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“All This Was My Life”: Constructing Textual Self-Identity in Diaries

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“All This Was My Life”: Constructing Textual Self-Identity in Diaries

A Thesis

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by

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Abstract

The ordering and control of experience through fictive selves, constructed in consideration of an audience of the self and others, is part of the diary’s identity-building and meaning-making function. This thesis analyzes the process by which the diaries of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Janet Schaw construct multiple textual identities and conceptualize their public and private selves. The projection of these multiple selves in the diary text serve to justify the private individual experience as extraordinary and worth telling, as well as to connect with a public community experience, relating the self to a greater socio-cultural context.

Journal, identity-making, travel narrative, trauma, testimony, mental illness
Chapter I: Dispelling the Binaries: Autobiography Theory’s Epistemological Fictive Self & Audience in Diary Writing

“Oh yes, I’ve enjoyed reading the past years diary, & shall keep it up. I’m amused to find how its grown a person, with almost a face of its own.” - Virginia Woolf

The diary is a literary genre frequently neglected by scholars; while some diaries, such as the diaries of Samuel Pepys and Anne Frank, are sometimes studied to provide background information about an age or major historical event, many are often relegated to textbook footnotes providing insight into an author’s life or motivations and are rarely the subject of literary analysis or even treated as complete, standalone literary texts. Even in composition and creative writing classes, the diary is relegated to the sidelines. It frequently exists merely as a source of information to supply the more critically-regarded genre of life-writing, autobiography. The diary and journal are regarded only as exercises in the writer’s prewriting toolbox, seen as practice or as a foundation for the author’s “real” writing; indeed, they are exercises that are meant to be edited and focused into a more cohesive plot and clearer purpose than the alleged everyday disarray produced by spontaneous chronicling. Because of the diary’s reputation as an “artless transcription of reality” (Doll 10), literary critics assume that the diary presents none of the trademarks of a unified whole that “proper” literature possesses—the diary is seen as an abundance of “unmediated experience” (10) that lacks audience awareness, focus, plot structure, and theme. As Thomas Hollweck notes, diaries are only “the products of…uncoordinated observations” (qtd. in Doll 10) and though they “often contain the stuff of literature” (qtd. in Doll 10), they are too much “the products of occasional impulses, [and] odd moments of personal confession or reflection” to actually be literature. This theory posits that the diary produces ideas
that are as formless and in need of cultivation as “the seed of literary invention in an author’s mind, [which] need to be tended and organized before they can acquire esthetic form” (qtd. in Doll 10); thus, in order to be successfully appreciated as literature, the diary requires the transformative “hand of an editor” (qtd. in Doll 10) to shape it into a more meaningful genre like autobiography. Because it is so difficult to see the diary as a valid literary text instead of a companion piece to better-understood literature, it is rare that critics regard “the diary or journal as other than merely a writer’s notebook or a historian’s hunting ground” (Doll 9). The autobiography, then, is seen as the “real” literature, the diary’s clumsy artlessness and purposelessness refined into meaning. The genres of autobiography and memoir are popularly assumed to be the diary’s well-edited, deliberately-crafted cousins, polished and focused for an audience and public consumption—the purposefully projected, “heard” public oratory as opposed to the diary’s privately “overheard” interior monologue.

There are many questions of how diary should be distinguished, as it obviously exhibits different qualities than autobiography in terms of the looseness of “story arcs” and plot, to name one example. Does the accretion of stories and anecdotes over a given interval constitute a storyline, and could “a diary written relatively day to day with no knowledge of what the future will bring, what will grow to prominence and what will cease to be urgent, be said to have a plot?” (Doll 11). But these questions look beyond the scope of this work; in terms of how the self is constructed and audience is regarded, it is helpful to dispel the limiting and overly reductive binaries (public/private, coherent/inaccessible, edited/unmediated, conscious/unconscious, fictive/real) which have kept diaries isolated from scholarly study. To illustrate the diary’s consideration of audience and projection of fictive selves, it is necessary to appropriate autobiography theory’s understanding of how the self is conceived and written. Ultimately, by
dispelling these binaries and examining diaries through the critical lens of self-making and world-ordering, it becomes clear that diaries are identity-forging texts which allow the diarist a double self-conception—the self as both an insular individual and a part of a greater community.

To this end, three diarists—Janet Schaw, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath—were chosen to show how an audience of the mind, comprised of all the external influences of any given life, combined with an audience of the self’s own appraising eye, produce a diary self. While these diarists happen to be women, they were chosen not because of their gender but because they suit the larger claim of how the genre functions in self-making—and because they do so in three vastly different ways. Woolf and Plath address their mental illnesses in opposing manners: Woolf constructs a public self that suppresses the private trauma, while Plath makes her innermost suffering a public exhibition. The diary self is not merely a function of trauma, as Schaw also enacts a public self that is at odds with the private reality of her life, though she did not suffer from a mental illness. In light of the gendered subjectivity, sexuality, class concerns, and trauma contained in these diary experiences, as well as the patriarchal empire and imperialist structure that contextualized these women’s lives, it may seem obvious to examine them within a feminist/gender studies framework. However, just as this thesis aims to dispel the binaries limiting the scope of how we understand diaries, it also seeks to unify the male with the female and avoid reaffirming divisive distinctions that have kept diaries peripheral to “real” literature for so long; Schaw, Woolf, and Plath’s identity-making texts are valid and useful in their contributions to a theory that interprets all diaries. Diaries were denigrated as merely “women’s writing” for years, until a new wave of feminist criticism elevated diaries as a platform for
celebrating women’s voices. A comprehensive body of positive, non-marginalizing criticism examining diary’s function in the creation of female self-conception is now available.

These groundbreaking works paved the way for this thesis to take the next step beyond exclusionary readings (regardless of intent to demean or celebrate) into integration and unification: diaries liberate human voices and selves. Gender is one of many influences and set of givens that will impact the self which is constructed in the diary. In this thesis, gender serves to show that the self is not sealed and inherently closed, but swayed by the context of a life; it is not the overarching mode by which we should read and understand the diary self. Just as a diary should not be read only as a way of understanding singular “maleness” and the text’s inherent “masculinity” should not prevent it from informing how other diaries order experience and construct the self, the same goes for “femaleness.” Instead, this thesis seeks to emphasize that gendered experience can now be apprehended in a more universal light—gender, regardless of which one it may be, is one of many factors that shapes self-conception. Therefore, the diaries examined are written by women, but the manner in which they construct their selves is absolutely relevant to informing a critical approach to a diary written by anyone. Most especially, they show that fictive selves can be created in many ways for many reasons, not just in response to a gender-specific or trauma-specific event. Schaw, Woolf, and Plath’s diaries serve to reveal that the diary self is not one buried in hidden subtext and closed subjectivity, but can be studied, a reversal of divisive genre conventions that reinforce the purportedly private, inaccessible nature of these writings.

