middle was something quite different—and also it was part and parcel of this extraordinary language. The metaphors and the perceptions came out of that world. (*CWTM* 226)

Magic described as “rayment” can be read as “appearance,” as a decipherable surface for an ineffable reality below. Here one may recognize the operation of the biconceptual reality Billingslea-Brown spoke of—the double vision created by the bifurcated belief systems of Morrison’s family life. Here, Christianity and folklore may operate in tandem, elaborating the actual *and* the possible. Magic and myths, ignored by Western praxis, are practical, legitimate tools for this process of revision. Perception is everything, or as Morrison says in an interview with Ann Hostetler (2002): “Vision is a kind of life” (*TMC* 197). What you see depends upon the *way* you see. Consider Morrison’s 1985 interview with Bessie W. Jones and Audrey Vinson:

If you look as I do in an imaginative way, you find out all sorts of things that are there that have just been pushed off as children’s stories which is absurd. The way people learn—narrative, you know. Myth is the first information there is, and it says realms more than what is usually there. But I don’t study folklore—they are family stories and neighborhood stories and community stories. (*CWTM* 183)

Jill Matus, referring to Morrison’s statement in her *Nobel Lecture in Literature* (1994) that language must defer to the “uncapturability of the life it mourns,” says that Morrison uses the power of language to “limn the actual, imagined and possible” (Matus 17) for a re-mythologizing of African American history and culture. Appropriating an already familiar, even pervasive narrative—such as the tar baby myth or the flying African—Morrison will reach past it, revise it, and then transform it completely for her purposes.

Morrison discusses her revision of the tar baby myth in a 1981 interview with Thomas Le Clair, “The Language Must Not Sweat” (*CWTM* 122). After discovering a “tar lady” in African mythology, she “started thinking about tar . . . [how] a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses’s little boat and the pyramids” (122). Morrison appropriates the negative term “tar baby,” reassigns its meaning to “the black woman who can hold things

together,” and makes it the catalyst for her fourth novel, *Tar Baby*: “The story was a point of departure to history and prophecy. That’s what I mean by dusting off the myth, looking closely at it to see what it might conceal” (122). When asked to discuss the use of myth and folklore in her work at the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference (1985), Morrison begins with time:

There is infinitely more past than there is future. Maybe not in chronological time, but in terms of data there certainly is. So in each step back there is another world, and another world. The past is infinite. I don’t know if the future is, but I know the past is. The legends—so many of them—are not just about the past. They also indicate how to function in contemporary times and they hint about the future. (*TMC* 27-28)

This is exactly the purpose served by Morrison’s re-mythologizing, an insistence that myth is still relevant because the meaning is timeless. In her discussion with Le Clair, Morrison emphasizes that myth and legend are more significant than “stories as they are told now,” and are misunderstood “because we are not talking to each other the way I was spoken to when I was growing up in a very small town. You knew everything in that little microcosm” (26). She realizes the importance of this environment when she leaves her small town to find work, losing that source along with “a certain sense of family” so essential to cultural memory:

So the myths get forgotten. Or they may not have been looked at carefully. Let me give you an example: the flying myth in *Song of Solomon*...my meaning is specific: it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. I don’t care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere—people used to talk about it, it’s in the spirituals and gospels. Perhaps it was wishful thinking—escape, death, and all that. But suppose it wasn’t. What might that mean? (*CWTM* 26-27)

Morrison says it was “a given” that black people could fly, so in order to successfully resurrect and revise the myth of the flying African, she had to think about both the “real” and the “surreal” as reality—what would it really take to fly? (*CWTM* 184-85). *Song of Solomon*’s young protagonist, Milkman, receives the answer from his friend Guitar when they see a rare white peacock in a city parking lot. Milkman responds to the bird with his inborn and “unrestrained joy at anything that could fly”: “Some jive flying, but look at her strut” (178-79). Guitar corrects

him: “The male is the only one got that tail full of jewelry...that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down” (178-79). The coming of age story concludes with a newly matured Milkman, who realizes that “If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it” (337). Here the myth is instructive, fulfilling Morrison’s definition of narrative and myth as instructive for learning how to live. But her admonitions about the dangers of self-sufficiency are also included in this tale, for in order to truly fly—live—one must not only surrender the baggage of the ego, but also embrace one’s ancestors and community.

Milkman’s unmarried sister, First Corinthians Dead, isolated by her father’s wealth and her own unrealistic expectations, has a similar revelation after meeting and becoming infatuated with Porter, a man named and positioned below her station. Her false pride has kept her trapped in a life as artificial and devoid of warmth as the velvet roses she crafts to fill her solitary hours. Corinthians is initially ashamed of Porter and comes close to sabotaging the relationship and forfeiting her happiness; however, having glimpsed a “real” life and love for the first time, she acquiesces, surrendering the trappings of ego and trusting her own feelings: “In place of vanity she now felt a self-esteem that was quite new. She was grateful to him, this man who rented a tiny room from her father” (*SOS* 201)—as her name implies, without love she is nothing. Porter, as representative of African American life, delivers First Corinthians Dead from a living death: the negation of her own community in an imitation of white life bequeathed by her father. In this and so many other ways, *Song of Solomon* is a tribute to the ancestors, for it is about raising people from the dead or keeping them alive in death.

Her citified brother Milkman embarks upon a quest for his “original home”—a spiritual pilgrimage—to Shalimar, Virginia, the hometown of his grandfather, Solomon. He too

experiences an epiphany that gives him insight; to have a real life, he must seek out and strengthen his relationships with his family and community. Milkman actively seeks redemption, fearing that without his heritage he is “already dead” (270). There, during a coon hunt with the local men, partnered with a man named Calvin, Milkman goes deep into the natural landscape, the backwoods of Virginia. Unable to keep up with Calvin and the hounds, he sits beneath a tree “in the deep night of the Virginia wilderness” where he “returns to a deeper stratum of memory” (Grewal 72); with “sharpened intuition” he begins “to waken to the buried lives of others” (72). With his newly acquired understanding, he expands his receptivity further in order to receive his greatest lesson from the oldest ancestor of all—the earth:

Under the moon, on the ground, alone, with not even the sound of baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people, his self—the cocoon that was “personality”—gave way. He could barely see his own hand, and couldn’t see his feet. He was only his breath, coming slower now, and his thoughts. The rest of him had disappeared. So the thoughts came, unobstructed by other people, by things, even by the sight of himself. There was nothing here to help him—not his money, his car, his father’s reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact they hampered him. (*SOS* 277)

In a state of indifference to all that constitutes his modern identity—he senses something that he was previously unaware of beneath the raiment of the world:

The men and dogs were talking to each other. In distinctive voices they were saying distinctive, complicated things...It was all language...what there was before language. Before things were written down. Language in the time when men and animals did talk to one another...when men ran *with* wolves, not from or after them...if they could talk to animals, and the animals could talk to them, what didn’t they know about human beings? Or the earth itself, for that matter. It was more than tracks Calvin was looking for—he whispered to the trees, whispered to the ground, touched them, as a blind man caresses a page of Braille, pulling meaning through his fingers...He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say... (277-79)

Like John Calvin, brought to mind by the hound keeper Calvin, Milkman senses the metaphysical reality beneath the appearance of the world. His intuitions are stronger because he is able to perceive a difference where everything appears to be the same. As though he hears

Wordsworth's "ghostly language of the ancient earth" (*Prelude*, Book 2, line 328), Milkman attempts to commune with the earth and it responds, alerting him to the presence of a murderer in time to save his life. Reminiscent of the Cain and Abel story, this earth is "soggy with black people's blood...[and] before that with Indian blood" (*SOS* 158); thus, it contains the knowledge of human blood. The earth will convey the knowledge he needs to survive and even to fly.

The idea of longing for an original home that is expressed by Milkman in *Song of Solomon* is elaborated upon by the benevolent Reverend Misner in *Paradise*, who describes it as "real home," an infinite landscape of memory:

A real home. Not some place you went to and invaded and slaughtered people to get. Not some place you claimed, snatched because you got the guns...your own home, where if you go back, past your great-great-grandparents, past theirs, and theirs, past the whole of Western history, past the beginning of organized knowledge, past pyramids and poison bows, on back to when rain was new, before plants forgot they could sing and birds thought they were fish, back when God said Good! Good!—there, right there where you know your own people were born and lived and died. Imagine that, Pat. That place. Who was God talking to if not to my people living in my home? (213)

This multidimensional metaphysical "place" elaborates a continuum much like the one Morrison describes in the discussion of her own family and ancestors. This non-place place is absent but timelessly present, preserved in an ancient landscape of memory, embedded in the minds, the very bodies, of those who long for it.

The "ghostly language of ancient earth" is also heard throughout the exorcism scene in *Beloved* when "whate'er there is of power in sound" (*Prelude*, Book 2, line 324) resonates within the women whose ancient affinity with the earth will exorcise the ghost: "They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like" (259). Just as the ancient sound comes naturally to their lips, our past returns to us, often inchoate, inarticulate, but returning relentlessly. A recurring fragment of childhood memory in *Beloved* provides Sethe with insight

into her abbreviated relationship with her mother, a slave laborer who died in her most distant memory. Now a mother herself, Sethe attempts to explain her mother to her daughter Denver when a memory abruptly arrives; what she remembers is Nan, the woman who cared for Sethe while her “Ma’am” worked in the field, and Nan’s attempts to convey the love her “Ma’am” felt for her despite her harsh words and actions:

[Sethe] had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew...[W]hat was getting clear and clearer as she folded and refolded damp laundry was the woman called Nan...[who] was the one she knew best, who was around all day, who nursed babies, cooked, had one good arm and half of another. And who used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. She believed that must be why she remembered so little before Sweet Home except singing and dancing and how crowded it was. What Nan had told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma’am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message—that was and had been there all along. Holding the damp white sheets against her chest, she was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood. (61-62)

What Sethe finally understands from the insistent images of the ghostly Nan is that despite her lifelong conviction to the contrary, her ma’am, her mother, truly loved her. Her mother’s distance was a result of enforced work in the fields; her attempted escape was not abandonment but desperation, and her absence the result of her execution.

Nan explains that Sethe, as the child of a beloved African man, was loved and therefore not discarded or killed outright like the offspring of her mother’s white rapists. Sethe’s own decision was to end her child’s life to save her from slavery, to express her love. She truly believed she was sending her child to a place where she would be safe, perhaps the same place her “Ma’am” inhabited after death: a landscape of memory. When the “almost-crawling-baby-girl” returns as Beloved, she is the ghostly materialization of Sethe’s childish anger and unfulfilled need for her own mother, feelings that are put to rest with the clarity provided by Sethe’s final realization of what this memory meant.

In *Beloved*, Morrison uses certain words for their anachronism; for example, her use of “antelope” evokes the landscape of Sethe’s African past (62). After Sethe escapes from Sweet Home, she is pregnant, exhausted, and in excruciating pain with many miles to go for freedom: “But she could not, would not, stop, for when she did the little antelope rammed her with horns and pawed the ground of her womb with impatient hooves. While she was walking, it seemed to graze, quietly—so she walked” (30). Finally, she can go no further:

She sank and had to look down to see whether she was in a hole or kneeling. Nothing was alive but her nipples and the little antelope...she waited for the little antelope to protest, and why she thought of an antelope Sethe could not imagine since she had never seen one. She guessed it must have been an invention held on to from before Sweet Home, when she was very young. Of that place where she was born (Carolina maybe? or was it Louisiana?) she remembered only song and dance...

Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. The men as well as the ma’ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, some demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did. Just like this one in her stomach. (30-31)

Sethe is driven forward, into the future, and connected to the past through this “demanding other”—Denver. Her memory of the slaves dancing the “antelope” connects her to a collective past and to an existence as “something other”—beneath the raiment of slavery. The word “antelope” is the key to the code, access to a landscape of memory and a reminder that the past remains with us, simultaneously ghostly and substantial, in language and even threaded into the very fibers of the body as a memory beyond cognition. Paul D describes it as something “look like, I’m ‘sposed to remember” (*Beloved* 234). Morrison asserts that her purpose in making *Beloved* real is “making history possible, making memory real” (*CWTM* 249), so that the characters and readers are able to confront the past, making it possible to remember the past in a manner in which it can be digested (248). However, one must first surrender; one must be receptive to it.

Denver spends many years housebound until her mother finally succumbs to the ghost Beloved and joins her. Under Beloved's vampiric influence, Sethe neglects and forgets all outside relationships, losing her job, her energy, and her will to live:

Now it was obvious that her mother could die and leave them both and what would Beloved do then?...Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help. (*Beloved* 243)

Denver finds the strength to act in the living memory of her grandmother Baby Suggs. In this passage Morrison presents the theme of surrender in yet another form while illustrating the function of a landscape of memory as reliquary. Years after her grandmother's death, Denver remembers what she said about the outside world, a landscape of destruction:

Out there where there were places in which things so bad had happened that when you went near them it would happen again. Like Sweet Home where time didn't pass and where, like her mother said, the bad was waiting for her as well. How would she know these places?...out there were white people and how could you tell about them?... Grandma Baby said there was no defense...

Remembering those conversations and her grandmother's last and final words, Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn't leave it. Her throat itched; her heart kicked—and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything. “You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina?... You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my.”

But you said there was no defense.

“There ain't.”

Then what do I do?

“Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on.” (243-44)

Within the landscape of Denver's memory, Baby Suggs provides an ongoing relationship that keeps Denver sane. Like Milkman, Denver learns that fear is just another thing to weigh you down, to keep you from flight—a “me”- or an “I”-centered emotion. Denver steps off the porch for someone else, and in turn, she saves herself. Morrison seems to be saying that you must first see the world as it is and then choose whether to fly or dance the antelope to “shift shapes” and

make it into “something other” (*Beloved* 31). Therefore, Denver must know the truth and still leave the nest.

Surrender as a kind of salvation threads its way through in Morrison’s remarks about religion, especially in *Paradise*, her most extensive treatment of the subject thus far. Within their sermons and their advice to their congregations, two men of the cloth, Reverend Senior Pulliam and the younger and less traditional Reverend Misner, who seem to parallel the Old and New Testaments, respectively, have a sustained argument about their divergent theological interpretations that reaches its crescendo during a wedding that they both officiate.

In his portion of the ceremony, Pulliam blasts the young couple, saying, “You do not deserve love regardless of your suffering,” and you must “earn God” and even “practice God”—“Love is not a gift,” he says, “It is a diploma” (141). Finally, Pulliam tells the wedding party, “God is not interested in you” (142). Misner knows he must not allow the message to be corrupted by the messenger, recalling Augustine’s directive that if the light “should pass through defiled beings, it is not itself defiled” (145). Angered by the old man’s poison, he puts his prepared words aside and takes down the three-foot oak cross, holding it aloft to reveal its “lyric thunder” (143).

To portray the cross as a symbol of inclusion and fusion, rather than exclusion, Morrison points to Christ’s choice to surrender, but this meditation upon the cross becomes encumbered with other meaning. Using the cross as a focal point, Morrison revises Judeo-Christian myth on several levels. Just as she began her revision of the tar baby myth with a study of the tar itself, *Paradise*’s Reverend Misner takes the cross to the podium and begins his narration with a concentrated focus upon the cross itself while holding it high for all to see—“if only they would”:

See what was certainly the first sign any human anywhere had made: the vertical line; the horizontal one. Even as children, they drew it with their fingers in snow, sand or mud; they laid it down as sticks in dirt; arranged it from bones on frozen tundra and broad savannas; as pebbles on riverbanks; scratched it on cave walls and outcroppings from Nome to South Africa. Algonquin and Laplanders, Zulu and Druids—all had a finger memory of this original mark. The circle was not first, nor was the parallel or the triangle. It was this mark, this, that lay underneath every other. (145)

Establishing the history of this symbol on yet another continuum accomplishes many things; it places the cross in existence before Christianity, lending it another type of metaphysicality, the origins of which are definitely African but not only African, so that it gains a continuity of existence that resists all claims upon it. Morrison takes us back to the beginning of humanity, when the cross began; since this mark “lay underneath every other,” there is the implication that although many interpretations have been assigned to it, its “lyric thunder” is undiminished. In order to understand it, one only has to “see” it, to be willing and susceptible to its influence.

Misner’s concentration upon the cross conjures other associated images:

This mark, rendered in the placement of facial features. This mark of a standing human poised to embrace. Remove it, as Pulliam had done, and Christianity was like any and every religion in the world: a population of supplicants begging respite from begrudging authority; harried believers ducking fate or dodging everyday evil; the weak negotiating a doomed trek through the wilderness; the sighted ripped of light and thrown into the perpetual dark of choicelessness. Without this sign, the believer’s life was confined to praising God and taking the hits. The praise was credit; the hits were interest due on a debt that could never be paid. (146)

Morrison’s unity of flesh in spirit appears in *pentimento*: the revelation of a human face emerging from a divine symbol. Inversely, the cross indicates the compass points of the human face implying the divinity there. The shape of the cross conveys embrace, arms open to clasp and to comfort, promises love given freely. Morrison seems to say that we must remember what the cross means in order to protect our freedom to interpret these signs, words, and concepts. Otherwise, the church will become an unforgiving authority figure, another kind of slave master

robbing congregants of the freedom, and finally the will, to choose. Morrison maintains that freedom is not lack of responsibility but “choosing your responsibility” (*CWTM* 195).

As the wedding party sits in rapt attention, Reverend Misner continues to hold the cross high while he ruminates upon the crucifixion. Here, Morrison transforms an age-old Judeo-Christian myth—reclaiming yet another aspect of African American heritage:

But with [the cross], in the religion in which this sign was paramount and foundational, well, life was a whole other matter.

See? The execution of this one solitary black man propped up on these two intersecting lines to which he was attached in a parody of human embrace, fastened to two big sticks that were so convenient, so recognizable, so embedded in consciousness *as consciousness*, being both ordinary and sublime. See? His woolly head alternately rising on his neck and falling toward his chest, the glow of his midnight skin dimmed by dust, streaked by gall, fouled by spit and urine, gone pewter in the hot, dry wind and, finally, as the sun dimmed in shame, as his flesh matched the odd lessening of afternoon light as though it were evening . . . swallowing him and the other death row felons, and the silhouette of this original sign merged with a false night sky. (*SOS* 146)

Morrison originally stresses the “uncluttered” surface of the cross (143), as if to wipe it clean of traditional imagery, then she plants the image of “facial features” that seem to rise from this overwhelming symbol and transform into the image of “a standing human poised to embrace” (146). In the last passage, she has repeated “See?” which echoes Misner’s aside “if only they would” (145), and directs the mind’s eye to the image of the cross, from which the “original imagery” manifests, evoked by her narration. In this subtle move, she inscribes the image of Jesus as a “black man” onto the cross that is already engraved in the consciousness, simultaneously rewriting Judeo-Christian mythology and reclaiming a significant piece of African American history. She has altered an image in a landscape of memory so communal as to be a kind of cultural consciousness, displacing (or at least upsetting) the iconic tableau of the white, blue-eyed, blond Jesus on the cross with the elegiac poetry of the death of “the solitary black man” (146) who is named by her not naming. Her meticulous attention to the intimate

details of his body and its fusion with the ethereal elements of landscape suggests again the unity of ordinary and sublime, flesh and spirit, man and God. The literal fading of the image of his body in the “false night” suggests that this “original” truth was intentionally obscured, lying for centuries beneath layers of mythology and enforced epistemology, awaiting its resurrection.

Misner still has not spoken aloud but continues his inner dialogue holding this powerful symbol higher as if urging his flock to “see” his rationale:

See how this official murder out of hundreds marked the difference; moved the relationship between God and man from CEO and supplicant to one on one? The cross he held was abstract; the absent body was real, but both combined to pull humans from backstage into the spotlight, from muttering in the wings to the principal role in the story of their lives. This execution made it possible to respect—freely, not in fear—one’s self and one another. Which was what love was: unmotivated respect. All of which testified not to a peevish Lord who was His own love but to one who enabled human love. Not for His own glory—never. God loved the way humans loved one another; loved the way humans loved themselves; loved the genius on the cross who managed to do both and died knowing it...not only is God interested in you; He *is* you. (146-47)

Morrison ignores biblical subtleties and calls this what it is: “official murder” (a qualification that evokes millions more). In her negation of the Old Testament Lord who is “peevish” and self-absorbed, she also negates Pulliam’s argument because God is no longer the inaccessible boss man-“CEO” out of reach or cry. As Misner holds the cross aloft, he means to rouse his flock with this revelation, to encourage them to release their fears and love their flesh. In respecting the surrender and sacrifice of Jesus, surely they will comprehend their value. Even with the eternal threat of evil, they must enter and embrace the world—they must, as Baby Suggs said, “Know it” and “go on” anyway (*Beloved* 244).

The pivotal “cross” scene in *Paradise* ends as Misner defines love as Morrison herself does, as “unmotivated respect”; it states the obvious: that you do not, as Pulliam claims, have to prove yourself deserving of God’s (or anyone else’s) love or respect. Not so obvious is that after a long tradition of masters in a life of slavery, respect is now a matter of choice, not fear or envy

or force. God is not only interested in you, but he loves you—and *is*, in fact, you. Therefore, to love and respect yourself is to love and respect God. Thus, depending upon how you see it, the memory or the myth, albeit altered, serves the purpose: it tells us how to live in the world.

### Memory and Writing

In “Memory, Creation and Writing,” Morrison says, “the deliberate act of remembering...is a form of willed creation” (385). Writers must rely on memory to stimulate the imagination; the subjective emotional identification of the writer is of utmost importance, while facts are secondary, even unnecessary. Writers must examine the specific milieu in which a scene takes place, and what feelings and impressions it evokes for them. It is also necessary that writers collect fragments of their memory about a given event because “the process by which the recollections of these pieces coalesce into a part...is creation” (386). Memory is crucial to Morrison’s method, as she herself admits in “Site of Memory”:

[M]emory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant. Zora Neale Hurston said, “Like the dead-seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me.” These “memories within” are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me. (*ITT* 192)

Hurston’s “dead-seeming cold rocks” allude to our ancient past, our “real home”—landscapes that we assume are insentient may obscure a deeper reality below. Morrison’s characters are often born of something as “ineffable and inflexible as a dimly recalled figure, the corner of a room, a voice” (*ITT* 195-96) or even a landscape. As she says in a 1985 interview with Margaret Croyden on her aspirations as a playwright, “I like to make up stuff...I take scraps, the landscapes of something that happened and make up the rest” (*CWTM* 221). A scene from *The Bluest Eye* seems to textualize this process; women simply say the names of their hometowns to

conjure landscapes of memory in the mind of the listener, and by proxy, the mind's eye of the reader:

When you ask them where they are from, they tilt their heads and say "Mobile" and you think you've been kissed. They say "Aiken" and you see a white butterfly glance off a fence with a torn wing... You don't know what these towns are like, but you love what happens to the air when they open their lips and let the names ease out.

Meridian. The sound of it opens the windows of a room like the first four notes of a hymn... these girls soak up the juice of their hometowns, and it never leaves them. They are thin brown girls who have looked long at hollyhocks in the backyards of Meridian, Mobile, Aiken, and Baton Rouge. And like hollyhocks they are narrow, tall, and still. Their roots are deep, their stalks are firm, and only the top blossom nods in the wind. (81-82)

Girls who look at hollyhocks over the years assume the characteristics of hollyhocks; this suggestibility echoes the incantations involving place, where the name of the town itself conjures a memory, connotes the landscape—a word or sound summons place.

Morrison responds to her own received images in a similar way, using fragments to construct a whole:

How I gain access to that interior life is what drives me and...distinguishes my fiction from autobiographical strategies and...also embraces certain autobiographical strategies. It's a kind of literary archaeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance upon the image—on the remains—in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth. ("Site of Memory" 192)

The image stimulates the fiction that, according to Morrison, as the product of imagination— invention—claims the freedom to dispense with "what really happened" (193): "The memory is long...beyond the parameters of cognition. I don't want to sound too mystical about it, but I feel like a conduit, I really do. I'm fascinated by what it means to make somebody remember what I don't even know" ("Site of Memory" 185).

Morrison's symbiotic embrace of fiction and memoir mirrors Virginia Woolf's intuitive technique for her "imaginary biographies" and her disdain for "facts." A Van der Zee

photograph of a dead girl in *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (1978) inspired the character Dorcas for *Jazz*; the catalyst for *Beloved* was a newspaper clipping of an infanticide by the slave Margaret Garner that Morrison discovered while compiling *The Black Book* (1974).

Morrison has a ritual that is very specific regarding images: “[T]he approach that’s most productive and most trustworthy for me is the recollection that moves from the image to the text. Not from the text to the image” (“Site of Memory” 193). Morrison insists that what she means by image is “picture, not symbol” (194). Her method lends credence to the ghosts she puts on the page, to the truth behind her interpretations—the transition from picture to text ensures a kind of authenticity. To emphasize her point, Morrison explores the use of images in the works of fellow writers Simone de Beauvoir and James Baldwin, who, unlike her, move from an “event to the image that it leaves” (194). Morrison says that Simone de Beauvoir’s images in *A Very Easy Death* function as “reliquaries” where grief lies “buried,” manifesting as the priest calls her mother’s name at graveside, bringing her “back to life” (194). Likewise, she says James Baldwin’s images spring from the event of his father’s death. Afterwards, revelations occur and images spring up: “All of my father’s Biblical texts and songs, which I had decided were meaningless, were ranged before me at his death like empty bottles, waiting to hold the meaning which life would give them for me” (as qtd. in “Site of Memory” 194). Afterward, Morrison says, the “text fills those bottles” (194-95).

Morrison’s own process begins when an image surfaces (195). Tracking an “image from picture to meaning to text” (197), she demonstrates her distinctive methodology in “The Site of Memory” using an image of “corn on the cob” that inspired a passage in the then unfinished *Beloved* (197). The corn image surfaces repeatedly, bringing with it memories of her childhood in Lorain, Ohio: the landscape that contains her family home and the garden that only her parents

tend, where they have their pleasurable midday “naps” (because her father worked at night) and the enjoyment of harvesting and eating the corn with friends and family (198-99). The joyous sensuality associated with the parental “naps” combines with the sensual comforts of home—the “picture of the corn and the nimbus of emotion” that surrounds that picture—to become the catalyst for a merger that goes beyond sexual intercourse in *Beloved* (198). Sethe and Paul D lie in a post-coital reverie revisiting separate memories of the same scenario: the consummation of Sethe and her husband Halle’s marriage in the cornfield at Sweet Home:

Both Halle and Sethe were under the impression that they were hidden. Scrunched down among the stalks they couldn’t see anything, including the corn tops waving over their heads and visible to anyone else.

Sethe smiled at her and Halle’s stupidity... Uncrossing her ankles, she managed not to laugh aloud.

The jump, thought Paul D, from a calf to a girl wasn’t all that mighty. Not the leap Halle believed it would be. And taking her in the corn rather than her quarters, a yard away from the cabins of the others who had lost out, was a gesture of tenderness. Halle wanted privacy for her and got public display... He, Sixo and both of the Pauls sat...pouring water from a gourd over their heads...watched the confusion of tassels in the field below. It had been hard, hard, hard sitting there erect as dogs, watching corn stalks dance at noon...

Paul D sighed and turned over. Seth took the opportunity afforded by his movement to shift as well. Looking at Paul D’s back, she remembered that some of the corn stalks broke, folded down over Halle’s back, and among the things her fingers clutched were husk and cornsilk hair.

How loose the silk. How jailed down the juice.

The jealous admiration of the watching men melted with the feast of new corn they allowed themselves that night. Plucked from the broken stalks...now Paul D couldn’t remember how finally they’d cooked those ears too young to eat. What he did remember was parting the hair to get to the tip, the edge of his fingernail just under, so as not to graze a single kernel.

The pulling down of the tight sheath, the ripping sound always convinced her it hurt.

As soon as one strip of husk was down, the rest obeyed and the ear yielded up to him its shy rows, exposed at last. How loose the silk. How quick the jailed-up flavor ran free.

No matter what all your teeth and wet fingers anticipated, there was no accounting for the way that simple joy could shake you.

How loose the silk. How fine and loose and free. (26-27)

Morrison's image of the corn serves many purposes. Through flashback, information is given about Paul D's longtime desire for Sethe and her innocent love for her husband. It also eliminates the need for explicit sexual language, alluding as it does to their lovemaking in the present. Finally, it blurs their physical boundaries, so that by the end of the passage, Sethe and Paul D are as undistinguishable from each other as speakers as their memories are from each other—they ultimately share a mutual landscape of memory. Morrison seems to encourage this marriage of memories which reappears in various forms throughout the novel and is ultimately affirmed in Paul D's decision to remain with Sethe—to “put his story next to hers” (273). Two stories, two people, two memories become one.

The shared memories are a conscious device—another biconceptual element of her method—and apparently, a manifestation of personal belief. In a 1988 interview while discussing *Beloved*, Morrison tells Marsha Darling that sharing memories can result in healing:

And no one speaks, no one tells the story about himself or herself unless forced. They don't want to talk, they don't want to remember, they don't want to say it, because they're afraid of it—which is human. But when they do say it, and hear it, and look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they're two, and three, and four, you know? The collective sharing of that information heals the individual—and the collective. (*CWTM* 248)

Collective healing takes another form in *Paradise*, as Consolata Sosa, a healer, leads the traumatized, damaged women of the Convent in a Brazilian religious purification ritual. The room ringed with candles, the women paint silhouettes of their bodies (Brazilian *vevers*) upon the floor and lie naked within them. Consolata tells her story, evokes the landscape of her memory, afterwards compelling the other women to do the same. As each woman opens her life, the others enter her memory—occupying the landscape, spiritually, walking in the shoes of their friends, living their pasts, removing their guilt and shame and resentment through empathy and understanding:

That is how the loud dreaming began. How the stories rose... Half-tales and the never-dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above guttering candles...it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer's tale. (264)

As the stories rise, they become material places that the women enter to live each other's lives, to walk in each other's shoes. They travel freely between their disparate landscapes of memory, no longer separated by their differences or the boundaries of individual experience. Each woman acquires Consolata's talent for what she calls "in sight"—"stepping in" the mind or body of another. The women heal themselves and each other in this exchange; they forgive each other as they forgive themselves and those who hurt them: "accusations directed to the dead and long gone are undone by murmurs of love" (*Paradise* 264).

### Strange Fruit

Morrison replicates the way images come to her during the creative process in her novels where elusive, fragmented, provocative images become nomadic, making brief, sporadic appearances along the trajectory of the narrative, accumulating substance and therefore meaning along the way. In *Beloved*, Sethe has a recurring memory, an image that haunts her throughout the novel: "boys in trees" at Sweet Home, the plantation where she was once a slave. This gadfly image insistently points to "something" that Sethe is either unable or unwilling to comprehend, reiterating in progressively altered incarnations, but always within the same landscape of memory. The image debuts with the first landscape of memory in the novel, Sweet Home, as Sethe rushes towards home with other things on her mind:

[S]uddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—

remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (6)

The landscape imposes its will upon her memory as the beauty of the sycamores obscures the full meaning of the image. The implication of violence is as muted as the image itself by incongruous descriptions like “beauty,” “pretty place,” “lacy groves,” and “the wonderful soughing trees,” but most of all the fact that the boys are “children.” Since the specifics are not given, the reader can share Sethe’s denial; he can simply think of children climbing beautiful trees, perhaps without asking why Sethe was ashamed for not remembering them. Like the images in Morrison’s image-writing ritual, they are provocative and laden with accrued meaning.

The boys-in-trees image returns with the surprise appearance of Paul D, whom Sethe has not seen since her escape from the plantation almost twenty years ago. When Paul D does not mention him, Sethe inquires about her husband Halle, who failed to meet her when she ran from Sweet Home:

“I wouldn’t have to ask about him, would I? You’d tell me if there was anything to tell, wouldn’t you?” Sethe looked down at her feet and saw again the sycamores.  
“I’d tell you. Sure I’d tell you... You must think he’s still alive.”  
“No. I think he’s dead. It’s not being sure that keeps him alive.” (8)

As unlikely as Halle’s successful escape may be, not knowing keeps him alive “somewhere” (86) for Sethe—he continues to exist in a landscape of memory. Paul D knows that Halle is dead, but at this time will not tell her. Later, the image recurs as Sethe attempts to remember her sons, Howard and Buglar, driven away as teenagers by the baby ghost occupying their home:

124 was so full of strong feeling perhaps she was oblivious to the loss of anything at all. There was a time when she scanned the fields every morning and every evening for her boys... Cloud shadow on the road, an old woman, a wandering goat... each one looked at first like Howard—no, Buglar. Little by little she stopped and their thirteen-year-old faces faded completely into their baby ones, which came to her only in sleep. When her dreams roamed outside 124, anywhere they wished, she saw them, sometimes in beautiful trees, their little legs barely visible in the leaves. Sometimes they ran along

the railroad track laughing, too loud, apparently, to hear her because they never did turn around. (39)

Her boys spent their childhood at Sweet Home doing just those things. The image is ambiguous...are they playing in the trees, or have they been apprehended and killed there by evil white men? Are the children playing on the tracks her children or even ghosts? Finally, Paul D reveals Halle's fate, forcing Sethe to accept at least part of the reality behind this image:

It was time to lay it all down. Before Paul D came and sat on her front porch steps, words whispered in the keeping room had kept her going. Helped her endure the chastising ghost; refurbished the baby faces of Howard and Buglar and kept them whole in the world because in her dreams she saw only their parts in trees; and kept her husband shadowy but *there*—somewhere. (86)

Sethe must admit Halle's death, but the image of her sons is still fragmented, not yet whole and therefore not yet real, sparing her from the full force of her grief.

Later, Sethe recalls the last time she saw Paul D's brother, Paul A—after a beating from Schoolteacher, the new master: “he had company in the prettiest trees you ever saw” (197), and here one realizes that grown men were hung by the neck in those trees. Then, as Sethe attempts to explain herself to Beloved, whom she believes to be her crawling-only-baby-girl returned from the dead, the image resurfaces:

What I had to get through later I got through because of you. Passed right by those boys hanging in the trees. One had Paul A's shirt on but not his feet or his head. I walked right on by because only me had your milk, and God do what He would, I was going to get it to you. You remember that, don't you; that I did? That when I got here I had enough milk for all?” (198)

As she explains that one of the “boys” wore Paul A's shirt, the realization hits and the gruesome image fulfills itself. Here is a nightmare landscape of memory that intensifies, peaking as Denver justifies her mother's infanticide by explaining that there are worse things than having your mother cut your throat, like “what Baby Suggs died of” and “what made Paul D tremble” (251):

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you wouldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean. No undreamable dreams about whether the headless, footless torso hanging in the tree with a sign on it was her husband or Paul A; whether the bubbling-hot girls in the colored-school fire set by patriots included her daughter; whether a gang of whites invaded her daughter's private parts, soiled her daughter's thighs and threw her daughter out of the wagon...what [Sethe] had done was right because it came from true love. (251)

The image fully reveals itself as the murdered Sweet Home men, now elements of landscape, hanging like strange fruit from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. But this prismatic image, now sons, now friends, now husbands, now brothers, reveals a continuum of violence and death that precedes Sethe's immediate personal experience.

Morrison's final reference to that image represents its absence, Sethe's release from this memory. As Sethe is "saved" by the singing of the women of the community, she looks up: "The sky is blue and clear. Not one touch of death in the definite green of the leaves" (261).

The sycamores are empty at last.

Cathy Caruth relates a similar process in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) while describing the aftereffects of a traumatic event, which she characterizes as "possession":

"[Trauma is] the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits" (4). More to the point:

It is this literality and its insistent return which thus constitutes trauma and points toward its enigmatic core: the delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event. It is indeed this truth of traumatic experience that forms the center of its pathology or symptoms; it is not a pathology, that is, of falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself. (5)

The boys in trees imagery returns until it is realized, until Sethe is able to digest it, until it is exorcised from her memory to resume its haunting in the memory of the reader.

## The Perfect Memory of Water

Distill the process of writing and memory is its essence, not only for Morrison, but, she claims, for any writer. After twenty years of being an editor and observing many authors, she concludes, “no matter how ‘fictional’ the account of these writers, or how much it was the product of invention, the act of imagination is bound up with memory” (“Site of Memory” 198):

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our “flooding.”

Along with personal recollection, the matrix of the work I do is the wish to extend, fill in and complement slave autobiographical narratives. But only the matrix. What comes of all that is dictated by other concerns, not least among them the novel’s own integrity. Still, like water, I remember where I was before I was “straightened out.” (198-99)

Morrison’s contention is that the memory has existence, with the capacity for intention, desire, and longing. No matter how you attempt to suppress it, it will out. Writers then write by compulsion, experiencing “emotional memory,” which appears to stimulate, be augmented by, or be indistinguishable from imagination. Although her conscious political work is the completion of the autobiographies of her ancestors, memory and imagination (and the ancestors themselves) “dictate” the rest.

The insistent return of memory as landscape is illustrated graphically in *Beloved*, where Sethe calls it a “rememory”:

Unfortunately her brain was devious. She might be hurrying across a field...Nothing else would be on her mind...Nothing. Just the breeze cooling her face as she rushed toward water. And then sopping the chamomile away with pump water and rags, her mind fixed on getting every last bit of sap off...Then something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them...and suddenly there was Sweet Home. (6)

While Sethe's memory of Sweet Home is involuntary, it is by no means Proustian, as there are no specific triggers—it has intention and autonomy instead. Sethe's attempts to warn her daughter Denver about these “places” illustrate the evolution of memory into independent existence:

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget...But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. (35-36)

These remembered landscapes operate uncannily like Morrison's images that rise so insistently to provoke and prevail. Rememories are tangible, have existence, like the ghosts of places but with autonomy and direction. Sethe insists upon their reality:

Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something and see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you. That's how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what.

Denver picked at her fingernails. “If it's still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies.”

Sethe looked right in Denver's face. “Nothing ever does,” she said. (36)

Traumatic events acquire immortality by embedding themselves in the memory, returning to attack without provocation or rationale. Landscapes of memory can also ensure the preservation of love and perpetuation of relationships. Like Sweet Home, Sethe's infant can die but can remain “real” while cradled in a landscape of memory.

Ashraf Rushdy describes memory in *Beloved* as “a communal property of friends, of family, of a people. The magic of memory is that it is interpersonal, that it is the basis for

constructing relationships with the other who also remembers” (321-322). Consider Sixo’s declaration to Paul D, extolling the virtues of his Thirty-Mile Woman in *Beloved*: “She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It’s good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind” (272-73). She re-members him, like Isis “gathers together the scattered body-parts of her slain husband Osiris, and by doing so restores him to life” (Atwood 170). Just as Toni Morrison gathers the “artifacts” and remnants of the African American past in order to reconstitute it, her characters gather the fragments of their memories to make them whole.

Laurence J. Kirmayer explains in “Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Disassociation” that Morrison’s novels create a “public space of trauma” (190) that “provides a consensual reality and collective memory through which fragments of personal memory can be assembled, reconstructed, and displayed with tacit assumption of validity” (190). As Gurleen Grewal remarks on *Beloved*, Morrison’s work is often organized by “fragments coming together”(104)—an idea presented in many ways: “The narrative represents fragmented bodies, psyches, stories, and memories gradually becoming whole through telling” (104). As Grewal notes, *Denver* and *Beloved* both “experience themselves as fragmenting bodies whose parts do not hold together” (104). Physical objects such as Sethe’s wedding dress made of disparate scraps of cloth and Baby Suggs’ contemplation of the few squares of color used in her otherwise uniformly bland quilt direct the mind’s eye to these fragments so representative of the processes of memory in this novel (104). The “boys in trees” imagery illustrates the trajectory of the process as fragmented memories cohere piece by piece and become whole, or real. But Morrison insists that these fragments can be brought together through shared experience, memories, and lives. Paul D “regards Sethe as the woman who can gather all the pieces of himself and arrange

them in the right order for him” (Grewal 104)—an idea that appeared first in *Tar Baby* as the black woman who can hold it all together, a concept arising from Morrison’s conceptual revision of the tar baby myth.

Morrison’s domestic multifaceted metaphor for memory in *Song of Solomon* is the watermark—this image of an actual stain on a dining room table represents Ruth Dead’s memory of the father she worships, a love that keeps him alive. As a metaphor, it dovetails nicely with Morrison’s Mississippi River analogy, especially when we consider the play on the word “watermark,” the height to which water rises or has risen in a river. Her father is well represented by such a mark, because Ruth’s esteem for him, especially after his death, is so high that her husband Macon Dead can never measure up:

Ruth looked for the water mark several times during the day. She knew it was there, would always be there, but she needed to confirm its presence. Like the keeper of the lighthouse and the prisoner, she regarded it as a mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her that the world was still there; that this was life and not a dream. That she was alive somewhere, inside, which she acknowledged to be true only because a thing she knew intimately was out there, outside herself.

Even in the cave of sleep, without dreaming of it or thinking of it at all, she felt its presence. Oh, she talked endlessly...about how to get rid of it... But her glance was nutritious; the spot became, if anything, more pronounced as the years passed.