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For excellent feminist criticism regarding women’s diaries, see Centuries of Female Days: Englishwomen’s Private Diaries by Harriet Blodgett (Rutgers UP, 1988), Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women’s Diaries edited by Cynthia A. Huff and Suzanne L. Bunkers (U of Massachusetts P, 1996), Diaries and Journals of Literary Women from Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf by Judy Simons (U of Iowa P, 1990), and In the Presence of Audience: Self in Diaries and Fiction by Deborah Martinson (Ohio State UP, 2003).
While autobiography is a genre understood as one that straddles the line between “adjacent genres of biography and fiction” (Anderson 2), it is one that is rather comfortably liminal. After all, “autobiography has also been recognized since the late eighteenth century as a distinct literary genre and, as such, [has been] an important testing ground for critical controversies about…authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction” (Anderson 1). And indeed, issues of identity and deliberate crafting are accepted and inherent in critical examinations of the genre. Autobiography theory frequently scrutinizes epistemological issues of self-building and self-mythology, exploring “how inventions in autobiographical form…were themselves as important as any events in forming the kinds of autobiographies that then followed them” (Bruner 68). For some critics, there is “little apparent difference…between realizing the self and representing the self” (Anderson 4); the desire (and indeed, ability) to achieve “the ideals of autonomy, self-realization, authenticity and transcendence” (Anderson 3) is distinguished little from the constructed unity of an autobiography’s textual self. The diary is a form that inhabits those same margins and asks the same questions of identity and fictionality, but problematically so—the autobiography has a universal audience and should arrange reality and self in ways that can be publically useful and productive (including raising questions), but the diary as a purportedly private document should raise no such questions of its construction or fictiveness, and thus remains “uncomfortably” liminal.

It is clear, then, that the problem of diary’s marginality is largely rooted in the issue of public versus private writing. Because of autobiography’s intentionality and public nature which “[gestures] towards a shared truth which ‘everyone’ can endorse” (Anderson 4), it “gets drawn seamlessly into supporting the beliefs and values of an essentialist or Romantic notion of
selfhood…each individual possesses a unified, unique selfhood which is also the expression of a universal human nature” (Anderson 4). Even after poststructuralist theory proposed “that all knowledge, including self-knowledge, depends on figurative language” (Anderson 12) and that, therefore, autobiographies “produce fictions of figures in place of the self-knowledge they seek” (Anderson 12), the understanding that “a unified self…was a historical and ideological construct, an effect of discourse” (Anderson 57) did not spell the death of autobiography. The self, as constructed by autobiography, is seen as an accessible and stable ideal, one that aligns the past, present, and future into a coherent narrative of self-development, even as it is understood that it is a constructed coherence. Indeed, even in light of post-structuralism, autobiography continues doing for audiences what it always did: through this new critical lens, “autobiography is seen as a site for negotiating and challenging the different ways meaning is given to the self” (Anderson 15), and thus these questions in autobiography are still seen as a productive system of making meaning of life—if there are not already questions present.

Conversely, the diary, with its presumed lack of public intention, cannot have a stable, meaning-making focus: it seems to offer a sprawling, fragmented, unclear vision of the self, one that is necessarily private and inaccessible to an audience. It is, however, a false assumption that diary writing is strictly personal, composed without consideration of audience or direction in moments of spontaneous contemplation. It is even false that the diary’s unedited, unconscious ramblings contain no “goal” or clear “end” and so produce only a troublingly unreadable (though utterly guileless) self. Instead, the diary can be understood in the same terms of autobiography’s purported goals: like autobiography, which “exemplifies ‘the vital impulse to order’ which has always underlain creativity” (Anderson 5), diary-writing strives towards self-building and
meaning-making, projecting fictive selves and arraying experiences into a more unified vision of life. The diary self is no less constructed than the autobiography self, and is better understood by examining diaries in light of the constructed self that autobiographical theory has long acknowledged.
Critical readers of autobiography often evaluate how the private self is constructed or reimagined for a public audience and the fictionalized aspects of self-made identity. As Bruner notes, “In autobiography, we set forth a view of what we call our Self and its doings, reflections, thoughts, and place in the world” (67), and the critic unravels the “the autobiographer’s conception (or invention) of his ‘life’” (Bruner 70) to better see how the autobiographer “transforms the primary qualities of direct experience into the secondary qualities of higher knowledge” (Bruner 69). Many contemporary autobiography critics are “constructionists”; they are concerned with “literary-historical invention, with form, with the depiction of reality” (Bruner 69) and how outside influences shape the autobiography’s projected self. Proponents of constructionism in autobiography study “the literary forces that shape autobiography. Is an autobiography, say, a Bildungsroman, premised on the accretion of wisdom from experience?” (Bruner 69). This conception of the fictive self as shaped by literature, ostensibly a feature of the autobiography’s form, is omnipresent in diary. Modeling is inevitable; the traditional view of the diary as free from outside consideration sets up damagingly false binaries that must be fulfilled in order for the reader to understand the diary (untrue/true, influenced/pure, subjective/objective, public/private) when there is no clear-cut dichotomy after all. The diary can be understood like any other text written for an audience—the diarist places herself within a context of events and opinions which influence the shaping and presentation of the self, including modeling the structure of one’s life story from the literary works one is familiar with. This process is not always unconscious; modeling in the diary can frequently be a self-aware act.
Witness Janet Schaw, the eighteenth-century author of *Journal of a Lady of Quality*. The Scotswoman’s journal documents the years 1774 to 1776, recording her journeys from her home country to the West Indies and North Carolina, as well as her subsequent flight back to Europe after being driven out of the colony by North Carolinian patriots for her Loyalist stance. Certainly Schaw’s reference likening the stowaway Scottish emigrants aboard her ship to “a Cargo of Dean Swift’s Yahoos newly caught” (Schaw 28) illustrates that no diary composition is without influence from outside references, and diarists, like autobiographers, can and do shape their lives in ways influenced by the literature they have read. Even more tellingly, Schaw’s diary takes the form of a travel journal; not only was the travel narrative a wildly popular literary form in the eighteenth-century, but Schaw’s reference to Yahoos is alluding to Jonathan Swift’s fictional travel narrative *Gulliver’s Travels*. She was also familiar with other travel journals: when she arrives in Lisbon, she finds it quite different than the description given by Richard Twiss, who authored *Travels through Portugal and Spain in 1772 and 1773*. Schaw comments that his account seems highly subjective and inconsistent with her own experiences: “Mr Twiss says a great deal, but his travels seem only a journal of his own bad humours, prejudices and mistakes…I am at a loss to think of where he found the dirty scenes he describes” (Schaw 250). Clearly, Schaw has deliberately chosen to model her diary’s account on the previous travel narratives she has read. In fact, diaries are subject to any and all the references contained within the author’s mind, whether it be literary or not: the opinions of personal acquaintances, prior personal experiences, factual knowledge, cultural references, or works of art.