The cloudy gray circle identified the place where the bowl filled every day during the doctor’s life with fresh flowers had stood...

It was for her father a touch that distinguished his own family from the people among whom they lived. For Ruth it was the summation of the affectionate elegance with which she believed her childhood had been surrounded. (11-12)

Because of her passion for her father, Ruth comes to her husband like a watermarked page, already branded by the manufacturer, no longer virginal. Ruth needs the watermark, now that she is Ruth Dead and her father is dead, to verify that she was once alive. The watermark itself evolves into a living element of landscape: “it behaved as though it were itself a plant and flourished into a huge suede-grey flower that throbbed like fever, and sighed like the shift of

sand dunes. But it could also be still. Patient, restful and still” (13). The ghostly stain takes on a life and exerts a will of its own.

Morrison’s landscapes of memory assume many forms, are insistent, living on in the mind regardless of the changes in the present. *Song of Solomon*’s “Not Doctor Street” bears a name the post office will not recognize; this is no barrier to the African American community, who often go unrecognized by whites and their institutions:

Town maps registered the street as Mains Avenue, but the only colored doctor in the city had lived and died on that street, and when he moved there in 1896, his patients took to calling the street, which none of them lived in or near, Doctor Street. (4)

As other African Americans move in, the postal service becomes a popular means of transferring messages, but letters that come addressed to that street are either returned or passed on to the “Dead Letter Office”—a situation complicated when Macon Dead and his family move to Not Doctor Street (4). In 1918, when colored men were being drafted and a few gave that address, it acquired a “quasi-official status”; later, the white authorities, “whose concern for appropriate names” was “the principal part of their political life,” saw to it that the name was never used in any “official” capacity (4). Therefore, when authorities posted notices in Southside that the street “had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street...It was a genuinely clarifying public notice because it gave Southside residents a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well”—of course, they called it “Not Doctor Street”. Absence is overwhelmingly present as the persistence of memory reveals a landscape of memory existing pentimento style beneath the “official” landscape on the city map.

A similar phenomenon exists at Macon Dead’s office on Not Doctor Street (17):

At least he thought of it as his office, had even painted the word **OFFICE** on the door. But the plate-glass window contradicted him. In peeling gold letters arranged in a semicircle, his business establishment was declared to be Sonny’s Shop. Scraping the previous owner’s name off was hardly worth the trouble since he couldn’t scrape it from

anybody's mind. His storefront office was never called anything but Sonny's Shop, although nobody now could remember thirty years back, when, presumably, Sonny did something or other there. (17)

Landscapes of memory operate in a like manner; they persevere, illustrating the function of memory as palimpsest upon which places, people and events are permanently inscribed.

Milkman Dead must learn to recognize such landscapes and to understand the "ghostly language of the earth" (*Prelude*, Book 2, line 328) in order to commune with his ancestors and to connect with his heritage. Morrison trains the mind's eye of the reader alongside that of Milkman, who experiences his first vision or revelation on his first trip away from home on a bus cross-country:

He read the road signs with interest now, wondering what lay between the names. The Algonquins had named the territory he lived in Great Water, *michi gami*. How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country. Under the recorded names were other names...Names that had meaning... Like the street he lived on, recorded as Mains Avenue, but called Not Doctor Street by the Negroes in memory of his grandfather, who was the first colored man of consequence in that city. (329)

Once initiated into this way of seeing through to "see," perception is never the same. Like memory, geography is resistant to change, revealing to those who would see a pentimento-style vision, as evidenced in Macon Dead's office door and the perpetuation of "Not Doctor Street." Milkman's susceptibility to hidden landscapes includes the invisible history of the soil itself and the contiguous space between the living and the dead.

### Sacred Spaces

That space is of special concern to Morrison, who does not accept the idea of the separation between spirit and flesh. In *Beloved*, she explores that Christian staple of the corrupt flesh and the pure spirit with the passionate, the indomitable, Baby Suggs. A mother, a

grandmother, a former slave, an “unchurched preacher,” Baby Suggs visits pulpits and opens “her great heart to those who could use it”:

Uncalled, unrobed, unannointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence. When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew. (87)

In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she would sit in the Clearing and call them to her, saying “cry,” or “laugh,” or “dance,” and they would, until they were exhausted. In the following silence, “Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart”:

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure.

She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it...

*You* got to love it. This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved.” (88)

Morrison’s passion for the unity of flesh and spirit is evident in her landscapes and their function; in Baby Suggs’ Clearing, the community finds sanctuary—a place for healing the self-hatred instilled by whites. Sethe longs for Baby Suggs upon hearing the definitive news of her husband’s death, and Denver depends upon Baby Suggs when she is afraid to step off the porch and enter the world. So identified with joy and life-affirming energy is Baby Suggs that everyone possesses a memory that includes her; each of the neighbor women who intend to exorcise Beloved bring a powerful confluence of memories to the yard of 124. Upon their arrival, the place itself calls up memories of “themselves” in Baby Suggs’ yard: “Younger, stronger, even as little girls...and happy” (258). This manifestation of their individual memories upon arriving at 124 becomes a shared consciousness that strengthens their exorcism, restoring a precious landscape of memory to Sethe—Baby Suggs’ Clearing:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

A similar religious experience occurs in *Paradise* in a ceremony held by the women of the convent, where each woman's landscape of memory ultimately serves as sanctuary for the rest. Their priestess Consolata, like the unchurched Baby Suggs, is the product of two cultures, and like Suggs, Consolata's native religion springs to the fore. As a child, Consolata is "rescued" from the streets of Brazil and brought to America by her guardian, the nun Mother Mary Magna. Consolata spends thirty years devoted to God, "offered her body and her soul to God's Son and His Mother as completely as if she had taken the veil herself" (225). However, when she meets Deek Morgan, she succumbs to her long-neglected flesh. Like Pauline in *The Bluest Eye*, Consolata simply transfers her love for Christ to the man, and this relationship is just as short-lived:

Romance stretched to the breaking point broke, exposing simple mindless transfer. From Christ, to whom one gave total surrender and then swallowed the idea of His flesh, to a living man. Shame. Shame without blame. Consolata virtually crawled back to the little chapel (wishing fervently that He could be there, glowing red in the dim light...No beseeching prayer emerged... "Dear Lord...I just wanted to go home." (240)

Consolata understands that her flesh needs to be loved, yet she is tormented by Judeo-Christian shame and conflicted by her desire to go "home"—she has "a memory of just such skin and just such men, dancing with women in the streets to music beating like an infuriated heart, torsos still, hips making small circles above legs moving so rapidly"—Consolata "knew she knew them" (226). Immediately after Deek abandons her, Consolata's adored adopted mother, Mother Mary Magna, dies, leaving her "orphaned" in a way she never was on the streets of Brazil. She understands for the first time the "reason the Church cautioned against excessive human love,"

for her “rope to the world had slid from her fingers” (247). The American cultural boundaries that contained the bereft Consolata fade as the religious beliefs and practices of her mother country reclaim her. Beliefs and practices she no longer has a language for and very little conscious awareness of take command of her daily life. Consolata begins speaking a broken language that reflects her neglect of English and reversion to her native tongue—and her new god, a jaunty Christ-figure, is a green-eyed gaucho in a cowboy hat. Soon he possesses her and she is engulfed in a landscape of memory.

Morrison’s mandate on the unity of flesh and spirit is evident in the purification ritual Consolata conducts for her followers in the basement of the Convent. Once the women are settled within their silhouettes, they lie naked in candlelight as Consolata speaks her landscape of memory:

“My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything...My bones on hers the only good thing. Not spirit. Bones. No different from the man. My bones on his the only true thing. So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost? Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve.” (263)

Consolata’s message resembles that of Baby Suggs in the Clearing: love your flesh *and* your spirit; never forsake your humanity. The intimate link between the women and the *vevers* mirrors the link between the flesh and the spirit; in fact, the women “had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below” (265). The painted silhouettes still exist firmly and visibly when they stand and move away from them—artistic renderings of Morrison’s landscapes of memory.

## Narrative Mourning

Longing and its function as a catalyst for return is an integral part of the way a landscape of memory works. It is also a common motif in African American literature:

From Harlem in the twenties to Paris in the thirties and the Americas in the sixties, “back to Africa,” “ancestralism,” and the “return to the source” have constituted a cultural and aesthetic paradigm for African-descended people in diaspora...it has persisted. As symbolic balm for the psychic wounds inflicted by forced migration and displacement, the motif of longing and return, especially during the decade of the sixties, was a mechanism for critique and creation. A critique and subversion of cultural imperialism, the “return to the source” was a strategy for the “management of reality” and the definition of identity. (Billingslea-Brown 56)

This motif often appears in Morrison’s work in myths like the flying African, but more often as the phenomenon of resurrection, accepted in both Christian and African American lore.

Resurrections are most often conjured with memory, taking multiple forms: brief recollection, haunting, visitation and recurring imagery. As Morrison herself says about the longing that saturates *Beloved*: “[T]he reader [must] yearn for their company, for the people who are gone, to know what slavery did” (*CWTM* 250). The resurrections in *Paradise*, like the crucifixion in the same text, come after an “official murder,” and, like Jesus to his followers, the women appear to *those who long to see them*. The women of *Paradise* actually experience a double resurrection; before the men of Ruby murder them, the women are reborn in the basement of the convent:

What Consolata does with the women of the convent is what an artist does. Within the death outlines they draw of each other, she encourages them to use paints and chalks to recreate themselves. They lie in a spot of their own making. She encourages them to tell the truth to each other. (*TMC* 198)

They leave their old selves on the floor within the confines of their renderings and spring forward as if from a cocoon. By the time the men hunt them, they are more ethereal than human; they can fly.

These death outlines, or *vevers*, carry even more significance if considered in light of Morrison's concern for the way that women place all the value of their lives in something or someone outside themselves, meaning either men or children. In *Beloved*, Sethe neglects herself while suffering from excessive maternal feeling; by the close of the novel, Sethe is exhausted and ill, mourning the loss of a ghost child that nearly kills her. Nevertheless, Sethe calls Beloved her "best thing" and Paul D contradicts this by saying "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (273). In *Jazz*, the teenaged Dorcas is puzzled and fascinated by women who return to abusive men; she "[is] enchanted by the frail, melty tendency of the flesh and the Paradise that could make a woman go right back after two days...to hold the pieces of her heart in her hand. Paradise. All for Paradise" (63). Her fascination results in her death from gunshot wounds received from the lover she refuses to blame.

Morrison is also fascinated, because in each instance: "A woman loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself" (CWTM 207). Morrison said she had to ask herself "what it is that really compels a good woman to displace the self, her self. It's peculiar...the best thing that is in us is also the thing that makes us sabotage ourselves, sabotage in the sense that our life is not as worthy, or our perception of the best part of ourselves" (208). Her solution was to find a way "to project the self not into the way we say 'yourself,' but to put a space between those words, as though the self were really a *twin* or a *thirst* or a *friend* or something that sits right next to you and watches you" (208). The "vevers," templates, or silhouettes in *Paradise* that heal the women of the convent and affect their rebirth are strikingly similar to Morrison's metaphysical construction of "a twin or a thirst or a friend or something" in that both resolve the issue of putting yourself or your "best thing"

outside the self. The women in the convent are drawn to the vevers “like magnets” (264); they buy paint and colored chalk and put all of their energies into their elaboration:

First with natural features: breasts and pudenda, toes, ears and head hair. Seneca duplicated in robin’s egg blue one of her more elegant scars, one drop of red at its tip. Later on, when she had the hunger to slice her inner thigh, she chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor. (265)

Seneca, a cutter, diverts this dangerous obsession to her effigy on the floor, so that her double, or her “twin” (in Morrison’s configuration), receives the scars and her own flesh is unscathed. Gigi draws “a heart locket around her body’s throat...a gift from her father which she had thrown into the Gulf of Mexico”; Pallas draws “a baby in her template’s stomach,” and this process alters them, revises their pasts, so that they are “no longer haunted” (266). In a strange art therapy, the women store their most intense and volatile emotions in these effigies of themselves, these contoured landscapes of memory where they act out the dramas of their pasts, their fears, desires, and obsessions, complete with preferred resolutions.

An analysis of *The Bluest Eye* suggests that writing the novel served a similar purpose for Morrison herself; indeed, Jill Matus has said that Morrison’s work is tantamount to wish fulfillment, a kind of “imaginative dreaming” where the dream brings an issue to the fore only to allay anxieties, so that the event can be digested. Morrison says, “I prefer to keep all of my remains and my images intact in their mystery when I begin. Later I will get to the facts. That way I can explore two worlds—the actual and the possible” (197). In *The Bluest Eye*, these two worlds form another biconceptual paradigm conveyed with elements of natural landscape, memory, and childish innocence. These worlds co-exist in all of Morrison’s novels and are, in fact, so prevalent as to be formulaic, variously referred to by critics as her “double vision” or “double consciousness.”

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison sets out to illustrate the way that the demonization of a race takes root in a child (210) and to attack Western-white-American concepts of beauty and romantic love. Elaborating on the roles these ideals force upon children—as both passive recipients and potential carriers—the novel’s outcome horrifies, but also indicates the potential for change. Children in *The Bluest Eye* are presented as seeds of the possible, often planted, like their ancestors, against their will in a hostile landscape.

Seed imagery surrounds young Claudia and her older sister Frieda:

It was a false spring day, which...had pierced the shell of a deadening winter. There were puddles, mud, and an inviting warmth that deluded us... We always responded to the slightest change in weather, the most minute shifts in time of day. Long before the seeds were stirring, Frieda and I were scruffing and poking at the earth, swallowing air, drinking rain.

As we emerged from the school...we began to moult immediately. (64-65)

These two are hardy seeds, eager for spring and the circumference of the garden. Pecola is the delicate seed that cannot flourish in hostile ground. The dandelions she loves introduce several motifs, that of the randomly scattered seed, the whimsical nature of a child’s play, and the duality of perspective—some consider them weeds, some plants, depending upon perspective:

Now, however, she moves down an avenue gently buffeted by the familiar and therefore loved images. The dandelions at the base of the telephone pole. Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty. But grown-ups say, “Miss Dunion keeps her yard so nice. Not a dandelion anywhere.”...

These...inanimate things she saw and experienced. They were real to her. She knew them. They were the codes and the touchstones of the world, capable of translation and possession. She owned the [sidewalk] crack that made her stumble; she owned the clumps of dandelions whose white heads, last fall, she had blown away; whose yellow heads, this fall, she peered into. And owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her. (47-48)

Pecola’s sense of self is tentative, while Claudia’s is impenetrable. Neither of the children understands why she is considered a weed; Claudia rejects the idea outright, but Pecola is crushed by it, relying as she does, as most children do, upon the positive responses of others.

When the “immigrant” shopkeeper cannot or will not “see” or acknowledge Pecola’s humanity, it corrupts her joy, and she perceives her beloved dandelions in a different light:

Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, “They *are* ugly. They *are* weeds.” Preoccupied with that revelation, she trips on the sidewalk crack. Anger stirs and wakes in her; it opens its mouth...laps up the dredges of her shame... Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging. (50)

Morrison simultaneously acknowledges the victimization of Pecola and children like her and, albeit in a more subdued fashion, illustrates the survival of the independent-thinking Frieda and Claudia, who are seeds of possibility for future little black girls.

Seed imagery permeates the text, but not all landscapes are receptive. Adults, especially parents, behave badly, but Morrison eradicates the burden of guilt, regardless of the offense, by revealing their tormented pasts. Pecola’s mother Pauline longs to escape her harsh life. She seeks sanctuary in the church, the white man’s kitchen, and the cinema, where she returns to the unrealistic dreams of her childhood:

There in the darkness her memory was refreshed, and she succumbed to her earlier dreams. Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. (122)

Pauline elicits the reader’s sympathy when she is shown as a young girl, the ninth of eleven children, born in the backwoods of Alabama with a crippled foot and a sense of homelessness. Her adolescent affinity for arranging things and her teenaged fantasies about love and romance find purchase in church ritual: “the songs caressed her...her body trembled for redemption, salvation, a mysterious rebirth that would simply happen” (113). In this twisted confluence of romance and Christianity, she is passive, awaiting the contact of a “Presence, an all-embracing tenderness” who will whisk her away from the drudgery of her life “to the sea, to the city, to the

woods... forever,” where she will experience a rebirth, a cinematic, miraculous, “death-defying death” (113), like Jesus. When this does not occur, Pauline makes a natural leap from Jesus into a romance with her future husband, Cholly, the one presence that actually does materialize.

Desperate over the failure of her marriage and her disappointment with her children, the fanatical Pauline is at last placated by her zealous absorption in the cinema and the white man’s kitchen that provides Pauline with some small measure of autonomy, escape, and power:

There at last were the darkened woods, the lonely roads, the riverbanks, the gentle knowing eyes. There the flawed became whole, the blind sighted, and the lame and halt threw away their crutches. There death was dead, and people made every gesture in a cloud of music. There the black and white images came together making a magnificent whole—all projected through the ray of light from above and behind. (122)

For Pauline, the movie is an actual destination; like magic, when the screen lights up, she can “move right on in them pictures” (123). Ironically, the film *Imitation of Life* is in theaters during this time. Like Pauline, the film’s young protagonist Peola rejects her African American family and life. Peola attempts to pass as white; she longs to meet white standards of beauty, like Pecola, whose name so closely resembles her own. Both meet a tragic end. While Pauline does not attempt to pass as a white woman, she thinks of the Fishers’ house as her “real” home; she chooses to reside in a white world.

Pauline’s ecstatic engagement with the cinema feeds the fantasy of her life in the Fisher family’s kitchen, a private, “Leave It to Beaver”-esque world where her dreams come true. Here she “could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows,” be reborn as “Polly,” blossom in a landscape of “power, praise, and luxury,” making the white man’s kitchen into her own image (127-28). “All the meaningfulness in her life was in her work,” and the illumination of her “private world” darkened the shadowy landscape of her home (128). Pauline’s fickle romantic-religious feelings, given to and then taken from Cholly, are returned to Jesus, her

“Maker”—who will take care of her while she takes care of the white child, leaving Cholly to take care of Pecola, whom he rapes and impregnates.

Pauline, who is so gratified by “brushing the yellow hair” of the Fisher child and in bathing and dressing the white body (127), is not the exception but the rule. Most of the adults in *The Bluest Eye* are unaware of their own aesthetic preferences, but their children understand it all too well. Even the seemingly innocent gift of a doll speaks volumes, because the adults give white baby dolls: “‘Here,’ they said, ‘this is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it’” (21). Unlike other, more passive children, Claudia and her sister Frieda find their preference unacceptable, and Claudia is particularly unyielding. “I could not love it,” she says, “But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable” (21). Claudia resists this forced ideal, dismembering the doll to “see of what it was made...to find the beauty...that had escaped” her (20), an action that, to her amazement, elicits a disproportionately angry reaction from the adults: “How strong was their outrage...The emotion of years of unfulfilled longing preened in their voices” (21). A lifetime of want resides in the childish adult response: “I-never-had-a-baby-doll-in-my-whole-life-and-used-to-cry-my-eyes-out-for-them” (21). Conditioned from their own youth, they have adapted themselves to this imitation of (white) life. In typical Morrison fashion, it is revealed that those who do wrong have been wronged; she promotes compassion rather than blame, even for the most misguided, yes, even for the incestuous Cholly.

A similar revelation occurs in *Sula* during the funeral of the drowned child Chicken Little, where adults mourning the child simultaneously mourn their own lost childhoods:

And they saw the Lamb’s eye and the truly innocent victim: themselves. They acknowledged the innocent child hiding in the corner of their hearts, holding a sugar-and-butter sandwich. That one. The one who lodged deep in their fat, thin, old, young skin, and was the one the world had hurt... Or they

remembered...when their father left home and wondered if that is the way the slim, young Jew felt, he who for them was both son and lover and in whose downy face they could see the sugar-and-butter sandwiches and feel the oldest most devastating pain there is: not the pain of childhood, but the remembrance of it. (65)

Here, Morrison reveals a landscape of childhood memory that each adult carries inside, their grief for the dead child alongside their own lost innocence. Yet in *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia is amazed that the same adults who mourn the white doll are dismissive about the living Pecola and her baby, alive in a most precious landscape, Pecola's womb:

I thought about the baby that everyone wanted dead, and saw it very clearly. It was in a dark, wet place, its head covered with great O's of wool, the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and living, breathing silk of black skin. No synthetic yellow bangs suspended over marble-blue eyes, no pinched nose and bowline mouth. More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples... (190)

Presenting black as natural, warm, and real, juxtaposed with white as artificial, cold, hard,

Morrison reveals the true beauty of the child displacing the standard of white beauty.

Apparently, the reader is meant to share the children's point of view and resist the wrongheaded resentment that has infected the parents, their neighbors, even the landscape that surrounds them.

They explain their survival in this way: "Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins...and could not comprehend this

unworthiness...the *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made [*white children*] beautiful, and not us" (74). In a kind of testimonial, Claudia and Frieda remember; they remember Pauline knocking

Pecola down to soothe "the pink tears of the frozen [Fisher] doll baby" (191). Morrison appeals to adults here, planting seeds of possibility, asking that they be as discerning as Claudia: "We had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody, considering all speech a code to be broken by us, and all gestures subject to careful analysis" (191). Nevertheless, she

also acknowledges the difficulty and complexity of the issue by revealing the child lodged within every adult, a child who is not only hurt, but also innocent.

### Resurrection

Morrison places herself inside her characters, landscapes, stories. Her interview with Gloria Naylor in 1985 reveals a biconceptual reality of another kind, an ongoing landscape where a young black girl is resurrected and reconstructed part-by-part and piece-by-piece (the opposite of Pecola's progressive fragmentation). This "young black girl"—the inversion of the white baby doll—represents Morrison herself, African American history, the lives of young black girls, and the dead body of an actual young black girl. In the Naylor interview, Morrison illustrates (perhaps inadvertently) the transformative process for which she is known. Here, writing not only resurrects her characters, but also resurrects Morrison herself from an emotional or spiritual death that occurred years ago. The process begins as Morrison responds to the question of how she began writing; the book that seems to be in question is *The Bluest Eye*, although she has completed others and is preparing to write the as-yet-unnamed *Beloved* (192). The interview operates as conceptual lesson on many levels.

I think at that moment I had no choice...I was really in a corner...alone with two children in a town where I didn't know anybody...I was thrown back on, luckily, the only thing I could depend on, my own resources... And so it looked as though the world was going by and I was not in that world...I used to really belong here...I was somebody's parent, somebody's this, somebody's that, but there was no me in this world. And I was looking for that dead girl and I thought I might talk about that dead girl, if for no other reason than to have it, somewhere in the world, in a drawer. There was such a person. I had written this little story earlier just for some friends, so I took it out and I began to work it up. And all of those people were me. I was Pecola, Claudia...I was everybody. (CWTM 198)

These characters are alternative versions of the author in an alternative landscape, another conceptual reality or a landscape of memory:

And as I began to do it, I began to pick up scraps of things that I had seen or felt, or didn't see or didn't feel, but imagined. And speculated about and wondered about. And I fell in love with myself. I reclaimed myself and the world—a real revelation. I named it. I described it...I recreated it. And having done that, at least, then the books belonged in the world. Although I still didn't belong. I was working hard at a job and trying to be this competent person. But the dead girl—and not only was that girl dead in my mind, I thought she was dead in everybody's mind, aside from my family and my father and my mother—that person didn't exist anywhere. *That* person... I thought that girl was dead...People ask, "Is your book autobiographical?" It is not, but it is, because of that process of reclamation. And I was driven there, literally driven. I felt penned into a basement... It wasn't that easy being a little black girl in this country—it was rough. The psychological tricks you have to play in order to get through—and nobody said how it felt to be that. And you knew better. You knew inside better. You knew you were not the person they were looking at. And to know that and to see what you saw in those other people's eyes was devastating. Some people made it, some didn't. And I wanted to explore it myself...having gone to those places, I knew I'd go there again. (198-99)

In the course of this interview Morrison conjures the image of a young black girl—a young Toni Morrison—who has been waiting, there in a landscape of memory, to be resurrected and reclaimed. In this way, Morrison revises the past and illustrates an ongoing biconceptual reality: two Morrisons, two worlds, and two perceptions. In this double-gesture, Morrison makes two reclamations, that of her self and that of the other little black girls.

Morrison says that her "interview" with Naylor was a "conversation" because of the intimate nature of the subject matter and her revelation that she was re-membering young Chloe Wofford—her self—bringing the fragments together to make her whole, to make her real again:

I said something I didn't know I knew. About the "dead girl." That bit by bit I had been rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention. Her fingernails maybe in the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time. Little by little bringing her back into living life. So that now she comes running when called—walks freely around the house, sits down in a chair; looks at me, listens to Gloria Naylor and anybody else she wants to. She cannot lie. Doesn't know greed or vengeance. Will not fawn or pontificate. There is no room for pupils in her eyes. She is here now, alive. I have seen, named and claimed her—and oh what company she keeps. (217)

Toni Morrison's writing is like Denver stepping off the porch; she does it for someone else, but she saves herself.

Resurrection is a major trope in Morrison's work. Consider Reverend Misner's comment in *Paradise*, that "God, being intelligence itself, generosity itself, has given us Mind to know...that 'what is sown is not alive until it dies'" (306-7). Still, this concept troubles some critics. In the 2002 interview "The Art of Teaching," Ann Hostetler questions the spiritual guidance of Consolata Sosa in *Paradise*: "It heals the women, but it also puts them at risk. It jeopardizes their lives and they end up dead" (*TMC* 197). Morrison justifies this by explaining that their murderers attack them because of their strength. When Hostetler finds that a bit of a backhanded compliment, Morrison defends her position:

To say that the women lost is to forget all that they learned. They claimed their own voices and found a ground from which to speak... And at the end of the book their lives take on other dimensions. They appear as whole, healed women to those who loved them...

That's why I chose to use the New Testament motif of resurrection. After his resurrection, Jesus appears to those who want to see him. Vision is a kind of life. The women of the convent in *Paradise* are not deified, but after death they appear to those who want to see them, just as the risen Christ appeared to his disciples. It's bigger than nostalgia. The person who has the vision, converses with it, becomes larger than themselves. The language of these passages in the novel is not just lyrical, but *transitional*, as between two realities. Thus the spiritual elements in the book offer alternate explanations for what becomes of the women at the end. (197-98, my emphasis)

Here is the possibility of other realities, of other modes of being. The refusal to separate flesh and spirit results in access to a kind of portal between life and death. If there were any doubt about this, Morrison proves it in the final pages of *Paradise* with the appearance of just such a passageway after the women's death. The bodies of the Convent women are never found, leaving the baffled citizens of Ruby to speculate upon their fate. The healer Lone Du Pres thinks that God appeared and took them away in order to announce his presence and his forgiveness: no bodies, no murders. Reverend Richard Misner and his fiancée Anna visit the Convent, hypothesizing that perhaps the women were not actually dead, but escaped after the men departed. When Reverend Misner says "I don't like mysteries," Anna reminds him that as a

preacher his “whole life’s belief is a mystery” (304). The Reverend’s response seems to be Morrison’s answer: “Belief is mysterious; faith is mysterious. But God is not a mystery. We are.” (304). Then they enter the garden, to salvage what remains. Anna gathers a kerchief of eggs, Reverend Misner a handful of pepper pods; the rest was a “mix of neglect and unconquerable growth”—“blossom and death” (304-5). The reference to Eden is easy, even predictable, but a binary system of life versus death is bypassed and complicated when Morrison induces the vision of a portal to another dimension. Both Reverend Misner and Anna see it, “Or [sense] it, rather, for there was nothing to see” (305). They argue later about whether it was a window or a door; as in most spiritual matters, interpretations vary. But both wonder “what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth?” (305). Just this glimpse into the ineffable affords them the ability to comprehend two realities; but the fact that they ask, “What on earth could it be?”(305), implies a suggestion, an invitation to speculate what may be at the heart of Morrison’s meaning. While the title *Paradise* serves multiple purposes—for some it means heaven’s reward, for some the Garden of Eden—there are other interpretations of paradise. Morrison seems to offer an alternative to heaven or hell, “another place—neither life nor death,” as intuited by Reverend Misner to be “there, just yonder, shaping thoughts he did not know he had” (307). The sterile citizens of Ruby are lost because they defer everything for the afterlife, while the earthbound, “bodacious Eves” of the Convent are empowered and given precedence. When they err, it is with passion, not premeditation. Catholicism cannot complete Consolata, who cannot forget her flesh and moves on to a spiritual existence intimate with nature and the elements. Not only is she not punished, but she is gifted with the power to resurrect the dead. Consolata’s evolution suggests that the world we think we know is actually multidimensional, full of possibilities:

“True paradise is what we enact here. Salvation occurs in context and history” (*TMC* 198). One might imagine that Morrison finds her paradise here on earth.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MARILYNNE ROBINSON: THE RESURRECTION OF LOST MYTH

*But all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature"

*The Death of Adam* (1998), like most of Marilynne Robinson's works, may be characterized as revisionist, whether revision of religion, history, the state of society, or the dimensions of being. In her introduction, Robinson defines the essays as "contrarian in method and spirit"; their purpose is as a demonstration that there are "other ways of thinking, for which better arguments can be made" (1). More specifically, they "assert that the prevailing view of things can be assumed to be wrong, and that its opposite, being its image or shadow, can also be assumed to be wrong" (1). What she presents, then, is not the thing, or its image, reflection, or shadow, but another way of perceiving altogether, which she herself characterizes as revisionism. Finding contemporary discourse "empty and false," Robinson proffers the "old lost myth of civilization": that civilization "unfolds, that it opens up the realizations of which it is capable, that it instructs itself" (2). Nostalgic for that state of expanding comprehension and fearing the loss of the legacy of former civilizations in "refining experience and circumstance into astonishingly powerful visions and dreams, into poems and music which have fallen like a mantle of light over our mere human weakness" (2), Morrison intends to rehabilitate lost myth in her work. Insisting that our culture has supplanted our metaphysical beliefs with economic and scientific myths, disappointed that Americans tend to question the "utility" of and measure

the value of such ethereal things, Robinson insists that we examine the “human tentatives” that produce our present cultural condition:

If all that has happened on this planet is the fortuitous colonization of a damp stone by a chemical phenomenon we have called “life,” then there is no case for utility. If our myths and truths are only another exotic blossoming, the free play of possibility, then they are fully as real and as worthy of respect as anything else. Or if use or value in this demythologized context signifies the adaptation of a creature to its circumstances, however gratuitous they may be, then even the universal human predisposition to create and value myths must be assumed to be a form of adaptation, therefore true in the sense and in the degree that these myths make an effective response to some exigency of being. (2-3)

Robinson finds that the “relationship between the mind and the universe” (3) in Judeo-Christian culture has become one-sided. We tend to pare universe and its mysteries down to meet our limited understanding, instead of expanding our comprehension like her literary champions, Hawthorne, Melville, and Dickinson, who reach beyond the grasp of language to express their individual visions of the numinous mysteries of this life. Robinson says that those who would “employ reductive definitions of utility or reality credit their own perceptions of truth with fundamentalist simple-heartedness, brooking no allusion to complexities and ambiguities and countervailing experience” (3); they are, in fact, demythologizing a mythology that she finds necessary.

Robinson relies upon her intuitions: “[I]f the mind is able to tell us what is true, why not credit its attempts at higher truth?”, for if the mind is in error about higher truths, then it may be uniformly so: “Is it not in fact a very naïve conception of reality, and of its accessibility to human understanding, that would exclude so much of what human beings have always found meaningful, as if by this means fallibility and error or delusion could be localized or rejected?” (3). She rejects the trend of attributing significance only to what can be used as a means to an end, bending philosophy, art, and religion to our purposes. Consider, for example, the use of

the selected interpretations of Darwin's theories to justify such ends. Useful, yes, to justify and to rationalize our greed and self-interest, as if "the reality of economics were reality in itself, the one Truth to which everything must refer" (3-4), a "crude monism" based upon the American embrace of simplicity.

This deference to economics, a product of and exacerbated by a cosmology-inspired terror that insinuates that "everything may in fact be made of nothing," results in human beings who desperately cling to the idea that something is real and necessary, "taking refuge from the wild epic of cosmic ontology by hiding our head in a ledger" (4). Robinson expresses this desire for a return to the old myth of civilization in religious overtones, rhythmic as a chant or a conjuring:

I want to overhear passionate arguments about what we are doing and what we ought to do. I want to feel that art is an utterance made in good faith from one human being to another. I want to believe there are geniuses scheming to astonish the rest of us, just for the pleasure of it. I miss civilization and I want it back. (4)

To retrieve it, she insists, we must look to the past, a "phenomenon" containing all the "evidence we have about ourselves to the extent that it is recoverable and interpretable," therefore, in due course, revisable: "The present is elusive for the same reasons as is the past. There are no true boundaries around it, no limit to the number of factors at work in it" (4-5) or on it.

The past has often been "dealt with badly," has been misconstrued; "all history is defective" (5), and so memory becomes a crucial element:

I do not wish to suggest in these essays that the past was better than the present, simply that whatever in the past happens to have been of significance or value ought to be held in memory, insofar as that is possible, so that it can give us guidance. Then, too, nostalgia, reaction, and denial, all of which assume a meaningful sense of the past, are potent energies... To be sane and manageable they ought to have a solid base than unconstrained fantasy, or prejudice or malice or tendentiousness. (5-6)

Today, Robinson finds that the recovery of the past is treated as an “arcane science” akin to the “science that provides the newspapers with a steady stream of diets and cures and newly identified syndromes in terms of which we are to reform our lives and revise our understanding of ourselves” (6). Current trends demand our susceptibility to expertise from an outside source and trivialize what we feel or what we think we know; in fact, anything of an insubstantial nature is vulnerable to such treatment. The abiding nature of myths only strengthens Robinson’s argument, for they are “so firmly established in the common mind that no one thinks to challenge them, not even the people who write history” (6). Therefore, she says, she offers *The Death of Adam* in order to raise fundamental questions about the way our intellectual life “has been lived and is being lived now” (6), and, it would appear, to revise and revalidate mythology.

Robinson notes the demise of “what used to be meant by ‘humanism,’” what she calls, “that old romance with the self,” the “idea that the self is to be refined by exposure to things that are wonderful and difficult and imbued with...the human spirit, once an object of unquestioned veneration” (8). Speaking wistfully of the Renaissance, she yearns for a time when “beautiful human creations were recovered from the obscurity of forgotten languages and lost aesthetics, or of prohibition or disapprobation or indifference, and were used to demonstrate the heights which human beings can attain” (8). The reader understands that she will replicate this process in *The Death of Adam* and dive into the proverbial wreck of the past to investigate and mend the rift between religion and culture: “It is not unusual now to hear religion and humanism spoken of as if they were opposed, even antagonistic” (8):

[H]umanism clearly rested on the idea that people have souls, and that they have certain obligations to them and certain pleasures in them, which arise from their refinement or their expression in art or in admirable or striking conduct, or which arise from finding other souls expressed in music or philosophy or philanthropy or revolution. (8-9)

She hopes to revive the long-dead marriage of religion and humanism with significant revisions. Robinson raises the specter of Renaissance humanism in contradistinction to the present, as a time in which “people still had sensibilities and encouraged them in others” (9). Unlike us, they found “utility” in many kinds of learning, as opposed to our contemporary preference to be spoon-fed by learned others. Leisure was not the basis of the culture; rather, Renaissance humanists maintained the “profoundly democratic idea” that anyone was only “incidentally the servant of his or her interests in this world” (9):

[T]ruly and ideally, a biography was the passage of a soul through the vale of its making, or its destruction...the business of the world was a parable or test or temptation or distraction and therefore engrossing, and full of the highest order of meaning, but in itself a fairly negligible thing. (9)

In other words, a human biography is an earthly narrative, a text for accessing a deeper meaning. The trajectory of her argument leads, inevitably, to the Bible, as the “unworldly stimulus,” the impetus, for universal literacy in Western civilization. Reading, because it is “an act of great inwardness and subjectivity,” has profound meaning as the soul encounters “itself in its response to a text, first Genesis or Matthew and then *Paradise Lost* or *Leaves of Grass*” (9). Before, this process produced great respect not only for the text itself, but also for the reader’s own subjectivity. Now, we are told how to see the authors and how to respond to their work; for example: “Dickens must pass through a filter of specialists who can tell us what we must see when we read him. Neither his nor our singularity is of value, nor are we to imagine his spirit acting upon ours” (10). Robinson rebels against this prohibition and insists upon her right to imagine that the author’s spirit is acting upon her own. There is no metaphoric voice from the past, no recovered message in a bottle, but the ongoing spirit of the author emanating from the text: an individual from the past who is speaking to the reader in the present through the instrument of the narrative. When we read, we have the overwhelming sense of a presence,

unseen, something intuited, but not fully grasped by our perception. Revelation occurs when the soul encounters itself in response to a text, or to a landscape or a human being.

### Biblical Landscapes

Robinson embodies and expresses her visions using landscape and its elements as a lens for the reader's perception. A case in point is her characterization of wilderness; she reveals a different facet with each use of the term. Her essay "Wilderness" (1998) begins: "I am an American of the kind whose family sought out wilderness generation after generation" (*DOA* 246); here, she defines wilderness simply, as "the condition of being in the natural world" (246). In her autobiographical "Psalm Eight" (1996) from the same collection, she presents nature as emblematic of the divine, as the veil between human perception and God:

It seems to me I felt God as a presence before I had a name for him, and long before I knew words like "faith" or "belief." I was aware to the point of alarm of a vast energy of intention, all around me, barely restrained, and I thought everyone else must be aware of it. For that reason I found the majestic terrains of my childhood, to which my ancestors had brought their ornate Victorian appreciation at daunting cost of life and limb, very disturbing, and I averted my gaze as I could from those luminist splendors. (*DOA* 228-29)

In this passage, wilderness landscape evolves from a condition of being in the natural world to that of being in a metaphysical landscape. This focus upon landscape implies that a kind of spiritual x-ray vision is necessary to see or to penetrate the "luminist splendors" of the earth and the universe, an ability Robinson refused to cultivate as a child, frightened by the knowledge such perception might reveal (229). Even though she is unable to grasp the full meaning of scripture, she returns to it like a moth to flame, intuiting what she cannot yet decipher. It is only in church that she hears experiences like her own "acknowledged in all those strange narratives, read and expounded," but they remain "opaque as figures of angels painted on gold" (229). Thus, landscapes in "Psalm Eight" are characterized as natural wilderness but infused with the

sacred, alive and full of “the frightening mercy of foreknowledge” (*DOA* 234), frightening to her as a child because they seemed to “know” her.

In both *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008), wilderness takes on connotations that spring from Bible stories of Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. Paul the Apostle’s Epistle to the Galatians defines the story of these relationships as a complex allegory:

For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid [Hagar], the other by a freewoman [Sarah]. But he who was born of the bondwoman [Ishmael] was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman [Isaac] was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from Mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. (Galatians 4:22-31)

Paul says the mountain, symbolic of earthly prominence, is named after Hagar; as a slave, her bonds are of flesh, her son heir to an earthly kingdom, while Isaac, son of Sarah, of the “promise”—the law and marriage—is a legitimate heir to the power conferred upon Abraham by God and heaven. Saint Augustine makes a similar comparison identifying Hagar as the symbol of the “earthly” city—the sinful condition of humanity—and Sarah as “symbolic presence of the heavenly city”—which exists alongside the other like a halo or obverse image (*City of God* 15:2). All of these interpretations involve place, describing individuals defined by landscapes; either they are citizens of a country or bereft of it. Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas develops the allegory until Sarah’s children are the redeemed and Hagar’s are the merest exiles.

Sarah, who is barren, gives her Egyptian slave, Hagar, to her husband Abraham for purposes of procreation; thus Ishmael is born to Hagar. Years and years later, God endows the aged Sarah with a son, Isaac. Abraham obeys God’s command to defer to Sarah’s wishes and expel Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness alone (16:2-3). Abraham is reluctant to send his son away, but concedes when God reminds him that he will make a great nation out of Ishmael,

because he is Abraham's seed. Exiled to the Wilderness of Paran, they almost die of thirst before God reveals a well to Hagar (Genesis 21:14), but it is there that Ishmael becomes the patriarch of the Arabs. The Wilderness of Paran, also known as the Desert of Paran, is a well known biblical landscape where the Israelites wander for forty years and King David flees after the death of Samuel.

Years later when God instructs Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, "his only begotten son" (Hebrews 11:17), this is commonly understood as a test of the father's love for his God. Abraham, with every intention of killing his son, has Isaac carry the wood for his pyre on his own back. Eventually, God sends an angel to stay Abraham's hand, and the landscape accommodates by trapping a ram in a thicket as a substitute offering. Abraham is nothing if not obedient, and for this he is promised, once again, numerous seed and abundant prosperity (Genesis 22). Some Christian theologians interpret the story of Isaac as the foreshadowing of the crucifixion of Jesus, another case of a father allowing a child to suffer for reasons of his own. All of Robinson's novels deal with the abandonment of children to wilderness by their parents, and each in its own way explores the resolution of parent-child relationships. Therefore, it is strange that there is no mention of her own parents in her autobiographical works and interviews. Her only specific reference is to her grandfather, and any other references to family are generic: forbears, ancestors, kindred.