For example, Schaw’s observations of the treatment of slaves are colored from her social, economic, and political reference points; her diary offers no judgment against the slavery she is
surrounded by in Antigua and later, in America. Just as no mind is the product of only itself, no diary is the product of an “island mind.” Schaw’s entries are colored by the paradigm of the times, and she a patriarchal woman, her ideologies a product of the British empire in which she was raised (and is staunchly allied with in her unrepentantly Loyalist sympathies) where slavery was part of the status quo. Group mentality also filters into diary writing, and to this end, Schaw does self-identify as innately part of a British group-concept, becoming self-conscious of how it renders her a ridiculous figure on the rugged frontier of North Carolina while affirming the naturalness of racial inequalities. She identifies as a public self, a figure of inherent Britishness when she describes herself attending a ball in the town of Wilmington while “dressed out in all my British airs with a high head and a hoop” (Schaw 154) but contrasts it with how inappropriately dressed and absurd she looks in this environment. Schaw realizes that her British nature is out of place “trudging thro’ the unpaved streets in embroidered shoes by the light of a lanthorn carried by a black wench half naked. No chair, no carriage—good leather shoes need none. The ridicule was the silk shoes in such a place” (Schaw 154). It is the overly-fancy shoes that she marks as particularly inappropriate, while the black attendant merits no additional comment. Schaw’s diary, then, cannot escape any of the socio-political prejudices of her time and culture. Any mind, however individualized it may be, is always in receipt of constant streams of information from outside of itself and is always situating itself in reference to its peers.

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and surroundings, be that reaction in defiance of or conformity to the others in its environs; the diary this mind produces is also necessarily influenced by such considerations.

Therefore, Schaw’s diary is a “robust, even nonchalant, endorsement of plantation slavery” (Coleman 170) and often depicts slaves “as mere brutes, well equipped for the bodily sufferings of the whip on account of their imperviousness to mental suffering” (Coleman 170). Schaw often idealizes and romanticizes the happiness of the slave population; at Christmas, she says, “We met the Negroes in joyful troops on the way to town with their Merchandise. It was one of the most beautiful sights I ever saw. They were universally clad in white Mus-lin” (Schaw 107-8). The aesthetic beauty of this marketplace scene highlights Schaw’s perceived “rightness” of the class stratification in Antiguan society—while she does not endorse abusing the slaves, she still believes the slaves are meant to be subjugated under the white man and are, in fact, happy in their place. During “this Season the crack of the inhuman whip must not be heard, and for some days, it is an universal Jubilee; nothing but joy and pleasantry to be seen or heard, while every Negro infant can tell you, that he owes his happiness to the good [white men’s God]…” (Schaw 108). Despite this idyllic scene she paints in her diary, she adds that the slaves are still animalistic, dangerous creatures, for “It is necessary however to keep a look out during this season of unbounded freedom; and every man on the Island is in arms and patrols go all around the different plantations as well as keep guard in the town” (Schaw 109). Her matter-of-fact tone signifies the ordinariness of this necessitude; preventing slave revolt is a fact of everyday life in the colonies, and her diary entry is a reaction that merely affirms what she sees as the commonplace. If Schaw had been an abolitionist, it would have demonstrated how the diary’s self-conception is influenced in the same manner: identity is forged from a wide range of factors, including external sources and reactions to current and relevant ideas, beliefs, and events. The
diary self is not necessarily limited to a solitary, intimate one, but can also be a public persona, one that accepts or rejects community sentiments and social ideals.