In the novels that follow *Housekeeping*, Robinson continues her preoccupation with parents who leave their children. Reverends John Ames of *Gilead* and Robert Boughton of *Home* each struggle with the knowledge of impending death, attempting to convey their love and wisdom in the time that remains. In *Gilead*, the troubled teenager Jack Boughton impregnates a local girl and disappears; his child dies shortly after, intensifying the difficulty of Jack's return as

the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), a story line that begins in *Gilead*, coming to fruition in the most recent *Home*. The story of Hagar and Ishmael frames the Boughton saga, as evidenced by this passage from *Gilead*, when the elderly Ames records his life in a journal for his young son, hoping to establish a presence in the boy's future:

That is how life goes—we send our children into the wilderness. Some of them on the day they are born, it seems, for all the help we can give them. Some of them seem to be a kind of wilderness unto themselves. But there must be angels there, too, and springs of water. Even that wilderness, the very inhabitation of jackals, is the Lord's. (*Gilead* 119)

Reverend Ames has married late in life and will die leaving his wife and young son without his protection and guidance—in a kind of wilderness. Since even parents who would like to be unable to shield their children forever, children are, technically, sent into wilderness on the day of their birth. “Some of them seem to be a kind of wilderness unto themselves” refers to his godchild, Jack Boughton, who spends his life in a state of self-imposed exile, despite his own father's continuing devotion. The Lord's wilderness can take on a dangerous, even predatory mien, emphasizing that despite all of our notions of solidity and permanence, humans are exposed and vulnerable. God provides the only salvation in angels and pools of water—angels to save children from well-meaning but wrong-thinking adults and water to sustain and purify, but most of all reflect God's capacity for mercy, because while the ultimate power lies with God, the ultimate responsibility rests there as well. After all, God has provided the jackals, too.

The story of Cain begins with a father's rejection. Both he and his brother Abel offer a sacrifice to God; Cain, assigned by God to the role of farmer, gives the fruit of his labor, while Abel, a shepherd, sacrifices the living animals under his care. God rejects Cain's offering and accepts Abel's sacrifice, prefers the destruction of life and the sprinkling of blood into the earth to the gift of the earth's bounty. Wounded by this rejection by the ultimate Father, Cain is so distraught and angry that he spills the blood of his brother into the earth. For this, God banishes

Cain and his heirs, consigning them to transience. In *Housekeeping*, Ruth recalls the way that God curses and expels parents, and therefore children for the sins of their parents (194). Cast out of Eden to wander—often for generations—the condition of wandering becomes, in and of itself, a kind of wilderness. In Ruth’s telling of Cain’s story, human flesh and blood merge with landscape—literally becoming human landscape—so that the “simple field” has a voice and feelings: “Cain murdered Abel, and blood cried out from the earth; the house fell on Job’s children, and a voice was induced or provoked into speaking from a whirlwind” (192). Just as God created man from dust or earthen clay, Cain, “the image of God, gave the simple earth of the field a voice and a sorrow”; therefore, he becomes “a creator, in the image of his Creator” (193). It is as if the sorrows of humankind provoke the earth and the whirlwind into speech; they mourn and remember those God has exiled and consigned to the past. Here landscapes are imbued with the blood, the spirits, of the dead, contain the narratives of their past, become literal reliquaries—landscapes of memory.

Landscapes, steeped in blood and fleshed with the lost, are reincarnated and transfigured in *Housekeeping*. The child Ruth, whose grandfather, Edmund, and mother, Helen, have drowned in a glacial lake, sees them as one entity, in a kind of trinity:

I cannot taste a cup of water, but that I recall that the eye of the lake is my grandfather’s, and that the lake’s heavy, blind encumbering waters composed my mother’s limbs and weighed her garments and stopped her breath and stopped her sight. (194-95)

Now that they are one with the ancient lake, Edmund and Helen are transfigured; they are also transient, as they are no longer tethered to their bodies. They are carried with the lake water as it evaporates and travels on the air, saturating the fields or encroaching as flood; in that act so too do Edmund and Helen saturate all elements of landscape. When Ruth’s grandmother Sylvia dies, her obituary page seems portentous, “like an opening of graves” (41):

It suggested to me that the earth had opened. In fact, I dreamed that I was walking across the ice on the lake, which was breaking up as it does in the spring, softening and shifting and pulling itself apart. But in the dream the surface that I walked on proved to be knit up of hands and arms and upturned faces that shifted and quickened as I stepped, sinking only for a moment into lower relief under my weight. The dream and the obituary created in my mind the conviction that my grandmother had entered into some other element upon which our lives floated as weightless, intangible, immiscible, and inseparable as reflections upon water. So she was borne into the depths, my grandmother, into the undifferentiated past. (41)

The lake contains multiple dimensions and levels with human characteristics—it is not finite in depth or scope. The “arms and legs and upturned faces” may also be symbolic of all the ancestors that preceded her. The lake thus functions as memory, as the past, a country Grandmother has “entered”—a landscape of memory.

Even as the earth functions as a tomb and as a record of the past, the earth is alive and its appearance, its surface features, only serve to obscure its many dimensions from our sight. Ruth portrays the cycle of the earth’s own death and rebirth in a few sentences within the story of the drifter, Edith, who chose a boxcar as a mobile coffin. The body of the earth is a mausoleum of its own history:

In such weather, one steps on fossils. The snow is too slight to conceal the ribs and welts, the hollows and sockets of the earth, fixed in its last extreme. But in the mountains the earth is most ceremoniously buried, with all its relics, against its next rising, in hillock and tumulus. In Butte the old woman had lain on her back and laced her fingers, and her breath had stood above her. When she arrived in Wenatchee, the ghost was gone, the exorcism accomplished. (88)

The human and the earth lie alongside one another in their respective winters; they die and rise again together. Edith’s breath stands above her, like lake water suspended in sunlight. Here the earth is like the lake, stratified and concealing multiple dimensions. As we walk upon the surface, we tread upon fossils, the residue of past life. The narrator presents life above ground through the visible features of high relief, the surface topography of mountains and hills, which

are accessible with ordinary perception. Robinson emphasizes the fragility of this boundary throughout the novel; Ruth's description of the earth's surface in winter is a case in point:

If one pried up a stick on those days, one found massed shafts of ice, slender as needles and pure as spring water. This delicate infrastructure bore us up so long as we avoided roads and puddles, until the decay of winter became general. Such delicate improvisations fail. Soon enough we foundered as often as we stepped. (93)

Robinson illustrates the confluence of the lake and the earth, the permeable and fragile nature of the membrane that separates the surface and the depths, and the ability of death to dissolve such boundaries, all in one brief passage.

Robinson's method throughout the novel involves the manipulation of images to condition the reader's visual perception. First, there is the imprint of an original image, an embedding of the image in the text and in the reader's mind and memory; then, either through repetition or allusion, the image returns in another context. The process is illustrated perfectly in Ruth's narration describing the furnishings in her grandmother's room, painted "creamy white" and "completely unremarkable" except that Edmund had once "ornamented them" (90):

On the doors of the wardrobe there appeared to have been a hunting scene, turbaned horsemen on a mountain. On the head of the bed he had painted a peacock, hennish body, emerald tail. On the dresser he had put a wreath or garland, held in the hands of two cherubs who swam in ether, garments trailing. Each of these designs had been thought better of and painted out, but over the years the white paint had absorbed them, floated them up just beneath the surface. I was always reminded of pictures, images, in places where images never were, in marble, in the blue net of veins at my wrists, in the pearled walls of seashells. (90)

Ruth's repetition of images and her use of provocative imagery create the same effect in the reader, who sees or expects to see "images in places where images" are not or at least were not before. In this way, Ruth's narration cultivates the reader's ability to see beneath the ordinary, thereby increasing the plausibility of what originally seems impossible.

Often the narrator will use a layering of images for revision; each succeeding image differs slightly from the first, so that the images continue to be similar but are simultaneously altered, and finally, all are fused in one image. For example, in order to bring her mother Helen back, Ruth primes the reader with imagery associated with her, like Helen's profile when looking back over her shoulder or turning away, or the tilt of her head when she adjusts her hair in the mirror. Providing substitutes who make these gestures repeatedly, the narrator evokes Helen's presence, a procedure that begins as soon as Aunt Sylvie arrives. Sylvie, who "walked with her head down, to one side," Ruth says, resembles Helen so much that "Sylvie began to blur the memory of my mother, and then to displace it" (53). After their aunt's arrival, the orphaned Ruth and her sister Lucille see their mother everywhere, in other places, other faces. Finally the image of a woman turning away is the predominate feature, not the individual who inhabits the form. One snowy day the children manage to run fast enough and long enough to keep abreast of a train in order to study the face of a young woman peering out of the window. Afterwards Ruth says, "I remember her neither less nor differently than I remember others I have known better, and indeed I dream of her, and the dream is very like the event itself" (55). Here Robinson alludes to the way that Ruth's mother will be returned to her. Then she adds yet another model of Helen as the children build a statue of snow:

[A] figure of a woman in a long dress, her arms folded. It was Lucille's idea that she should look to the side... It was mere accident...but her shape became a posture...her figure suggested a woman standing in a cold wind. It seemed that we had conjured a presence. (60-61)

And in fact they have, just as Robinson has. The presence alluded to is their departed mother Helen, and like Helen, despite their best efforts, the presence becomes an absence and the snow woman melts away.

Robinson revises Bible stories, classical myth, and the lives of her characters together in a powerful confluence designed to resurrect Ruth's mother, Helen. Having primed the reader with images of Helen, it is a Pavlovian response to think of Helen when a woman stands or tilts her head in a certain way, as with the woman behind the train window and the snow statue. Later, on a visit to a deserted island with Sylvie, Ruth excavates a ruined homestead in hopes of finding the ghosts of orphaned children when another statue comes to mind: "If there had been snow I would have made a statue, a woman to stand along the path, among the trees. The children would come close to look at her" (153); there is no snow, so, in the child's imagination, this woman evolves into a statue of salt: Lot's wife. Ruth's compassion for Lot's wife brings speculation upon the nature of loss, which then becomes an argument for retribution. This speculation, powered by longing, enacts a transfiguration not only of Lot's wife but also of the landscape that surrounds her and, ultimately, of the parallel figure of Ruth's mother, Helen. The resurrection occurs within the landscape as the resurrection of an obverse Carthage:

Imagine a Carthage sown with salt, and all the sowers gone, and the seeds lain covering the earth, till there rose finally in vegetable profusion leaves and trees of rime and brine... Light would force each salt calyx to open in prisms, and to fruit heavily with bright globes of water—peaches and grapes are little more than that and where the world was salt there would be greater need of slaking. (152-53)

Ruth asks the reader to speculate, to imagine, not *the* Carthage but *a* Carthage. Ice and salt—antonyms for warmth and fecundity—sprout and blossom in this Carthage, as if simply preserved. "Light had coaxed a flowering from the frost," which before had only "seemed" barren and parched as salt (152). Simultaneously, Ruth's emotional logic resurrects her mother, whose image is embedded within that of Lot's wife:

Lot's wife was salt and barren, because she was full of loss and mourning, and looked back. But here rare flowers would gleam in her hair, and on her breast, and in her hands, and there would be children all around her, to love and marvel at her for her beauty...and they would forgive her eagerly and lavishly, for turning away, though she never asked to

be forgiven. Though her hands were ice and did not touch them, she would be more than mother to them, she so calm, so still, and they such wild and orphan things. (153)

Lot's wife, frozen in salt, is absolved, restored within the landscape she will inhabit, this renewed landscape, this not-Carthage. Thus, the narrator, who has already fused the image of Helen and Lot's wife in the reader's mind, resurrects her mother by proxy. Above all, the narrator grants forgiveness, something that God is, apparently, unable to give. The orphan children forgive Lot's wife directly, while Ruth's forgiveness for her own mother is a given.

Ruth's speculation is served greatly by her evocation of Carthage, a city born in the wake of crisis by a queen who ultimately commits suicide. Queen Dido flees her homeland after the murder of her husband, landing in North Africa, where she is allowed to purchase as much land as she might contain in a bull's hide. By cutting the hide into strips, the clever queen secures enough land to build a citadel around which the legendary city is founded. Dido's method is uncannily like that of Robinson, who dissects imagery and pieces it back together to create alternative entities, expanding their known dimensions and boundaries into mythical proportions. Ruth resurrects the city lost to time, a legendary space made possible by the dissection of a seemingly finite object to trace an infinite landscape. The reader is asked to imagine an "other" Carthage, which has been sown with seeds of salt—so like Dido's tears.

Ruth continues to exonerate her mother's suicide with the story of Noah's ark, a story she tells from the perspective of Noah's nameless wife. Alluding to the ark story throughout the text, providing images and effigies cumulatively with references to curtains that fill like sails, tree trunks that creak like masts, and houses that founder like arks in a flood, the narrator primes the reader for Noah's tale, but gives a very different story:

One can imagine that, at the apex of the Flood, when the globe was a ball of water, came the day of divine relenting, when Noah's wife must have opened the shutters upon a morning designed to reflect an enormous good nature. We can imagine that the Deluge

rippled and glistened, and that the clouds, under an altered dispensation, were purely ornamental. True, the waters were full of people—we knew the story from our childhood. The lady at her window might have wished to be with the mothers and uncles, among the dance of the bones, since this is hardly a human world, here in the fatuous light, admiring the plump clouds. Looking out at the lake one could believe that the Flood had never ended. If one is lost on the water, any hill is Ararat. And below is always the accumulated past, which vanishes but does not vanish, which perishes and remains. If we imagine that Noah's wife, when she was old, found somewhere a remnant of the Deluge, she might have walked into it till her widow's dress floated above her head and the water loosened her plaited hair. And she would have left it to her sons to tell the tale of generations. She was a nameless woman, and so at home among those who were never found and never missed, who were uncommemorated, whose deaths were not remarked, nor their begettings. (172)

In this passage, Robinson offers an alternative reading, a rewriting, of the Noah story, which becomes an elegy for those unnamed souls drowned in the Flood. This version also valorizes Noah's wife and therefore other wives whose biographies are obscured by those of their husbands, as illustrated by Sylvia Foster's absence from, and her husband's overwhelming presence in, her own obituary. Presumably the same fate befalls Noah's wife, as only Noah's story survives.

God himself is rewritten, in fact, seems indirectly reprimanded, in this passage. As the unnamed designer of nature and therefore landscape, God has structured and contrived the scene to reflect his benevolence, to dispel the bitter aftertaste of his wrath. The clouds, having dispensed God's watery vengeance and fueled the Flood, are now purely ornamental—they are meant to distract and delight the viewer. The Deluge, having cleansed and purged, transforms the earth into a global sea, which functions as a reflective surface, mirroring the heavens and obscuring what lies below. Ironically, then, God would see only his image. This sea is a quasi-Lethe, meant to promote forgetfulness and to obscure the truth—human carnage—from human sight. Noah's wife cannot forget, in fact, will not; her memory holds the images her empathetic vision affords her. Her remembrance becomes their elegy, their obituary or biography, but her

mourning is inconsolable, so Ruth speculates upon what might happen should she find a remnant of the Deluge. She “might have walked into it till her widow’s dress floated above her head and the water loosened her plaited hair” (172), just as Helen drove herself into the lake, for “sorrow is a predatory thing” (198).

In the biblical stories we all know, men like Noah are the characters in high relief, while women like his wife remain unnamed, or circumscribed beneath the narrative. Like Ruth’s grandmother and countless other women, she resides beneath the surface topography. Robinson brings her into bas-relief, along with her memories of those who lie in the tangled landscape beneath the floodwaters. These dead held in memory are therefore resurrected and elegized, despite God’s efforts to obliterate them. Both Lot’s wife and Helen lose their lives because of their inability to forget the past and their inconsolable mourning.

An analysis of *Housekeeping*’s tenth chapter illustrates the premise that sorrow is a sin. Landscape is the means whereby man speaks to God and God to man. Cain killed Abel, and the blood cried out from the ground; therefore, Cain, the image of God, “gave the simple earth of the field a voice and a sorrow”—gave it life. “God Himself heard the voice and grieved for the sorrow”—presumably of Cain and his descendants. Therefore, Cain becomes a creator in the image of his Creator; hence, both man and God grieve for the sorrows of the lives they create. God hears their cries through the earth and sends them a flood meant to purge the “wicked sadness” which remains in fragmented visions of heaven:

God troubled the waters where He saw His face, and Cain became his children and their children and theirs, through a thousand generations, and all of them transients, and wherever they went everyone remembered that there had been a second creation, that the earth ran with blood and sang with sorrow. And let God purge this wicked sadness away with a flood... Still they taste a bit of blood and hair. One cannot cup one’s hand and drink from the rim of any lake without remembering that mothers have drowned in it, lifting their children toward the air, though they must have known as they did that soon

enough the deluge would take all the children, too, even if their arms could have held them up. (193)

Cain is a murderer, but also a creator; he brings the simple clay of the field to life with the blood of his own brother. While it remains unsaid, one must accept that God, *the* “Creator,” is also a murderer—he wipes out millions with fire and flood and pestilence, and later, sacrifices his “only begotten son” (John 3:16) for the sins of his other creations. Ruth gives only one explanation for the human lives lost in the Deluge: “to purge this wicked sadness” (193). We are given images of desperate mothers holding innocent children up to heaven as the floodwaters encroach, and then Ruth makes a strange comment: “Presumably only incapacity made infants and the very old seem relatively harmless” (193). One is given the idea that some dangerous element is being purged—perhaps the human capacity for sorrow. Ruth closes the passage by saying “all that was purged away,” and nothing is left but a “certain pungency and savor in the water, and in the breath of creeks and lakes, which, however sad and wild, are clearly human” (193). Landscape acquires perpetual memory in its fusion with human life.

Ruth’s tone is defiant in this chapter, which leads one to feel that she is somehow circumventing God in her treatment of these women. Remember, both Helen Stone and Lot’s wife defied God’s law, but Ruth resurrects them through remembrance and forgives them; this is a challenge to God. One can see this clearly in Ruth’s insistent argument that, despite God’s best efforts, families will not be broken:

There is remembrance and communion, altogether unhallowed. For families will not be broken. Curse and expel them, send their children wandering, drown them in floods and fires, and old women will make songs out of all these sorrows and sit in the porches and sing them on mild evenings. Every sorrow suggests a thousand songs, and every song recalls a thousand sorrows, and so they are infinite in number, and all the same. (194)

Ruth equates remembrance with the sacrament of communion, so that remembrance is sacred, with or without God’s sanction. Most significantly, she insists that no power can break families.

The power of mourning is greater than God's power to purge sorrow from the world. God is not the force behind the movement of time—Ruth identifies that force as “a mourning that will not be comforted” (192).

Mourning is explored extensively in *Home*, as the prodigal son Jack Boughton searches for answers and absolution for the sins of his youth—most of all, the abandonment of his infant son, who subsequently dies. He confides in his sister Glory, who has extensive knowledge of biblical theology. Together they explore various interpretations of the scriptures to determine whether or not Jack's soul may escape eternal perdition—is it to be his eternal state? Glory is ultimately forced to question her own faith in her despair for her brother and his exile into wilderness. In her search for resolution, she revisits the story of Cain:

Maybe great sorrow or guilt is simply to be accepted as absolute, like revelation. My iniquity/punishment is greater than I can bear. In the Hebrew, her father said, that one word had two meanings and we chose one of them, which may make it harder for us to understand why the Lord would have pardoned Cain and protected him, and let him go on with his life, marry, have a son, build a city. His crime was his punishment, which had to mean he wasn't such a villain after all. (101)

Robinson again redeems a biblical character, revealing another perspective. Why would God allow Cain to have everything that Abel can never have? Cain is the consummate human, frail, desiring, jealous—forever marked, forever mourning his own choices.