When Schaw’s diary describes the plantations of Antigua, she does so from the cultural context of her life as a white woman in the eighteenth-century British Empire, and she holds fiercely to her familiar patriarchal customs. In fact, Schaw’s opinions are highly emblematic of the “late-eighteenth-century British public’s fascination with complexion” (Coleman 169) and fear of miscegenation, which was “symptomatic of the period’s preoccupation with a new identity and status for Afro-Britons following Lord Mansfield’s decision in the Somerset case (1772), in which a slave-owner was denied the right to deport his slave...back to the colonies” (Coleman 169). White supremacist texts responding to Mansfield’s ruling preyed upon the “the fear that the nation, overrun by freed blacks” (Coleman 169) would succumb to “the West Indian bogey of widespread racial intermixture” (Coleman 169). Schaw’s diary is not immune from this influence, and expresses great distaste for miscegenation, criticizing the Antiguan white men for “the indulgence they give themselves in their licentious and even unnatural amours, which appears too plainly from the crowds [sic] of Mullatoes” (Schaw 112). The children produced from these liaisons, she says, are “a spurious and degenerate breed, neither so fit for the field, nor indeed any work, as the true bred Negro” (112). She does not lay the blame on the white men for their lack of control, but instead on the “young black wenches [who] lay themselves out for white lovers” (Schaw 112). Indeed, Schaw does not merely write from the perspective of a white, British citizen, but through the lens of her experience as a patriarchal female who identifies with white masculine power; she is inclined to suspicion towards the Antiguan women, regardless of their race, finding their behavior vastly different from “proper” British women.
Schaw’s diary is highly influenced by her idea of cultural tradition in gender; she sees herself as fitting the natural set of givens of British womanhood, while the Antiguan women are indisputably “other.” She finds the customs of the white colonists in Antigua to be quite alien, reporting that the relentless sunshine “appears to affect the sexes very differently. While the men are gay, luxurious and amorous, the women are modest, genteel, reserved, and temperate” (113). She finds it highly peculiar that the women eat and drink in extreme moderation, consuming “nothing stronger in general than Sherbet, and never eat above one or two things at the table” (113). Schaw even comments that extreme care that the women take in their politeness and morality is “so unnatural” (113) as to be considered “cunning” (113). However, she grudgingly admits that this strange reserve of the white colonial women “is the most commendable cunning I ever met with, as nothing can give them a better appearance in the eyes of a stranger” (113). She finds the white Antiguan women’s strict enforcement of pale, white complexions to be as foreign as their manners and eating habits, rejecting their overzealous efforts at guarding their skin from the sun with masks and living “entirely excluded from proper air and exercise” (114). Schaw is disappointed in her traveling companion, the young Fanny Rutherford, when Fanny capitulates to Antiguan traditions to shield her skin from the sun. Schaw idealizes Fanny’s complexion as a normal, natural English color that is “blooming as a new blown rose” (114), and is disgusted that Fanny “was prevailed on to wear a mask, while we were on our Tour, which in a week changed her colour, and if she had persevered I am sure a few months would have made her as pale as any of them” (114). Schaw resists this “otherness” of sallow skin color that does not fit within her world-view of acceptably healthy or British. Outside influences (her patriarchal culture, the imperialist view of color and miscegenation, her nationality, and her gender) have all served to shape her conception of the ideal self as one of moderation: white, but not artificially
white, and demure, but not overly weak. Therefore, her diary entries are not the product of a hermetically-sealed mind, but also reflect this accretion of socio-cultural influences and external public opinions.

Diarists do not write in a vacuum; their writing is always subjective and always influenced by the context of their experiences, beliefs, reference group, and surroundings. For example, aside from countless references to the literature she has read, Sylvia Plath’s diary discusses the popular culture and news of her time and the conversations she has: “Tom’s father knew Wright brothers, man who invented the Stanley Steamer, men who utilized ammonia deposits in refrigerators in a creative way. We talked of Lindbergh…the kidnapping of his child. The electrocuted murderess of her husband in some Schneider-Grey case or other, a very clumsy affair. Teletype machines” (Plath, *Journals* 489). Plath’s social experiences are also a locus of popular music; she sees an outdoor concert where the band plays jazzy interpretations of Gershwin standards, (*Journals* 129), hears the traditional American folk song “On Top of Old Smoky” being sung in Norwegian at a party (*Journals* 207), and “Thank Heaven for Little Girls” is played at a wedding reception she attends (*Journals* 497). Art, movies, and television are also no exception to the impacts upon her psyche, the locus of her self-conception. Plath describes a woman as “Breuguel-nosed” (*Journals* 272), she writes out scene outlines of the film *Un chien andalou* in her diary, marking the entry as “Notes on an experimental film: scenario by Dali: a shock film: sex and sadism” (*Journals* 56), and she contemplates whether writing for television stations would be compromising her values, saying, “Money, money. I like CBS, too. They are more inventive than most stations. Another test…would I pass, keep myself intact?” (*Journals* 487). The diary self is one that is necessarily impacted by the outside world, be it current events, social interactions, or multimedia; one cannot assume that the self which is contained within a
diary is somehow “pure,” untainted by external forces. Therefore, as theories of autobiography make clear,

Self-making is powerfully affected not only by your own interpretations of yourself, but by the interpretations others offer of your version... while Self is regarded (at least in Western ideology) as the most ‘private’ aspect of our being, it turns out on close inspection to be highly negotiable, highly sensitive to bidding on the not so open market of one’s own reference group... it is probably a mistake to conceive of Self as solo, as locked up inside one person’s subjectivity, as hermetically sealed off. Rather, Self seems also to be intersubjective or ‘distributed’ in the same way that one’s ‘knowledge’ is distributed beyond one’s head to include the friends and colleagues to whom one has access, the notes one has filed, the books one has on one’s shelves. (Bruner 76)

This holds true for diary-writing as well. Self-formation, regardless of whether it is in autobiography or diary, is not an isolated activity; as a result of this, diaries possess not only a pool of external influences, but an intrinsic audience as well.

Indeed, it is clear that the outside influences and audience considerations which shape a text are certainly not exclusive to autobiographies. Indeed, a diarist like Virginia Woolf is more than just a writer of fiction—she incorporates life events into her fiction, including Orlando, a “triumphantly fictive biography in which Woolf refuses to separate life and writing” (Anderson 91), wrote a biography of Roger Fry, tried her hand at autobiographical sketches, and is a sophisticated reader of many genres, including biographies and diaries. Woolf demonstrates that the boundaries of literary genres are often difficult to distinguish and blend into one another, a recursive loop of influence and integration—her diary is no exception. She also “has a passion for ‘lives of the obscure,’ and for marginal, unvalued literary forms like memoirs, letters, and
journals” (Lee 13), and is familiar with quintessential diarists Fanny Burney (Woolf, “Sketch” 105), James Boswell (“Sketch” 157), and Samuel Pepys (The Diary of Virginia Woolf I: 128). In fact, she is “the inheritor of a family tradition of autobiographical writing stretching back several generations” (Anderson 86); both her great-grandfather and father had written memoirs. Therefore, Woolf is also highly versed in the rhetorical strategies of fiction, life writing, and the diary, and often chose to blur the margins between them—the literary influence in her diary writing is absolutely unquestionable. And indeed, much like the diarist Fanny Burney, whose “claim to artlessness is, of course, carefully constructed, playing to at least two audiences—strangers and her older self…She seeks to establish a character that conceals while claiming to reveal, employing rhetorical strategies far from the artlessness she claims” (Doll 12), Woolf’s diary plays to an audience of herself and her many literary peers, fans, and detractors. She makes the bold claim in her diary that “I haven’t an inner life” (Woolf, Diary I: 79). However, this sentiment, uttered from the woman whose literary works contain keen and insightful representations of inner life both in her autobiographical pieces and fiction, is grossly misleading, if not a deliberately deceptive statement. It is clear that Woolf is playing to an audience, perhaps one who expects nothing but mental turmoil to be recorded in the most intimate writings of a woman who endured several breakdowns over the course of her lifetime before committing suicide in 1941.

The projection of a fictive self for an audience is always present; all writers (diarists included) must construct an imagined audience of the self and others. Woolf certainly caters to her own curiosity and amusement, and often acknowledges such in the diary. She readily admits she is her own audience and that she writes the diary for self-knowledge, commenting that “I should say, to placate V.W. when she wishes to know what was happening in Aug. 1940—that
the air raids are now at their prelude” (Diary V: 313). It seems also that she did not just review her diaries for her own pleasure, but had some intention of using them as an aide de memoire in writing an autobiography, a work that would give her the chance to define herself through her own self-written myth. When their house in London was destroyed in World War II, Woolf notes in her diary that they were able to recover “24 vols of diary…a great mass for my memoirs” (Diary V: 332). Additionally, Woolf’s diaries preserve her memories (and selfhood) so that they are not lost. She mentions reviewing her diaries as a memory device in 1933 while lamenting the faultiness of memory and the loss of self to the passage of time: “To freshen my memory of the war, I read some old diaries… I read of L. & me at the Green: our quarrels; how he crept into my bed with a little purse, & so on… The sense of all that floating away for ever down the stream, unknown for ever: queer sense of the past swallowing so much of oneself” (Diary IV: 193). But she doesn’t just record for an audience of one to refresh her memory or merely to amuse. Any diarist carries a larger audience within himself or herself—not only the opinions and impulses of the singular mind, but consideration of those external individuals whom the diarist loves or hates, respects or rejects, who necessarily mold how the diarist acts and responds. Therefore, Woolf masquerades for those external individuals, also; while reading the biography of Samuel Butler written by Henry Festing Jones, Woolf comments in her diary, “For such a critical & contemptuous mind, the value attached to reviews seems queer. Why, I dont think half or quarter so much of mine!” (Diary I: 317). And in 1922, she says of Jacob’s Room, “The reviews have said more against me than for me—on the whole. Its [sic] so odd how little I mind…But we scarcely sell, though it has been out 10 days. Nor do I much mind that” (Diary II: 210-11). These are statements that pander to her literary audience, a façade of thick-skinned bravado that was, in fact, belied by her sensitivity to the reviews and sales performance of her work.
Woolf did, in fact, dwell upon the sales figures and the critical reception for her writing a great deal, revealing the weight she gave to the opinions of her readers and critics. On August 22, 1922, Woolf wrote in her diary that she “should very much like to account for my depression” (Diary II: 190), and proceeds to recount a visit by Sydney Waterlow in which “Sydney reproduced in his heavy lifeless voice exactly the phrases in which Murry dismisses my writing ‘merely silly—one simply doesn’t read it—you’re a back number’” (Diary II: 190). Murry’s criticism certainly must have stung Woolf deeply, since she continues to contemplate his words in her diary three days later. She comforts herself by saying, “The Times (weekly) says my novels are by some thought among the finest of our time” (Diary II: 194), but admits, “Yet, yet, I am not quite past the depression of hearing Sydney repeat what Murry said” (Diary II: 194). In August of 1924, Woolf reveals her continuing apprehension over criticism that Murry wrote more than a year prior to her diary entry; in early 1923 he decried the lack of plot in novels by Woolf and her generation and claimed that subsequently, “the novel has reached a kind of impasse” (qtd. in Diary II: 308). Woolf worries that “I shall prove the truth of Murry’s saying, that there’s no way of going on after Jacob’s Room” (Diary II: 308) before denying his impact upon her by declaring, “Yet if this book proves anything, it proves that I can only write along those lines, & shall never desert them, but explore further & further, & shall, heaven be praised, never bore myself an instant” (Diary II: 308). In fact, Woolf frequently uses the diary to admit insecurity before seeking to obscure it in a façade of confidence, creating a self which is designed to convince both the audience of herself and her critics that her writing does have value and that she is unaffected by those who claim otherwise. Even if her diary was never intended for publication or a real audience, the imagined audience continues to shape how she records her diary self.
In 1920, while first conceiving the idea that would become *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf shrugs off any potential critics, claiming that their attacks are spurious and only fuel her determination: “it’s the ‘writing well’ that sets people off—and always has done, I suppose…& then a woman writing well, & writing in The Times—that’s the line of it…but I value blame. It spurs one” (*Diary II*: 30). She dismisses her critic Walkley, calling him “a cheap little gossip…laughed at” (*Diary II*: 30). And after *Jacob’s Room* is finished and she is anticipating its publication, Woolf uses the diary to bolster both her self-esteem and valuation of her writing by pre-planning a self-defense, writing, “Then will begin my season of doubts & ups & downs. I am guarding myself in this way. I am going to be well on with a story for Eliot, lives for Squire, & Reading, so that I can vary the side of the pillow as fortune inclines” (*Diary II*: 178). However, she admits that she cares greatly for the criticism that might come from *Jacob’s Room*, and she fantasizes several defiant responses to a potentially negative reception: “If they say this is all a clever experiment, I shall produce Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street as the finished product. If they say your fiction is impossible, I shall say what about Miss Ormerod, a fantasy. If they say, You can’t make us care a damn for any of your figures—I shall say, read my criticism then” (*Diary II*: 179). But planning out all of these bold answers does little to quell her fears. She follows up her imagined defiant act with insecurity, wondering, “Now what will they say about Jacob? Mad, I suppose: a disconnected rhapsody: I don’t know” (*Diary II*: 179). Her diary, then, contains a multiplicity of selves: she is both insecure and impervious and can be both in the same entry. Consideration of audience reveals deliberate crafting of the public and private self; Woolf can experience cathartic confession of insecurity while denying it altogether. The diary, then, is not just a spontaneous and uninhibited eruption of the self, but one that allows a nuanced double self (both the public and private) and exhibits elements of deliberation, control, and restraint in self-expression.
By expecting and brushing off her negative reviews in advance, she is performing a public self while subconsciously admitting that they will bother the private self deeply. Her diary entries for October 1922, just before Jacob’s Room is due to be published on October 27th (Diary II: 205), demonstrate the dual nature of Woolf’s textual personas. On October 14th, she wonders about the sales figures—“I think we shall sell 500: it will then go on slowly” (Diary II: 208)—before addressing her concerns for the reviews. “The only review I am anxious about is the one in the Supt.: not that it will be the most intelligent, but it will be the most read & I cant [sic] bear people to see me downed in public” (Diary II: 208), Woolf says, and then lists two other publications that she casually acknowledges “will be hostile” (Diary II: 208) before she brushes them off. These negative reviews will not disturb her, she says, for “nothing budges me from my determination to go on, or alters my pleasure…though the surface may be agitated, the centre is secure” (Diary II: 208). She declares the same sense of resoluteness and stability, affirming her worth and talent, in an entry dated October 29th. While she admits she is “too riddled with talk & harassed with the usual worry of people who like & people who don’t like J.R. to concentrate” (Diary II: 209), she tries to shrug off any painful criticism as inevitable, quoting reviews casually as if their impact is minimal. “I shall never write a book that is an entire success. This time the reviews are against me, & the private people enthusiastic. Either I am a great writer or a nincompoop. ‘An elderly sensualist’ the Daily News calls me. Pall Mall passes me over as negligible” (Diary II 209). She even goes so far as to say that she anticipates cruel reviews; her strategy serves to undermine the importance of negative criticism by juxtaposing the criticism with her success: “I expect to be neglected & sneered at…So far of course, the success is much more than we expected. I think I am better pleased so far than I have ever been” (Diary II: 209). This is nearly an echo of the 1920 diary entry she wrote two years earlier, anticipating attacks on
*Jacob’s Room* before it was even written; “I predict that I’m destined to have blame in any quantity. I strike the eye; & elderly gentlemen in particular get annoyed. *An unwritten novel* will certainly be abused” (*Diary II*: 29). She reinforces the idea of herself as “other” and says that resistance to her “otherness” serves only to kindle her spirit again and again, even almost twenty years later; in 1938, she writes of *Three Guinea*’s poor reception, “In a way it is a relief. I’m fundamentally, I think, an outsider. I do my best work & feel most braced with my back to the wall” (*Diary V*: 189). The repetition is a dramatic technique, and there is a definite air of rehearsal to Woolf’s repertoire of dismissive responses, oft recited and mantra-esque. This recurring tactic frequently spotlights vicious attacks on her abilities, drawing attention to her critics so as to finally express her disdain or indifference to them. Yet, at the same time, Woolf reveals her private fears and shows that she feels, to some degree, defenseless against these attacks.
Chapter III: Reflecting in the Textual Mirror: Performing Multiple Selves in Diary Writing