While male characters predominate in *Gilead* and *Home*, God is one of the few male figures in *Housekeeping*—an unseen presence who makes his appearance in Chapter 10. Ruth, whose name means “mercy,” forgives God for his anger and unreasoned punishments just as she absolves Lot's wife and her own mother, Helen. After relating graphic depictions of God's cruelty, she provides him with an alibi so that he may also be forgiven. When the world was new, God was a “young man, and grew indignant over the slightest things” (192):

In the newness of the world God had perhaps not Himself realized the ramifications of certain of His laws, for example, that shock will spend itself in waves; that our images will mimic every gesture, and that shattered they will multiply and mimic every gesture ten, a hundred or a thousand times. (193)

Like Helen before her suicide, God had not thought about the repercussions of his actions. The wicked sadness could not be excised; it was carried within Cain and was in fact what marked him. Cain became his children and their children through a thousand generations, so that the wicked sadness was conveyed to subsequent generations despite the flood, and was even exacerbated because of the flood, persisting in the thoughts of the survivors just as a story or song is passed down through generations. In *Housekeeping*, the reflective nature of water becomes the reflective power of thought, making memory and speculation tools for resurrection.

And here we find our great affinity with water, for like reflections on water our thoughts will suffer no changing shock, no permanent displacement. They mock us with their seeming slightness. If they were more substantial—if they had weight and took up space—they would sink or be carried away in the general flux. But they persist outside the brisk and ruinous energies of the world. I think it must have been my mother's plan to rupture this bright surface, to sail beneath it to very blackness, but here she was, wherever my eyes fell, and behind my eyes, whole and in fragments, a thousand images of one gesture, never dispelled but rising always, inevitably, like a drowned woman. (163)

Ruth's mother meant to disappear, to be erased from memory, but she lived on in the mind and heart of her child.

Ruth explains that memory derives its power from "the sense of loss" so powerful that "God Himself was pulled after us into the vortex we made when we fell" (194). Ruth seems to suggest that God followed in the form of his own son. Jesus Christ, endowed with a great understanding of this "sense of loss," brings Lazarus back from the dead and walks on water, refusing to sink into the remnants of the flood (194). Ruth's faith in the return of her mother rests upon her belief in Christ's abilities; while he was on the earth he "mended families," healing the sick and raising the dead so that they could be reunited with their loved ones. Her

recounting and subsequent revision of the means of his resurrection reveals the power of memory, a power that will fulfill Ruth's desire for her own restitution:

And when He did die it was sad—such a young man, so full of promise, and His mother wept and His friends could not believe the loss, and the story spread everywhere and the mourning would not be comforted, until He was so sharply lacked and so powerfully remembered that His friends felt Him beside them as they walked along the road, and saw someone cooking fish on the shore and knew it to be Him, and sat down to supper with Him, all wounded as He was. There is so little to remember of anyone—an anecdote, a conversation at table. But every memory is turned over and over again, every word, however chance, written on the heart in the hope that memory will fulfill itself, and become flesh, and that the wanderers will find a way home, and the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step through the door finally and stroke our hair with dreaming habitual fondness, not having meant to keep us waiting long. (195)

Ruth's metaphysics for the resurrection of her mother is thus revealed, for "need can blossom into all the compensations it requires. To crave and to have are as alike as a thing and its shadow...when do our senses know any thing so utterly as when we lack it?" (152). That Jesus restored others to health and was resurrected is a foreshadowing that "the world will be made whole"—"whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again. Though we dream and hardly know it, longing, like an angel, fosters us, smoothes our hair, and brings us wild strawberries" (153). This speculative, emotional logic is the heart of the novel. The narrator in *Gilead* says that great faith is required to trust God's assurance that there will be angels in the wilderness (129). The playful, provocative, unseen presences in *Housekeeping* may represent the visits of angels, or they may take human form. When Ruth is abandoned in a wilderness created by the deaths of her mother and grandmother, her angel takes the shape of Sylvie Fisher. Springs of water, pools, ponds, and lakes are the reflecting mirrors of heaven and the sacred natures of the humans who gaze into them. Robinson's landscapes are wildernesses, where threat and blessing coexist. Wilderness expresses itself in many forms: a child's lack of guidance, a place of exile and wandering, the flourishing of nature, or a state of being.

Robinson's revisions provide new perspectives, most often through the use of unlikely landscapes like Carthage and Fingerbone Lake; ultimately, they create desired outcomes and therefore are elaborations of longing—actualizations of the possible.

### The Myth of Landscape

Robinson says that Europeans who believe that “Americans have no myth of landscape” are mistaken, because “we have many such myths” (*DOA* 246). Robinson, who hails from northern Idaho, concedes that she began writing fiction while attending an eastern college in hopes of making her friends understand how “rich and powerful a presence a place can be which, to their eyes, is forbidding and marginal, without population or history, without culture in any form recognizable to them” (246). She characterizes her feelings for her native landscape by saying “[a]ll love is in great part affliction” and her desire for it as an “unnamable yearning, to be at home in it, to be chastened and acceptable, to be present in it as if I were not present at all” (246). Her love, for her homeland and for her elders, constitutes a “religious feeling, being so powerful a reference for all other experience” (246). In the autobiographical “Psalm Eight,” the eclipsing of personality by landscape manifests itself in memories of visits to the forests of Idaho, where she feels “a mote of exception, improbable as a flaw in the sun” (*DOA* 230).

Robinson elaborates upon her desire for unity and anonymity in her essay “My Western Roots”:

I was a child...walking into the woods by myself and feeling the solitude around me build like electricity and pass through my body with a jolt that made my hair prickle. I remember kneeling by a creek that spilled and pooled among rocks and among fallen trees with the unspeakably tender growth of small trees already sprouting from their backs, and thinking, there is only one thing wrong here, which is my own presence, and that is the slightest imaginable intrusion—feeling that my solitude, my loneliness made me almost acceptable in so sacred a place. (167-68)

In the “A World of Beautiful Souls” (2005) interview with Scott Hoezee, Robinson ultimately expands these feelings into a worldview, characterizing human civilization as a “great yearning beyond itself” and human beings as “out of place in the world, out of scale with it,” a situation that she would remedy by re-mystifying and re-mythologizing culture. After college, Robinson remained in the eastern United States for several years, eventually moving to Paris, France. Like James Joyce before her, Robinson recreated her extraordinary native landscape with an exactitude that belied her absence. After writing *Housekeeping*, she returned to the United States, where she continued to reside in the east. Robinson’s self-imposed exile from the mountains of northern Idaho lasted twenty years.

The issue of recognition is crucial for understanding Robinson’s work. Her renderings of landscape are clearly intended as a method of comprehension, a shared revelation so that others might see through her eyes what their own enculturation obscures. She translates her intensely felt experience into a myth of landscape saturated with memories of the people and events that inhabited them. Ultimately, her desire to elaborate her interpretations of such myths becomes an insistence that Americans should re-mythologize and re-mystify their culture: “I think we have demythologized prematurely, that we have lost the vocabulary for discussing reality at its largest scales” (“Religion and Ethics” 829). Anticipating those who refuse to embrace intuition and personal experience by using reductive techniques to explain the numinous, she says the claim that myth is the opposite of truth is like saying that poetry is the opposite of truth. She proposes a “new articulation” through remystification, where the metaphysicality in her work often goes unexplained, just as it does in life. What she provides, with her signature recipe of speculation and manipulation of landscape, is the lens.

Ruth's narration begins with an extensive depiction of the childhood house of her grandfather, Edmund Foster, whose genealogy is populated by landscapes:

He had grown up in the Midwest, in a house dug out of the ground, with windows just at earth level and just at eye level, so that from without, the house was a mere mound, no more a human stronghold than a grave, and from within, the perfect horizontality of the world in that place foreshortened the view so severely that the horizon seemed to circumscribe the sod house and nothing more. (3)

Movement, albeit understated, begins with the character of Edmund, who initiates the tempo and gives the novel a sense of direction, of ascension. Having grown “up” obsessed with mountains, in a “subterraneous” house circumscribed by the horizon, from which he walks to take a train to make his home amid a forest of mountains, ending with his final rest at the bottom of Fingerbone Lake—Edmund lives and dies by geography.

It is Edmund who conveys a foundational sense of *terra firma* to the reader, for Ruth details the young man's early preoccupation with “travel literature, journals of expeditions to the mountains” (4) while boxed in his grave-like home. She describes his drawings—many odd, compulsive renderings of mountains, cone-shaped, bell-shaped—in explicit detail. In our mind's eye, these topological features become material, solidified, actual, through repetition and layering. Misled by our own sense of landscape as stable and concrete, we hardly notice that Ruth's grandfather has a markedly skewed vision, for in his drawings “every tree bore bright fruit, and showy birds nested in the boughs, and every fruit and bird was plumb with the warp in the earth” (4). Edmund's obsession with topography, with the configuration of the world, brings him, and therefore, Ruth, to Fingerbone, a town bounded by mountains. As Ruth narrates, the reader travels from the depths of the grave Edmund was born in, to the encompassing mountains he lived within, to the watery home he died in.

What drew him to this “improbable place” was his attempt to escape the “perfect horizontality of the world,” his intense desire to rise, to see beyond the foreshortened view of his origin (4) and to glory in the most elevated of relief features, the mountains. His journey introduces a detailed mapping of locale, with attendant boundaries and compass points that create the sense of a concrete topography. However, insistent repetition of this mapping from multiple perspectives and various moments in time effects a layering of landscape upon landscape—leaving the possibility of space between. The reader first sees the town of Fingerbone just as Edmund does upon his arrival, but through the eyes of Ruth, looking back:

The terrain on which the town was built is relatively level, having once belonged to the lake. It seems there was a time when the dimensions of things modified themselves, leaving a number of puzzling margins, as between the mountains as they must have been and the mountains as they are now, or between the lake as it once was, and the lake as it is now. (4-5)

Here is a foreshadowing of Robinson’s method. The narrator moves the reader from Edmund’s arrival “then,” to her perspective, her “now.” In the lens of our mind’s eye, we situate an image of the lake and mountains as they might have been twenty years ago. Just as we fasten our gaze to it, attempt to catalog or map it, the image begins to fade and the narrator moves forward in time to the lake and the mountains as they are “now.” What remains is the space in-between, where the dimensions of things had “modified themselves, leaving a number of puzzling margins” (5). Robinson stacks one image upon another, going from past to present to past before we may shut the aperture of the mind’s eye to capture the image as unified and singular. Chronology and linear systems are bypassed. Ruth repeats this optical illusion so deftly and so often that the “photograph” within the mind’s eye is blurred, a double, then prismatic, image. These margins become substance, area, and region—dark spots in our vision. The reader follows the narrator, who continues this technique, assimilating these unarticulated, puzzling margins

that come into existence as absences, gaps in our knowledge, places not then or now, but some-  
“where” between.

In Edmund’s section we attempt to create a map in our minds, as our vision travels by train, from circumscription by horizon to circumscription by “mountains, uncountable mountains” (4), until horizontality brims with perpendicularity. Like her grandfather’s precarious paintings, Ruth insists that we are “plumb with the warp of the earth” (4) and that our visual maps are oblique, or aslant to the point of vertigo. Jean Wyatt notes this shift in the reader’s sense of *terra firma*, this vibration in the plumb line of the reader’s vision:

The distinct lines between things that enable us to read the world are elided... The landmarks of the discursive world are equally mobile, replacing the clear dividing lines between things with these “puzzling margins” where elements blend. (86)

In *Housekeeping*, ordinary topographical features are transformed, acquiring metaphysical depth and breadth, even performing as regions unto themselves. We look to the narrator for a sense of balance, for guidance, but Ruth has looked away, to the lake. Robinson’s employment of the lake is an excellent example of her method. By metamorphosing the lake, from that of “charts and photographs” into a prismatic vision of many lakes, she reveals the substrata of an encompassing region that may permeate and consume all others:

It is true that one is always aware of the lake in Fingerbone, or the deeps of the lake, the lightless airless waters below. When the ground is plowed in the spring, cut and laid open, what exhales from the furrows but that same, sharp, watery smell? The wind is watery, and all the pumps and creeks and ditches smell of water unalloyed by any other element. At the foundation is the old lake, which is smothered and nameless and altogether black. Then there is Fingerbone, the lake of charts and photographs, which is permeated by sunlight and sustains green life and numerable fish, and in which one can look down in the shadow of a dock and see stony, earthy bottom, more or less as one sees dry ground. And above that, the lake that rises in the spring and turns the grass dark and coarse as reeds. And above that the water suspended in sunlight, sharp as the breath of an animal, which brims inside this circle of mountains. (9)

Appearance consists of mere surface topography, low-hanging fruit for the senses. Surface topography that can be charted and photographed actually obscures the dimensions that the eye must be trained to see. Since the lake is impervious to human boundaries and accoutrements, landscape becomes a lesson in perception; one must focus on an ordinary object in an ordinary landscape, a train, a house, a mirror, a window, while the eye is instructed to recognize a multidimensional landscape. From the moment it is introduced, the lake mutates and all earthly boundaries become permeable as elements merge; sky, land, water, and air become miscible ingredients for a transient landscape that harbors the children:

Sometimes in the spring, the old lake will return. One will open a cellar door to wading boots floating tallowsy soles up and planks and buckets bumping at the threshold, the stairway gone from sight after the second step. The earth will brim, the soil will become mud and then silty water, and the grass will stand in chill water to its tips... A narrow pond would form in the orchard, water as clear as air covering grass and black leaves and fallen branches, all around it black leaves and drenched grass and fallen branches, and on it, slight as an image in an eye, sky, clouds, trees, our hovering faces and our cold hands. (5)

Here, in their first physical appearance in the novel, the children, Ruth and Lucille, are insubstantial; they “hover” above the elements of earth as mere reflections of themselves. Although the stairway is “gone from sight” and human accoutrements are rendered useless, Ruth is reconciled to the permeability of the house and to the mercurial natural landscape. The nature of being, her existence, seems “slight as the image in an eye” (5). Slight because the eye has only to blink to displace her image with another, obliterating this frail evidence of her being. Just a fraction of a second, a momentary darkness, separates one image from the next, leaving sense or image altered. As the eye continues to blink, this layering of images substantiates, constructs (with spaces between) perception. To reassure ourselves that we “are,” we rely upon this visual confirmation, this reflection of ourselves in the surface of a mirror, a lake or the eyes of another.

Edmund works as a signalman for the railroad until “his mortal and professional careers ended in a spectacular derailment” from which his body is never recovered (5):

The disaster took place midway through a moonless night. The train, which was black and sleek and elegant...had pulled more than halfway across the bridge when the engine nosed over toward the lake and the rest of the train slid after it into the water like a weasel sliding off a rock. (6)

The image of the train entering another medium to become a serpentine mausoleum for

Edmund is used later to establish images of resurrection. As the truant children observe the hoboes who stare into the water under the bridge, Ruth speculates upon a reversal of fortune:

As it was, I thought of telling them that our grandfather still lay in a train that slid to the lake floor long before we were born. Perhaps we all awaited a resurrection. Perhaps we expected a train to leap out of the water, caboose foremost, as if in a movie run backward, and then to continue across the bridge. The passengers would arrive, sounder than they departed, accustomed to the depths, serene about their restoration to the light, disembarking at the station in Fingerbone with a calm that quieted the astonishment of friends. Say that this resurrection was general enough to include my grandmother, and Helen, my mother. Say that Helen lifted our hair from our napes with her cold hands and gave us strawberries from her purse. (96)

This resurrection is enacted with imagery, similar to a rewind in film, since the train leaps back onto the tracks bringing Ruth’s loved ones back to her. However, this is not the original train, or even its rewind opposite, but a third train who returns everyone, even those who were never on the train, and all are “sounder than they departed, accustomed to the depths, serene about their restoration to the light” (96). The child lays these images of resurrection down like tracks.

An intensely metaphysical image of a train conveys the sense of a timeless present, of multiple dimensions and of Robinson’s disregard for spatial and temporal boundaries. Ruth daydreams about what she hopes will be her first train trip with her sister Lucille and their new guardian, Aunt Sylvie:

I saw the three of us posed in all the open doors of an endless train of freight cars—innumerable, rapid, identical images that produced a flickering illusion of both motion and stasis as the pictures in a kinoscope do. The hot and dangerous winds of our

passing tattered the Queen Anne's lace, and yet, for all the noise and clatter and headlong speed, we flickered there at the foot of the garden while the train roared on and on. (50)

The “innumerable, rapid, identical images” that produce the illusion of simultaneous motion and stasis imitate the way we see, the way we fuse separate frames between blinks into vision and visual perception. The passage portrays the train as a marriage of motion and stasis that defies conventional notions of time and space. The images that repeat seem constant and the characters inhabit a bizarre landscape. Whether or not we go, we always stay. Ruth, Lucille and Sylvie are situated at the intersection of past, present, and future, where they experience each simultaneously. The train, like memory, goes on indefinitely. Since this is difficult to conceptualize, to realize, the image must convey it to our perception so that we may “see” this simultaneity—yet another (non)location because it does not meet conventional criterion for locale—a perpetual non-region missing the fixed points necessary for proper geography. To see Ruth's vision, we must read this merging of temporal and spatial at once, with a kind of blurred or double vision.

Consider the way that trains pull us along tracks, through landscapes, without our control, deaf to our desires, just as the events of our lives change our course, all before we are able to understand what is happening. Images, people, places fly by quickly, just as Ruth's narration speeds past the events and people of her life, leaving her reader with glimpses so fleeting, we ask ourselves—“what have I seen?” Like the kinetoscopic images, Ruth's landscapes are strobed into the mind, with little else to guide the reader. The images awaken a kind of sixth sense, an intuitive other sight that makes the impossible possible.

After Edmund's train enters the icy water of the glacial lake and initial rescue attempts have failed, the weather becomes colder and boys begin jumping off the bridge into the water.

At this point, Robinson introduces one of the more prominent and surreal image clusters in the novel, that of a reflective surface shattered into fragments which then knit themselves back together again:

When the sun rose, clouds soaked up the light like a stain. It became colder. The surface of the lake was very still. As the boys' feet struck the water, there was a slight sound of rupture. Fragments of transparent ice wobbled on the waves they made and, when the water was calm again, knitted themselves up like bits of reflection...the water was becoming cool and opaque, like cooling wax. Shivers flew when a swimmer surfaced and the membrane of ice that formed where the ice was torn looked new, glassy and black. All the swimmers came in. By evening the lake had sealed itself over. (7-8)

Robinson illustrates a familiar, even ordinary image of ice forming on water, kids jumping off train trestles, ice separating with the disturbance of the water and resealing itself in calm. She takes great care to deliver this image to us in concise detail, because it will appear later to convey meaning on a more metaphysical plane to describe the effect of Edmund's death upon his family:

That event had troubled the very medium of their lives. Time and air and sunlight bore wave and wave of shock, until all the shock was spent, and time and space and light grew still again and nothing seemed to tremble, and nothing seemed to lean. The disaster had fallen out of sight, like the train itself, and if the calm that followed it was not greater than the calm that came before it, it had seemed so. And the dear ordinary had healed as seamlessly as an image on water. (14)

Forgetfulness acts as an anesthetic as the family rebuilds their life together. For now, the routine nature of daily life obscures the images of loss, the memories of the bizarre tragedy, but they will, inevitably, rise to be reckoned with later. This image of tearing and sealing, trauma and healing, resonates throughout the novel; here it is also used to illustrate and to justify Ruth's speculative logic:

Ascension seemed at such times a natural law. If one added to it the law of completion—that everything must finally be made comprehensible—then some general rescue of the sort I imagined my aunt to have undertaken would be inevitable. For why do our thoughts turn to some gesture of a hand, the fall of a sleeve, some corner of a room on a particular afternoon, even when we are asleep, and even when we are so old that our

thoughts have abandoned other business? What are all these fragments for if not to be knit up finally? (92)

The persistence of these intense feelings and perpetual memories must mean that they are the key to her retribution. They will assist her in this retrieval, this gathering of all she has lost. One has only to fit the pieces together to be whole once more.

### Resurrection

In *Death of Adam*, resurrection takes place in the memory of the beholder; Robinson describes herself as a reincarnation:

Perhaps that was part of the difference I felt between the world and myself, that while it was a thousand ways true that it knew me as I could not know myself—my old relatives remembered people with my eyes and how they lived and how their lives ended—I hoarded the notion of a singular self in this singular moment, as if such things could exist. (234)

The youthful Marilynne is just the present incarnation, a reflection and a recollection of a past form. *Housekeeping* contains a similar allusion when Ruth watches Sylvie reenact Helen's gestures at the mirror. Ruth's meditations on her heredity conjure Helen—the metaphorical becomes the metaphysical:

Her head fell to the side so oddly and awkwardly when she reached to fasten up the hair at her neck, as my mother's had done. That was not mysterious. They were both long and narrow women like me, and nerves like theirs walk my legs and gesture my hands. Was this coincidence just another proof of the conspiracy of the senses with the world? Appearance paints itself on bright and sliding surfaces, for example, memory and dream. Sylvie's head falls to the side and we see the blades of my mother's shoulders and the round bones at the top of her spine. Helen is the woman in the mirror, the woman in the dream, the woman in the water, and her nerves guide the blind fingers that touch into place all the falling strands of Sylvie's hair. (132)

At last, the women are indistinguishable; this fusion occurs before the reader's very eyes, so we understand how we will perceive Helen's presence. As Ruth herself insists, "And if [Sylvie] were Helen in my sight, how could she not be Helen in fact?" (167). Their mutual biology is

elaborated to signal Helen's presence in their bodies—she inhabits Sylvie and Ruth—she gestures when they gesture, walks when they walk, speaks when they speak.