It is clear that one of Woolf’s diary personas embraces its “outsider” status and affects impassivity in the face of her reviews—whether her motives are to bolster her own self-confidence and self-image, as a show for others, or both. As a result, the diary has an undeniable element of performance. This theatricality in the diary is anticipated by autobiography theory, which recognizes in autobiographical writing both the performance of the self who parades before a mirror as well as the self who performs roles for other observers. As Roland Barthes acknowledges in his experimental autobiography, the “image-text” of autobiography can be used as a mirror for the writer to better view himself or herself: “Where is your authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image” (qtd. in Anderson 69). This is the premise of autobiography as theater, the text as a stage for representing oneself and evaluating the selves that one “tries on.” Barthes envisions the theater of autobiography as a Brechtian performance, one that is meant to provoke questions of representation and distance; as in Brechtian theater, Barthes feels that his autobiography self “must distance his character: ‘show’ rather than incarnate him” (qtd. in Anderson 70). He performs himself “as if he were demonstrating or rehearsing different parts, distancing himself from them at the same time as scrutinizing them from different perspectives” (Anderson 70). This theory recognizes autobiography as an important way of “breaking up any simple identification” (Anderson 70) of the self to facilitate understanding oneself as a multifaceted, complicated body with many faces; the diary can be similarly understood as one with a similar attention to craft when performing selves to make meaning of a chaotic existence. The performance may be for private viewing, as a
way of personally justifying one’s existence, and as public exhibition, a way of orienting oneself in the sphere of public life, but it is always necessarily complex, and there is always an audience of at least one and often many more.

Thus, Virginia Woolf’s diary is an excellent example demonstrating how diary, like autobiography, seeks to mediate the many facets of a single individual; her diary often struggles with how she wants to represent herself while performing the character of Virginia Woolf—as a public or private self, an inner or outer being. And in line with the distancing of Brechtian theater, her diary sometimes reverts to the quintessentially Woolfian “one” instead of the intimate “I.” Woolf understood that a “life-writer must explore and understand the gap between the outer self” (Lee 6), which she conceptualized in her diary in tellingly theatrical terms: “the fictitious V.W. whom I carry like a mask about the world” (Woolf, *Diary V*: 307). In fact, during “the mid-1920s, she has a self-conscious debate with herself about whether it is a diary of facts or a diary of ‘the soul’…She seems to have promised herself that the diary would be about ‘life’ rather than ‘the soul’” (Lee 5). Woolf writes in 1923, “How it would interest me if this diary were ever to become a real diary: something in which I could see changes, trace moods developing; but then I should have to speak of the soul, & did I not banish the soul when I began? What happens is, as usual, that I’m going to write about the soul, & life breaks in” (*Diary II*: 234). She then recounts a memory of her cousin Katherine Stephen’s neat collection of diaries, which she kept “there in a row on a shelf…Some were brown; others red; all the same to a t” (*Diary II*: 234). These diaries are marked not by thoughtful inner contemplation, but only the facts of days, each entry unremarkable as “one of many thousand days, like pebbles on a beach: morning, evening, afternoon, without accent” (*Diary II*: 234). Woolf marks how, when prompted to read an entry, her cousin is expressionless and unemotional, “strangely unaccented…and level,
sagacious…Only once or twice did I strike a spark in the one remaining pale blue eye, which is
tenderer than the glass one. Orderly solidity marked every atom there” (Diary II: 234-5). Woolf
seems to appreciate the strict “soullessness” of these diaries, which her cousin plans to burn on
her last day of life, and admires the smooth, inexpressive perfection of Katherine Stephen’s diary
writing: “I scarcely tried to disturb what had the sculptured classic appearance of alabaster fruit
beneath glass” (Diary II: 235). Woolf aspires to this streamlined diary of facts that does not
linger too much on the messy and disjointed ruminations of the soul, though she wavers on this
conviction. In 1924, she records that “I think its [sic] time to cancel that vow against soul
description…I mean, what’s the use of facts at our time of life? Why build these careful cocoons:
why not say straight out—yes, but what?” (Diary II: 304). The entry never resolves this question
and tapers off into her plans for the day; and indeed, but what? is the key question Woolf’s diary
examines again and again. But what will she share of herself in the pages of her diary?

The self-consciousness is notable—Woolf examines how she has fashioned herself in the
diary text, turning in front of the mirror and wondering at the acceptability of the selves she
projects. What can she allow her diary to reveal about the details of her life while simultaneously
concealing her soul, such as discussing Samuel Butler’s oversensitivity to his reviews while
flaunting her own lack of concern about her reviews? In this way, Woolf’s diary is always
seeking to hide behind itself, performing a sleight of hand—distracting the audience with one bit
of information while slipping her soul behind the curtain. If she reveals too much, is she being
too egotistical? For Woolf worries often about her egotism, frequently calling herself a “snob”
(Diary II: 15, 57, 235; “Am I A Snob?” 204-20); she says achieving immortality through her
letter writing is vanity, and cries out, “Oh vanity, vanity! How it grows on me—how detestable it
is—how I swear to crush it out” (Diary II: 63). In 1937, she wonders, “Do I ever write, even
here, for my own eye? If not, for whose eye?...I’m musing on the nature of Auden’s egotism—he wants to write straight from the heart: to discard literature” (Diary V: 107); to lay bare the self, free from literary intent, is for Woolf an act of unadulterated narcissism. Indeed, Woolf believes that going beyond objective facts to reveal her soul would be indulging this particular fault of self-absorption: “Soul, you see, is framing all these judgments, & saying as she sits by the fire, this is not to my liking, this is second rate, this vulgar; this nice, sincere, & so on. And how should my soul know?” (Diary II: 236). And Woolf certainly detests feeling vulnerable and open to judgment after she has revealed too much of her soul, as evidenced by her humiliated 1920 entry after a meeting with the Memoir Club. Woolf writes after the event, “If this diary were a diary of the soul I could write at length of the 2nd meeting of the Memoir Club…‘Oh but why did I read this egotistic sentimental trash!’ That was my cry, & the result of my sharp sense of the silence succeeding my chapter…What possessed me to lay bare my soul!” (Woolf, Diary II: 26).

Indeed, her intense concern at revealing her “soul” is revealing in and of itself, producing a view inside of her soul nonetheless. But despite her conflicted views on how to portray herself, the diary is a platform where she can have many faces—Woolf’s diary is, in fact, a theater where she performs both public and private through many fictive selves. Her entries recognize the difficulties of dividing the “life” from the “soul” and the “public” self from the “private,” the problem of reducing a complex self which is torn by opposing impulses down to a single identity. Thus, Woolf’s diary, despite its performative nature and many faces, represents the intricacies of an individual mind and the multitude of selves it seeks to understand.

Like Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath was a lifelong diarist and sophisticated reader and writer of literature. The twentieth-century American poet and novelist “began keeping diaries and journals at the age of eleven and continued this practice until her death at the age of thirty”
and graduated *summa cum laude* from Smith College where she would later teach English (Ames 8). Also in keeping with Woolf’s delight at blurring the boundaries of literary genres, Plath viewed her novel *The Bell Jar* “‘as an autobiographical apprentice work’” (qtd. in Ames 12); according to her mother, Plath described *The Bell Jar* as a loose reinterpretation of reality, “‘[throwing] together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color’” (qtd. in Ames 14). Also like Woolf, Plath’s mental health and death by suicide has been the source of great scrutiny. In some ways, the fascination about her mental state and death has overshadowed her literary talent—Plath first attempted suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills in August of 1953 (Plath, *Journals* 189), suffered a miscarriage in 1961 (*Journals* 531), and while separated from her husband, she committed suicide in February of 1963 (*Journals* 703). Unlike Virginia Woolf, however, Plath had little compunction about revealing her “soul” in her diary, writing frankly of her moods and emotional torment. Woolf’s diary often avoided or sought to obscure her mental health issues—Woolf’s diary refers to an extended breakdown in 1913 during which she attempted suicide only as “a series of catastrophes which very nearly ended my life” (Woolf, *Diary II*: 283) and *only* discusses suicide not as an act of depression, but to avoid concentration camp if Hitler invades Britain, as her husband Leonard Woolf was Jewish (*Diary V*: 292)—however, Plath’s diary openly discusses (and even embraces) her depressions and suicidal impulses.

After Plath’s first suicide attempt, her diary resumes after a year and a half in late 1955, but the entries quickly acknowledge the darkness in her mind. In December of 1955 she writes, “I am tormented by the questions of the devils which weave my fibers with grave-frost and human-dung, and have not the ability or genius to write a big letter to the world about this” (*Journals* 193). She writes a couple of months later,
I am going to the psychiatrist this week…I feel like Lazarus: that story has such a fascination. Being dead, I rose up again, and even resort to the mere sensation value of being suicidal, of getting so close, of coming out of the grave with the scars and the marring mark on my cheek which (is it my imagination) grows more prominent: paling like a death-spot in the red, wind-blown skin, browning darkly in photographs, against my grave winter-pallor. (*Journals* 199)

Her suicidal fantasies are elaborate, reverent, and unflinchingly specific. She even insists upon incorporating her suicidal impulses into *more* of her writing, commenting with vigorous emphasis that “I must write one about a college girl suicide. THE DAY I DIED” (*Journals* 495) and that she should break into the “market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don’t relive, recreate it” (*Journals* 495)—and indeed, by revisiting it with bravado again and again in her diary, she does relive it before she ever finishes *The Bell Jar*. But despite what some may call her devastating honesty and unshrinking devotion to exploring mental illness, Plath’s diary is no less a theatrical performance of a suicidal self than the concealing act which Woolf performs in her respective diary.