According to John Calvin, the soul travels from one incarnation/body to the next, clothing itself anew. Ruth's speculations during the flood seem to echo this sentiment:

Every spirit passing through the world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable, and finally has come to look and not to buy. So shoes are worn and hassocks are sat upon and finally everything is left where it was and the spirit passes on, just as the wind in the orchard picks up the leaves from the ground as if there were no other pleasure in the world but brown leaves, as if it would deck, clothe, flesh itself in flourishes of dusty brown apple leaves, and then drops them all in a heap... (73)

Like Calvin, Robinson says that all souls are one soul, that “there is no meaningful distinction to be made between one and the next—each one is simple, absolute soul, and as if the only soul...this is heaven without hierarchy” (*DOA* 225). But we must cultivate an ability to see it, to recognize it, so that perception may be visited upon us.

Robinson is conditioning our mind's eye, commending certain elements to our sight, leaving interpretation to us. She respects and highlights the mystery inherent in each human being. Those we love come to us with a history that presumably extends to past lives, actual and metaphorical deaths and resurrections that even they could not explain to us. The beloved we think we know, even the self we think we are, is an illusion, and one of many inhabiting an array of landscapes.

Our mind's eye absorbs the gaps so full of implication; Robinson depends upon this reflex, so human, writes with it in mind. It is in fact what brings Robinson to church each week; she gets glimpses of something full of implication each time, is intrigued by parables, and intuits something she cannot fully grasp. She maintains a continual conversation with the language of scripture. But she cannot penetrate the opacity of the text; it remains as opaque as the figures of angels painted on gold (229). She makes an odd concession about her compulsive church

attendance, saying that the “sensation of exclusion is more poignant” to her in church than elsewhere, by virtue of its being, after all these years, so very familiar (231). Not so strange in a woman whose precondition for intimacy is that she be given “almost no thought” at all. In church, the repetition is hypnotic, cyclical, the reciting of “luminous” fragments of verses, the opening and closing hymns—it is always new to her, she is “never not instructed” (230-31). Repetition creates gaps, openings between; she sees a glimmer, a flash of luminosity, but she is unable to sustain her vision without revitalizing it or re-mem-bering it: “Scripture...is itself, a visionary experience...evoking a sense of astonished realization, of a constant, overwhelming present moment” (*MN* 219). The elusive nature of the text compels her to come back repeatedly to “have it opened” for her (*DOA* 230), because the dear ordinary seals over the fantastic nature of the sacred.

### Landscapes of Intention

Certain landscapes speak to us: “[T]he outer world—forms, temperatures, the moon—is a language we humans have forgotten or which we can scarcely distinguish” (Machen 14). De Quincey saw the symbolic in landscape, read its messages: “Even the articulate or brutal sounds of the globe must be all so many languages and ciphers that somewhere have their corresponding keys—have their own grammar or syntax,” and “the least things in the universe must be secret mirrors to the greatest” (*Writings*, V.1, 129). Robinson uses landscapes like language. Consider her *New York Times Book Review* piece in 1987 wherein she expresses her conviction that “among all the constellated forms of describable experience in the world, there are mists in which we do not yet see configuration [that] should neither be subsumed or denied in other ways

of perceiving” (LIS 8). Robinson uses imagery and repetition to bring about an incarnation, to convey indescribable experience, and to inscribe that experience in the mind’s eye of the reader.

“Psalm Eight” portrays a landscape with human characteristics, a landscape saturated with the sensation of God’s presence—a combination that she found disturbing as a child:

In those mountains there is a great constant silence surrounding any brief local silence, and one is always aware of it. When I was a child it seemed to me sometimes it might be emptiness that would tease my soul out of my body, with some intention too huge even to notice my fragile flesh. I knew that the mountains and the lakes and the woods brought people’s lives to disastrous conclusions, often too frightening to repeat in the hearing of children... (DOA 237)

Energy of intention is evident in all of Robinson’s landscapes—they have eerily sentient qualities; their ultimate function is to present or commend or house the possible. Robinson’s interpretation of John Calvin presents a less disturbing concept of this energy of intention:

John Calvin says that when a seed falls into the ground it is cherished there, by which he means that everything the seed contains by way of expectation is foreseen and honored. One might as well say the earth invades the seed, *seizes it as occasion to compose itself in some brief shape*. Groundwater in a sleeve of tissue, flaunting improbable fragrances and iridescences as the things of this strange world are so inclined to do. So a thriving place is full of intention, a sufficiency awaiting expectation, teasing hope beyond itself. (234, my emphasis)

It is easy to understand why Robinson found this concept disturbing as a child; she must have sensed that she herself was the seed, and wanting to avoid this fusion, averted her eyes. Ruth imagines a similar invasion by water in *Housekeeping* as Sylvie rows her across Fingerbone Lake. As disturbing as this scene may seem, for the child it is a welcome parturition:

I lay like a seed in a husk...I toyed with the idea that we might capsize. It was the order of the world, after all, that water should pry through the seams of husks, which pursed and tight as they might be, are only made for breaching. It was the order of the world that the shell should fall away and that I, the nub, the sleeping germ, should swell and expand. Say that I, miraculously, monstrously, drank water into all my pores until the last black cranny of my brain was a trickle, a spillet. And given that it is in the nature of water to fill and force to repletion and bursting...then, presumably, would come parturition in some form...could such a birth be imagined? (162)

This passage describes Ruth as drowning, but it is presented to us as a myth of rebirth under the aspect of nature's machinations—the order of the world. Infused with that vast energy of intention, the water of the lake is simply composing itself into a brief shape, a mortal, human shape. Death simply accommodates another form of life. We know that Helen drowned herself, but Robinson does not provide a description of the event, so there is a deficit in our catalog of images, a mote in our visual perception of the event, which is then filled by Ruth's enactment. One can see this *bouleversement* of birth not as life or its opposite, death, but as a transfiguration into another incarnation.

Say that Ruth mimics or repeats this event, the way she imagines it happened to her mother. Say she does this by insisting upon a natural law; everyone knows that a seed is planted for the purpose of transfiguration. Couldn't Ruth's rebirth reflect or mirror Helen's? Could such a birth be imagined? The passage brings to mind Robinson's discussion of the penumbra and corollary and implication of ideas in her essay "Language Is Smarter":

[Language] seems still to have, in some decayed and anarchic form, those powers to conjure contained in the first cosmic decrees. Merely say that the earth is at the center of the universe, and the planets spring into place around it, and angels mass just clear of their rotations, and hum as they hum, and shine as they shine, and the whole is so pleasing to contemplate that if there is beauty in truth, only infidels could object. (2)

Ruth's mother is revived visually, through this landscape, briefly, by this passage, and by inference (if Ruth can be reborn, Helen can too), a resurrection that is repeated in many forms throughout the course of the novel.

Ruth is aware of her mortality, often stressing the fragile nature of being: "I felt that our survival was owed to our slowness, that we danced through ruinous currents as dry leaves do, and were not capsized because the ruin we rode on was meant for greater things" (162). When she realizes that her materiality separates her from Helen, Ruth deconstructs herself.

Systematically removing any residuum attributable to her, Ruth transforms herself from a reality to a reflection able to float like thoughts upon the currents of life:

Let them come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart. It was no shelter now, it only kept me here alone, and I would rather be with them, if only to see them, even if they turned away from me. If I could see my mother, it would not have to be her eyes, her hair, I would not need to touch her sleeve. There was no more the stoop of her high shoulders. The lake had taken that, I knew. It had been so very long since the dark had swum her hair, and there was nothing more to dream of, but often she almost slipped through any door I saw from the side of my eye, and it was she, and not changed, and not perished. She was a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind, itself and nothing else, lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished. (160)

Like Dante, Ruth would enter the unknown medium of the netherworld and whatever that entails just to “see” her beloved again. Longing, speculation, and the raiment of landscape allow Ruth to explore routes to her mother and incarnations of herself enacting the possible.

#### A Defense of Resurrection

In “Psalm Eight,” Robinson recalls a sermon she heard as a girl on the discrepancies of the resurrection; she explains away these discrepancies with little concern for what she calls “forensic” detail. The four gospels differ only slightly on their accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb on the morning of the resurrection; each account describes the visit of Mary, Mary Magdalene, an apostle or two, and various others to the sepulcher where they find that the stone has been rolled away. Once inside, they encounter men wearing luminous white garments who announce that Jesus has risen. While the number of angels and the identities of other minor players vary, all agree that there is “a vision of angels” in some form. The minister who gives this sermon asks what it could mean that this essential moment is described differently in every report of it. Were they really angels or were they men? Which is the true story? The minister’s

answer, distilled through Robinson's memory, is a continuation of the speculative logic so pervasive in *Housekeeping*:

The Bible, he said, was full of proof that angels could pass for men, which must certainly mean that men could pass for angels. He concluded that, insofar as a young man is seen under the aspect of joy and kindness and holiness, he is properly seen as an angel, because that is a vision of his immortal nature. And insofar as the joy and kindness and holiness of angels are addressed to human beings, angels are like us and at one with us, at their most beautiful when they express attributes most beautiful in us. That such confusion could have occurred is central to the meaning of the resurrection, because it reminds us what we are. (DOA 234)

In the passage above, Robinson not only defends the discrepancies in the text, but the concept of angels. She seems to be saying that the angels are provided to us as metaphors, a way of comprehending God, once removed, as well as mirrors for the reflection of our better selves, despite our flaws. An essential element in this passage for understanding Robinson's work is the element of "aspect"—the way that we see—because, for her, seeing is comprehension. The power of the author is pro-vision: we see it through her eyes. Like her beloved Calvin, Robinson's "sense of things is overwhelmingly visual" (MN 221); for both, perception and understanding are "the primary locus of reality" (221):

In Calvin's mind, the mirror is by far the dominant metaphor for perception and also for Creation, so distortion would be a natural extension of the metaphor, especially in a time when the art of making mirrors was newly recovered and flaws and distortions would have been inevitable. Yet it is also true that, in its essence, experience is a text he reads. That is why the textuality of Scripture gives it such authority, and why his struggles with flaws in the text, the mistranslations and scribal errors and forced interpretations, are identical in his understanding with the problem of discovering and establishing truth—a thing which he is too good a scholar to imagine can ever really be achieved. (221)

Making perception and understanding the primary locus of reality "rescues the world and the flesh from dualism...from the opprobrium of existing in a state of opposition to the soul because they are addressed to and exist for the soul, for perception and understanding" (221). The flesh

and the world are also metaphors for our comprehension of what our human understanding is incapable of grasping.

The elements of aspect, perception, and address are crucial for Robinson's metaphorical and metaphysical elaborations, the conditions for comprehension. Robinson offers a lens that filters out or elides forensic details: "Fact explains nothing...it is fact that requires explanation" (*HK* 217). Robinson's images are used for resurrection; addressed to us and cast under certain aspects, emotional or mystical, they are transfigured. Images, landscapes, memories, and identities are all susceptible to this transfiguration.

Robinson turns her laser-like vision on the northern mountains of Idaho in "Psalm Eight," conjuring it from memory. These landscapes are animated and described in human terms, flooded with the vast energy of "intention" that unnerved her as a child:

[T]here is a special sweetness in the light and grace in the vegetation, as well as a particular tenderness in the contact of light and vegetation. We used to hunt for wild strawberries in places in the woods where there had once been fires. These meadows, which for decades or centuries would hardly have felt more sunlight than the floor of the sea, were avid for it...they were radiant, smoldering, gold with transparency, accepting light altogether. (234)

Light and vegetation effect sweetness, grace, and tenderness; meadows feel and are avid and accepting. The luminous landscape arises from a naturally occurring catastrophe, is restored as something more radiant because of it. The narrator paints the beauty of the landscape, captures the mind's eye of the reader, then Robinson contracts this vision, goes deeper, from general to specific, to a flourishing landscape within the landscape, miraculous in its intricacy:

Thousands of florets...so tiny even a child had to kneel to see them at all, squandered intricacy and opulence on avid little bees, the bees cherished, the flowers cherished, the light cherished, visibly, audibly, palpably. (234)

In her extreme focus on the minutest workings of the world, Robinson practices what she preaches—commending these "Orients" (234) of delectation to the reader—revealing the

immanence of the fantastic within the ordinary. These tiny landscapes are refracted into other forms, and they branch and blossom into metaphoric allusions. She compares her discovery of these Orients to “hearing a tale of opulent grace poured out on modest need or of miracle astonishing despair, a parable brilliant with strangeness, cryptic with wisdom, disturbing as a tender intention full of the frightening mercy of foreknowledge” (234). The landscape is elaborated as narrative, as miracle, as parable—albeit a disturbing parable.

As she goes about revealing the nature of this energy of intention in “Psalm Eight,” Robinson performs a characteristic double gesture, an important aspect of her analogism: she throws one image into a confluence of images, whether of landscape, of people, or both. Then she layers them, stacks them like stairs to her conclusion. The reader must learn to read this pentimento style or fall into the gap. Robinson prefaces the first instance in this essay with a kind of disclaimer; she says she knew her grandfather for years, but, “I am not sure I ever knew him well. He seemed stern and I was very shy of him. I had heard sad stories about him as a boy and a young man, and when I was with him I always thought of them, and I was cautious, as if the injuries still might be tender” (235). Here is the power of aspect. Perhaps she did know him well *because she thought of him as a boy and a young man* and could explain his silence as sadness instead of severity. She realizes her childhood way of seeing him through her adult memory, so from the vantage of the present, she may interpret his appearance in the past. The memory of his stooped but dignified back is seen as an effort of composure against the cruelty of the world, the “memory of his polished shoes and his habit of gardening in his oldest suit and his worst necktie as evidence that I sensed in him diligent pride in the face of sadness not otherwise to be borne” (235). The condition for comprehension is still aspect, which functions here like foreknowledge. Robinson’s double gesture begins as she remembers a characteristic gesture her

grandfather often made while inspecting the “flourishing he set in motion” in his garden; she re-experiences a scene from memory which is immediately overtaken by another, more metaphysical landscape—the author moves from figures of speech to figures of thought:

He would hold one blossom and another in the tips of his fingers, at arm’s length, and tilt his face up and back to look at them. It was an old man’s method of scrutiny, but to me it seemed as if he were revealing prodigy or sleight, the way a magician opens his hand to reveal a dove. I looked carefully at every blossom he appeared to commend to me, noting how they were made of cell and capillary, whisker and freckle, frail skin, tented on white bone, and how they were chill to the touch, and how they curled on themselves like smoke, and how, till the life was wrung out of it, each one accomplished a small grandeur of form. (236)

What have we seen? The mind’s eye of the reader observes the child observing the grandfather, transformed from an ordinary old man to an accomplished magician, a godlike figure who opens his hand to reveal the dove, symbol of the Holy Ghost. We are then pulled into the more intricate landscape of the flowers themselves and their human characteristics of “cell and capillary, whisker and freckle, frail skin, tented on white bone”. Finally, the image of “how they curled on themselves like smoke” imbues them with a metaphysical quality, an ethereal nature, made elegiac by “till the life was wrung out of it, each one accomplished a small grandeur of form,” like humans in their fragile existence. The final image, “how they curled on themselves like smoke,” becomes transient and returns to haunt the novel later when it migrates to other passages; it will be resurrected as an inlaid detail which will signal the reader, make the connection (236).

The story of Robinson’s grandfather and his flourishing garden is the reflection of another story of another gardener and another garden we have yet to see. But first, we are given the Eighth Psalm itself, which provides the link, the symmetrical circumstance for connection: “When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars... What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him

a little lower than the angels” (227). Robinson interprets the question “What is man that thou art mindful of him?” as a positive expression of wonder, and she defines the manner of the Psalmist as exuberant (240). She reckons that the idea is to “confound all notions of scale” (240) in order to bridge the distance between God and man, not to emphasize it. The moon and stars—the heavens—are diminished in relation to God’s magnitude, even though nothing vaster than the heavens can be conceived, and they are the work of “his fingers” (240). Then Robinson addresses the next question, “what is small and mortal man?”—man, albeit foolish, weak, sad, and bewildered, has intrigued or enchanted God, as the flowers enchanted her grandfather. Because of this aspect, this nimbus of love, man “is *crowned* with honor . . . [is] what God has made him . . . splendor of a higher order, like that of angels” (240). Here the image reoccurs, the inlaid, embedded image of ineffable life:

There is a wonderful implication that the great moon and the innumerable stars are astonishing not for the vastnesses they fill so sparsely and illuminate so slightly, but because God should delight in making anything so small and fine as the heavens and their adornments, in every way exceeding them as he does. I have always imagined the trace of a gesture of conjuration or display left in the clouds of stars curling on themselves like smoke. (240)

As the question “What is man?” still reverberates, Robinson uses metaphor to articulate a metaphysical notion. The transient image of the clouds curling on themselves conjures the image of God in Grandfather’s posture, holding a star at arm’s length, face tilted in scrutiny, “the way a magician opens his hand to reveal a dove” (236). The imagery is doubled, then blurred, then unified, and we see man and God as one.

The question that reverberates throughout Robinson’s work may be “What have we seen?” but Calvin asked it first. His question “What is in this moment?” captures Robinson’s imagination; consider her “World of Beautiful Souls” interview:

One of the great gifts I have received from Calvin is the idea of experience as encounter. This is consistent with his understanding of communion, which is so utterly misunderstood. It floods life in general with meaning, moment to moment, and it clears away that old persistent distinction between sacred and secular, so oddly invidious toward most of God's creation. This seems right to me, and wonderful. I learned from it to ask a very basic question: What is in this moment? That is, what am I being given to see, to understand? (2)

In part, we are being shown Robinson's (and Calvin's) insistence that "any person one encounters is an image of God" and that it is an "astonishing privilege" to be able to "encounter such an image" (3). This idea is central to "Calvin's metaphysics of encounter—in which atmosphere takes on a special richness of meaning, because in Calvin's terms, these images of God are God," so the luminosity of landscape signals God's presence within the landscape which, as an image of God, demands "great attentiveness" (3). The soul is the perceiver upon whom perception is visited—a "gift whereof the virtue is unknown to my little power" (MN 221). Since this perception cannot be accessed or grasped, only received, great attentiveness must be given to each moment. In *Housekeeping*, Ruth's attentiveness to moments is tantamount to foreknowledge:

I hated waiting. If I had one particular complaint, it was that my life seemed composed entirely of expectation. I expected—an arrival, an explanation, an apology. There had never been one, a fact I could have accepted, were it not true that, just when I had got used to the limits and dimensions of one moment, I was expelled into the next and made to wonder again if any shapes hid in its shadows. That most moments were substantially the same did not detract at all from the possibility that the next moment might be utterly different. And so the ordinary demanded unblinking attention. Any tedious hour might be the last of its kind. (166)

Like Calvin's seed, Ruth's life is composed entirely of expectation; she understands that the ordinary demands absolute attention if one is to be visited by perception:

When did I become so unlike other people? Either it was when I followed Sylvie across the bridge, and the lake claimed us, or it was when my mother left me waiting for her and established in me the habit of waiting and expectation which makes any present moment most significant for what it does not contain. (214)

A moment is like a seed, significant for what it does not contain; once a seed is filled, it is no longer a seed, but is translated into another shape. When a moment or the expectation within it is filled, it is transfigured, perhaps into eternity. What is in this moment? That is, what are we being given to see or to understand? To understand Robinson's method, it is important to pursue this question. Unseen presences, conveyed through landscape or elements of landscape, are glimpsed out of the corner of one's eye, images existing only in the periphery of our vision, like Ruth describing her mother as a music she "no longer heard" which still "rang in her mind" and although "lost to all sense...not perished, not perished" (*HK* 160):

In my dream I had waited for her confidently, as I had all those years ago when she left us on the porch. Such confidence was like a sense of imminent presence, a palpable displacement, the movement in the air before the wind comes. Or so it seemed. Yet twice I had been disappointed, if that was the word. Perhaps I had been deceived. If appearance is only a trick of the nerves, and apparition only a lesser trick of the nerves, a less perfect illusion, then this expectation, this sense of a presence unperceived, was not particularly illusory as things in this world go. (121-22)

These presences are sensed by proxy, are filtered through landscape or in the gestures and appearances of others, as if barely recognizable to human perception. Again, Robinson's interpretation of Calvin is instructive. In "Marguerite de Navarre Part II," she analyzes his commentary on Genesis, where he describes heaven in these terms: "[T]he earth, with its supply of fruits for our daily nourishment, is not there set before us; but Christ offers himself unto life eternal" (*DOA* 224); so the sun does not provide light, Christ does: "There, in short, the invisible kingdom of Christ fills all things, and his spiritual grace is diffused through all" (250). Robinson interprets Calvin's heaven this way:

Heaven's essence for him is that it is inconceivable in the world's terms, another order of experience. This is true even though his conception of the world is utterly visionary. He says that while God is not to be seen "in his unveiled essence" he "clothes himself, so to speak, in the image of the world, in which he would present himself to our contemplation...arrayed in the incomparable vesture of the heavens and the earth"... Every understanding of the self is meaningless where the whole of existence is changed

beyond our ability to conceive of it, where all understanding is the nature of revelation, that is, of perception overwhelmed. (250)

God veils himself, clothes himself in the image of the world—the vesture of the heavens and the earth—nature, landscape, and the elements. Recollect Ruth’s sense of being “bewilderingly lost in a landscape that, with any light at all, would be wholly familiar...So little fell upon our senses, and all of that was suspect” (130). One could imagine that perception overwhelmed describes the desired effect upon the reader, who is compelled to see in a new way by imagery that appears to be conventional at the outset, but is, like Edmund’s maps and mountains, aslant or askew.

The novel’s introduction manipulates language in a different way, with a similar result; something is always slightly off balance. The first words are “My name is Ruth” (3). Critics correctly assume the author is invoking Melville’s Ishmael; Robinson wants to stress that we are all Ishmael—we are not at home in this world. So the novel begins with a woman who is submerged by the surface topography of literature—the omnipresent Ruth of Naisari from the Book of Ruth. Robinson, whose knowledge of scripture is formidable, claims that she only realized that she had invoked the Book of Ruth *after* she had completed the novel—an amazing omission. Ruth of Naisari leaves her home to follow Naomi, her mother-in-law, into the wilderness; Ruth Stone follows her Aunt Sylvie into wilderness. After introducing herself in this way Ruth recites what appears to be a conventional genealogy, but with glaring omissions, all of the men in her family and, most significantly, her mother. The rapid recitation of this list moves the reader quickly past the absences in her family tree. Ruth’s character is located, textually, within her relationships to others—she is sister, she is grandchild, and she is niece. Ruth names her sister, Lucille, her grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, her great aunts, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and finally, her aunt, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher, saying, “through all these generations of elders we lived in one house” (3). The reader “sees” a line of women passing through a house that is in

a fixed position within a fixed landscape and the two children, Ruth and Lucille, framed inside the house held in a state of “poise and arrest” (13), an image that echoes the motion and stasis of the metaphysical train. Ruth’s genealogy initiates a cataloging of the past and a constant cycling of the seasons and memory that provide the rhythm for the novel. Here, the replication that constitutes the text’s imagery begins with genetic memory—in the face of Ruth, we see the faces of all of those who came before her—nothing is lost.

The absent dead return as unperceived presences—Edmund is a wind full of memory, playfully billowing the sheets as Sylvia attempts to hang them:

[S]ay that when she had pinned three corners [of a sheet] to the lines that it began to billow and leap in her hands, to flutter and tremble, and to glare with the light, and that the throes of the thing were as gleeful and strong as if a spirit were dancing in its cerements. That wind! she would say...It came down the lake, and it smelled sweetly of snow, and rankly of melting snow, and it called to mind the small, scarce, stemmy flowers that she and Edmund would walk half a day to pick. (16)

Sylvia experiences fond memories while Edmund billows her sheets, signaling the “resurrection of the ordinary” (18). Edmund’s next visit evokes Calvin’s God, “clothed” in the image of the world, in several ways. Sylvia is described as taking on “all the postures and vestments of a matron,” to be what she seemed to be, so that her children would “never be startled” (19). Her garden is transfigured after what is alluded to as a fiery event—the earth is “soft as cinders” and the sky the “dark blue of ashes”—but the trauma has passed; now trees and plants are “ordinary green, with comfortable rustlings” and potatoes are “smooth as eggs” (19), signifying new life.

Sylvia, knee-deep in landscape, is visited by Edmund as her perceptions are overwhelmed:

[S]he knelt in the rows...burrowed her hand under a potato plant and felt gingerly for the new potatoes in their dry net of roots, smooth as eggs. She put them in her apron and walked back to the house thinking, What have I seen, What have I seen. The earth and the sky and the garden, not as they always are. And she saw her daughters’ faces not as they always were, or as other people’s were, and she was quiet and aloof and watchful, not to startle the strangeness away. (19)

Sylvia experiences the sense of imminent presence that Ruth felt as she waited for her mother: things are not as they were, but no change is visible to the naked eye, because “the strangeness” is veiled by the ordinary. Sylvia has no words to describe what she saw, because it was beyond her conception. One can be sure that for Robinson, the unseen presence within the landscape is God.

According to “Psalm Eight,” talk of religion was rare in Robinson’s childhood, which she ascribes to “their” (she never mentions family members by name or role) stoicism about anything that deeply moved them. While she never doubted their faith, she also never inquired, assuming an “intimacy with the thoughts” of those around her that “may well have been entirely real” (236). Her family taught her grammar with parables; she drew and colored pictures of noteworthy events (images from the very first), like God speaking from a burning bush or Pharaoh dreaming of famine. They never explained these events to her: “No intrusion on the strangeness of those tales was ever made” (237); their “esotericism” enthralled her. Mourning their dead (unknown to her personally) and placing herself within their memories (experiences she did not share) young Marilynne lived her life “so as to be missed with bitterness” after her death, and from a young age, “preparing and refining their regret” (236). She longed to be missed like those “whose loss could hardly be borne no matter the years that passed, and whose names were spoken rarely, and then softly, with rue and grief—Stephen and Lewis and the precious Virgie, a woman or girl I have mourned my whole life in the absence of all particulars, just for the way they said her name” (236). It is not only that the child absorbs the traits of the guardians, but also that the child seizes the occasion to compose herself within her guardians, like the earth or water that fills the seed. Still, they also live on within her, as Robinson reminds us in “Psalm Eight” saying: “I poured myself into the vessel of their memories, which are mine

now. I save all those people in myself by regretting the loss of them in the very way they taught me” (*DOA* 236). Regretting their loss appears as mourning that will not be comforted in

*Housekeeping:*

The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted. That is why the first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and return. So memory pulls us forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory—there will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine. (192)

In “Psalm Eight,” this concept of mourning is elaborated within a reinterpretation of scripture.

Robinson turns to her discussion of the resurrection, emphasizing how common and how accepted this event was in the early church. Therefore, biblical accounts are not intended to persuade. Even Elijah brought a child back from the dead and ascended to heaven without dying; his return was awaited with such confidence that John the Baptist and Jesus were both thought to be Elijah (238). The many stories of Jesus restoring life to the dead are well known. There was no skepticism, and therefore, no persuasion. Instead, she asserts that Jesus himself seized upon “a narrative familiar or even pervasive and wholly transformed it” (238). Ruth is confident about the plausibility of resurrection because of her knowledge of the Bible and because of what she terms “the law of ascension” (92). Although she has never met her Aunt Molly, who left home to join the missionaries—the “fishers” of men—and although Molly is actually only a secretary, Ruth envisions her in an act of recovery:

Even now I always imagine her leaning from the low side of some boat, dropping her net through the spumy billows of the upper air. Her net would sweep the turning world unremarked as a wind in the grass, and when she began to pull it in, perhaps in a pell-mell ascension of formal gentlemen and thin pigs and old women and odd socks that would astonish this lower world...such a net, such a harvesting, would put an end to all anomaly. If it swept the whole floor of heaven, it must, finally, sweep the black floor of Fingerbone, too...there would be a general reclaiming...until time and error and accident were undone, and the world became comprehensible and whole. (92)

As if anticipating the reader's doubt—what leads Ruth to believe that this is possible? What facts or evidence would lead her to such a conclusion?—she responds using examples from the natural world, images of landscape, saying: “perhaps only from watching gulls fly like sparks up the face of the clouds that dragged rain the length of the lake” or “from watching gnats sail out of the grass, or from watching some discarded leaf gleaming at the top of the wind” (92). Her emotional logic derives the inevitability of this metaphysical retrieval from her reading of “ordinary” events in the natural landscape.

Returning to “Psalm Eight,” Robinson addresses the idea of aspect. In the Gospel of John, when a weeping Mary Magdalene enters the tomb and sees the angels, they ask her: “Woman, why weepest thou?” She sees a man standing behind her whom she mistakes for a gardener. The man is Jesus, who repeats the question “Woman, why weepest thou?” and adds, “Whom seekest thou?” (239). Robinson insists that to Jesus the meaning is *implicit*—when he says, “Woman, why weepest thou?” it means there is no more cause for weeping (242).

Robinson interprets these questions under the aspect of her own love:

Jesus seems to be teasing her toward delight and recognition, ready to enjoy her surprise, in something like the ordinary manner of a friend. The narrative asserts that he is a figure of unutterable holiness, only pausing to speak to Mary before he ascends to heaven, yet it is his very ordinariness that disguises him from her. (239)

She seems to be saying that Jesus, like Calvin's God, clothes himself in the world, in human raiment—in the ordinary. The resurrection of Jesus is singular because it is interpreted in the light of his teaching and his life. The great difference between Jesus' and Elijah's resurrection is, according to Robinson, “simply embrace,” because while Elijah's ascent expressed God's love for him, Jesus' expresses love for humankind (239); however, her point is that both men ascended regardless.

Robinson sees great beauty in the fact that Jesus experienced the crucifixion, which deprived prisoners of their dignity as well as their lives, as an ordinary man, and that afterwards, he gathered around himself the composure of an ordinary man, as if he were someone going about his work, like a gardener (238): “It seems to me that the narrative, in its most dazzling vision of holiness, commends to us beauty of an altogether higher order than spectacle, that being mere commonplace, ineffable humanity” (240). In light of this, her recurring theme of the resurrection of the ordinary in *Housekeeping* becomes more meaningful; in “Psalm Eight” it is manifested within a chain of implications beginning with Robinson’s grandfather in the garden and ending with Jesus’ death and resurrection. The meaning of the question “What is man that thou art mindful of him?” now deepens (*DOA* 240)—Robinson’s reply: “God is mindful of man, in that he visits him,” which for her is the major assertion of the whole literature (240). The question “What is man?” is asked “in awe that God should be intrigued or enchanted by him, or loyal to him” (240-41). Robinson says that “any sufficient answer would go some way toward answering ‘What is God?’” and goes on to say “I think anxieties about anthropomorphism are substantially inappropriate in a tradition whose main work has been to assert and ponder theomorphism” (241).

Robinson sheds some light on her theme of prophetic memory in her discussion of the gospels, saying that they attempt to “preserve a sense of Jesus’ presence and are evocation and portraiture first of all, meant to achieve likeness, rather than precision, in the manner of art” (241). Since Jesus was concealed from his followers by his ordinariness after his resurrection and in his life, “if memories were transposed to provide eloquent detail, or even if some details were invented, it would be in the service of creating a likeness, not a history” (242), so discrepancies would not matter. These details obviously flourished in the perception and

memory of those closest to Jesus and in the stories they told about him. As Robinson says, these narratives “seize their occasion” (242), but she qualifies this by saying: “More is meant by prophecy, and more by fulfillment, than that narratives shape and recur. But without them there would be neither prophecy nor fulfillment” (242). She elaborates this idea of prophetic memory in *Housekeeping* within Ruth’s recollections of her mother on the day of her suicide, of her calm and silence during the drive to her grandmother’s house and their stop for ice cream:

It seemed to me that in all this there was the hush and solemnity of incipient transfiguration. Perhaps memory is the seat not only of prophecy but of miracle as well. For it seems to me that we were recalled again and again to the sense of her calm. It seems that her quiet startled us, though she was always quiet. I remember her standing with her arms folded...She was so tall and quiet in her silvery gray dress, never looking toward us...I remember her, grave with the peace of the destined, the summoned, and she seems almost an apparition... But if she had simply brought us home again...I would not remember her that way...she would have remained untransfigured. We would never have known that her calm was as slight as the skin on water...we would have known nothing of the range and reach of her sorrow if she had come back. But she left us and broke the family and sorrow was released... Even the illusion of perimeters fails when families are separated. (196-97)

This transfiguration prophesizes another, powered by memory. While he lived, the apostles saw Jesus as Ruth saw her mother while she lived—“through the veil of knowledge and habit” (179). Each became extraordinary by vanishing from sight, both were transfigured in the minds of those who loved them because they went to their deaths with foreknowledge, and both were joining the father they were parted from. Helen and Jesus were resurrected by longing, were re-membered by those who loved them. The apostles, like living reliquaries, hold Jesus in their memories; there Jesus lives on. Sylvie is a landscape containing Ruth’s beloved mother Helen. Memory is, at last, the only sacred space.

For Robinson, the final realization leads to her final revision:

I have spent my life watching, not to see beyond the world, merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes. I think the concept of transcendence is based on a misreading of creation. With all respect to heaven, the scene of miracle is here, among

us. The eternal, as an idea, is much less preposterous than time, and this very fact should seize our attention. In certain contexts the improbable is called the miraculous. (*DOA* 243)

Robinson says that what is eternal must always be complete, “so it is possible to imagine that time was created in order that there might be a narrative—event, sequence and causation, ignorance and error, retribution, atonement” (243-44). Robinson’s interpretation reverberates with Calvin’s notion of the cherished seed:

A word, a phrase, a story falls on rich or stony ground and flourishes as it can, possibility in a sleeve of limitation. Certainly time is the occasion for our strangely mixed nature, in every moment differently compounded, so that often we surprise ourselves, and always scarcely know ourselves, and exist in relation to experience, if we attend to it and if its plainness does not disguise it from us, as if we were visited by revelation. (244)

Robinson takes our traditional assumptions, our conventional landscapes, and tilts our world on its axis, opening our minds to the possible, enhancing our visual perception so that we may recognize the scene of miracle, here among us.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, and Marilynne Robinson reach for the ineffable, pressing language to its limits, exploiting the gap between material and immaterial dimensions with the metaphysical use of memory and of language. For them, the beloved are thus returned from the past to reside in the perpetual present of memory, where one may revise the past, continue relationships, resolve conflicts, and alter the future.

These authors endeavor to remythologize language, literature, and the world, each armed with a background in the classics and individual techniques drawn from their understanding of the mythic properties of language and narrative. They acknowledge and rely upon instinct, intuition, and imagination—“every feeling, every thought, every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss”—to create works that fill the reader with visions of “the infinite possibilities of the art” because “no *method*, no experiment, even of the wildest – is forbidden” (*The Common Reader* 154). Reflect upon Orlando, who is born a man, becomes a woman, and lives to be over three hundred years old, or Morrison’s *Beloved* as the embodiment of millions of ghosts. In Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, the precocious child narrator speculates upon the nature of “unbeing”:

Of my conception I know only what you know of yours. It occurred in darkness and I was unconsenting. I (and that slenderest word is too gross for the rare thing I was then) walked forever through reachless oblivion, in the mood of one smelling night-blooming flowers, and suddenly—My ravishers left their traces in me, male and female, and over the months I rounded, grew heavy, until the scandal could no longer be concealed and

oblivion expelled me. But this I have in common with my kind. By some bleak alchemy what had been mere unbeing becomes death when life is mingled with it. So they seal the door against our returning. (214-15)

Roland Barthes says that “when no known language is available to you, you must determine to steal a language—as men used to steal a loaf of bread” (167); Helene Cixous takes this further in “Laugh of the Medusa”:

It’s no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They...fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them up, emptying structures and turning propriety upside down. (887)

Consider the rigor with which Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, and Marilynne Robinson “fasten on problems of language or consciousness—bending form to their purposes, ransacking ordinary speech and common experience” (HIS 30). Both Morrison and Robinson create and employ nonbeing and non-language in their work. Morrison’s famous “I am Beloved and she is mine” chapter records the point of view of that multifaceted ghost who attempts to claim Sethe, contain herself, and deliver the fragmented visions that make up her past:

...how can I say things that are pictures                      I am not separate from her    there is  
no place where I stop...  
    All of it is now                      it is always now                      there will never be a time when I am  
not crouching the man on my face is dead    his face is not mine...we are all trying to  
leave our bodies behind...it is hard to make yourself die forever... (210)

On the other hand, Robinson’s narrator does not reveal whether she and her aunt have actually died during a dangerous trestle crossing, employing a not-language to describe their not-meeting with her sister Lucille, abandoned by their choosing the transient life (or death)—so that their absence is presence:

Or imagine Lucille in Boston, at a table in a restaurant waiting for a friend... Sylvie and I do not flounce in through the door...we do not sit down at the table... We are nowhere in Boston. However Lucille may look, she will never find us there, or any trace or sign... No one watching this woman...could know how her thoughts are thronged with our

absence, or know how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie. (219)

Just as Emerson describes the soul by what it is not, Robinson inscribes presence by describing absence.

For Woolf, Morrison, and Robinson, it is as if they must believe that “everything can be apprehended truly when seen in the light of an esthetic understanding [and] that they wished to declare...the senses bathed in revelation” (HIS 30). When Ruth and Lucille spend the night on the beach, Ruth experiences a revelation:

Lucille...would say I fell asleep, but I did not. I simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones. Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world’s true workings. The nerves and brain are tricked, and one is left with dreams that these specters loose their hands from ours and walk away, the curve of the back and the swing of the coat so familiar as to imply that they should be permanent fixtures in the world, when in fact nothing is more perishable... (116)

Each author hears, in some fashion, and responds to “voices far older than her own: fragments of recollection and imagery and handed down tradition” (Zinsser 113) and attempts to return myth and mystery to language in order to envision and find expression for the ineffable—the sublime.

In *The Waves*, the death scene for Woolf’s character Bernard describes such expression through landscape:

The canopy of civilization is burnt out. The sky is dark as polished whalebone. But there is a kindling in the sky whether of lamplight or of dawn... Another general awakening. The stars draw back and are extinguished. The bars deepen between the waves. The film of mist thickens on the fields. A redness gathers on the roses...A bird chirps. Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again.

And in me too the wave rises...I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now...It is death. Death is the enemy... Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death! (220)

Woolf presents this death as a kind of existential victory because of the courage it takes to have a true understanding of life.

Robinson, Morrison, and Woolf attempt to “develop language that will acknowledge that it does fray, and where it does, and that those things we do not understand are not mere gaps to be closed by extensions of existing ways of thinking, but are sphinxes, riddles, their solutions likely to be astonishing and full of implication” (*DOA* 1). For each language “seems still to have, in some decayed and anarchic form, those powers to conjure contained in the first cosmic decrees” (*LIS* 2). There is Ruth’s resurrection of her mother through the resurrection of Carthage in *Housekeeping* and Lily Briscoe’s resurrection of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* and Sethe and Denver’s resurrection of the lost infant in *Beloved*. Then there is “My name is Ruth” and “I am Beloved” and “A toy boat, a toy boat, a toy boat”—conjuring not only Orlando’s past but also that of Virginia Woolf, his/her maker.

Morrison is straightforward about her method; without written history, she relies upon her ancestors and other ghosts as spirit guides to provide images for the revision of myth and the restoration of the African American past, even describing herself as a kind of medium. Robinson emulates her literary forebears in her use of extended metaphor analogue—“simulations of experience”—to reinterpret scripture and remythologize the present. Woolf wants to access the soul; by any means necessary, she will pull back the curtain of surface appearances to understand and fuse with the numinous. Each of these authors restores discredited people, rewrites history, and revises literary forms. Each uses language and literature for transfiguration and restitution. All three ask us to live in the condition of the sublime through an ecstatic return to unity with the natural world, similar to the poetic vision of Keats or of Wordsworth, the metaphysical speculations of Emerson and Thoreau; each acknowledges not only the actual world, where one

is bounded by a body and other physical borders, but also a self contiguous with the world without borders that lies beneath appearances. Emerson said in “The Over Soul” (1841):

There is a difference between one and another hour of life, in their authority and subsequent effect. Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences... The philosophy of six thousand years has not searched the chambers and magazines of the soul. In its experiments there has always remained, in the last analysis, a residuum it could not resolve. (Essay XIX)

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