Plath uses her diary to exhibit the demons of her mind (entirely different from using the diary to *exorcise* the demons), and even welcomes the comparison to Woolf and Woolf’s suicide, paralleling her own 1953 attempt with Woolf’s intentional drowning in 1941. There is an undeniable element of admiration of Woolf and her death when Plath notes reverently, “And just now I pick up the blessed diary of Virginia Woolf which I bought with a battery of her novels saturday [sic]…Bless her. I feel my life linked to her, somehow. I love her…But her suicide, I felt I was reduplicating in that black summer of 1953. Only I couldn’t drown” (*Journals* 269). In fact, Plath’s familiarity with and similarities to Woolf seem to inform the way Plath envisions
herself. In the early 1950s, Plath idealized Woolf’s life as one “in color, rather than black-and-white” and resolves to “try to be more like” her (Journals 44), but Plath’s diary is constructed as if it is a defiant response to their likenesses, an attempt to separate and individualize herself. Therefore, Plath writes candidly about visiting her psychiatrist Ruth Beuscher (often referred to as RB), the time she spent institutionalized at McLean Hospital, and receiving shock treatments as part of her therapy. In an entry titled, “NOTES ON INTERVIEWS WITH RB” (Journals 429), she writes with dramatic relish that after a session with Beuscher, “I have been feeling like a ‘new person’. Like a shot of brandy went home, a sniff of cocaine, hit me where I live and I am alive & so-there. Better than shock treatment: ‘I give you permission to hate your mother’” (Journals 429). And the day after meeting Ted Hughes for the first time, she channels the immediate, ardent passion she feels for him into the drive to write as brutally as she can about her shock treatment:

And now I sit here, demure and tired in brown, slightly sick at heart. I shall go on. I shall write a detailed description of shock treatment, tight, blasting short descriptions with not one smudge of coy sentimentality…I thought about the shock treatment description last night: the deadly sleep of her madness, and the breakfast not coming, the little details, the flashback to the shock treat-ment that went wrong: electrocution brought in, and the inevitable going down the subterranean hall, waking to a new world, with no name, being born again, and not of woman. (Journals 212)

Plath also notes after another therapy session that during her institutionalization “At McLean I had an inner life going on all the time but wouldn’t admit it…I needed permission to admit I lived. Why? Why, after the ‘amazingly short’ three or so shock treatments did I rocket uphill?” (Journals 455). Plath’s affirmation of possessing “inner life” is particularly notable in that it
seems to be a direct response to Woolf’s diary and Woolf’s conviction that she lacks one, and the remarkably blunt discussion of shock treatment draws unabashed attention to an often stigmatized condition. Plath’s diary constructs the image of a deeply troubled woman in opposition to the strategies employed in Woolf’s diary; Plath’s entries seek to forcefully display her mental trauma as a means of mediating it, repudiating Woolf’s staunch repression.

But in writing of her mental illness, however honestly, Plath is performing a fictive self; she steps outside her body using the textual figure she has created. This is evident in her dissociation from the figure who receives the shock treatment—even in her determination to write as grittily “real” a description as possible, Plath refers to “her madness,” and not to “my madness.” She even uses the metaphor of performance throughout her diary to more clearly see from outside what her role is in the “great, stark, bloody play acting itself out over and over again behind the sunny facade [sic] of our daily rituals, birth, marriage, death, behind parents and schools and beds and tables of food: the dark, cruel, murderous shades, the demon-animals, the Hungers” (Journals 456). Therefore, even as Plath performs as the suicidal self for readers of her diary, projecting herself as unusual and unique or even shocking in her macabre imaginings, she also seeks to affirm herself as part of a larger cycle of normal human life, “canonically” troubled. This impulse is well understood in the public sphere of autobiography; autobiography theory sees life writing as “an act of ‘entrenchment’...That is to say, we wish to present ourselves to others (and to ourselves) as typical or characteristic or ‘culture confirming’ in some way” (Bruner 71), but also to simultaneously justify the recounting of one’s story by appealing to the perceived audience as an extraordinary figure with a life worth telling. And Plath’s diary also utilizes this rhetorical scheme; her diary serves as a way for Plath to have both the face of the exceptionally disturbed woman and the face of one who is thoroughly normal—just another cog
in the ever-turning wheel of life, just another casualty of the eternally human condition of sorrow and pain.

Plath claims that her writings are all representative of her life and “come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have” (Plath, “Interview”). However, she qualifies that intense experiences cannot be left raw and unmediated, but must be germane to a greater human experience. She believes unadulterated passion must be distilled through disciplined thought and intellectualization to find some utilitarian application:

I must say I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife…I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrific, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience…I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn’t be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on. (“Interview”)

While she was referring to the immediacy and intensity of her subjective experiences fueling confessional poetry, her response is also highly relevant to her personal diary writing which seeks to unify her experiences within the context of a timeless, universal canon of human suffering.

Plath is often examining herself in the reflection of her diary as she denies the narcissistic impulse that Woolf also renounced. Plath’s technique of avoiding egoism is to enlarge the mirror by situating herself within the plotline of some larger production of humanity. Her idea of the self as part of a staged cycle of human experiences directed by some greater entity is repeated multiple times in her diary; at age eighteen, she muses about walking home alone at night as if
on stage being guided by an invisible director, “an off-focus light cast by the moon, and the
streetlights are part of the spotlight apparatus on a bare stage set up for you to walk through”
(Plath, *Journals* 54). She continues the idea of an audience overhearing her and an observant
force guiding her actions: “You get a feeling of being listened to, so you talk aloud, softly…I am
walking down this street and I am being propelled by a force too powerful for me to
break…chained me to the inevitable action…always repeating the circle or line” (*Journals* 54).
She frequently muses upon some intangible greater understanding of herself in the larger scheme
of the human race:

> There are times when a feeling of expectancy comes to me, as if something is there,
beneath the surface of my understanding, waiting for me to grasp it…I can feel it when I
think of human beings, of the hints of evolution suggested by the removal of wisdom
teeth, the narrowing of the jaw no longer needed to chew such roughage as it was
accustomed to; the gradual disappearance of hair from the human body; the adjustment of
the human eye to the fine print, the swift, colored motion of the twentieth century…I
consider the prolonged adolescence of our species; the rites of birth, marriage and death;
all the primitive, barbaric ceremonies streamlined to modern times…something is there,
waiting for me.” (*Journals* 15-16)

Plath’s diary also sets up panoramic scenes, focusing in on moments of observed ordinary life
that are now elevated to dramatic significance. She writes of the sights she sees while out
walking in theatrical terms: “A black hearse rounding the corner by the coffee house in a cinder-
block garage under a corrugated tin roof. Velvet curtains like at the opera, and patentleather
black as Lothario’s dancing shoe” (*Journals* 438). As she continues describing the street scene,
she further dramatizes it by imagining one of the black-coated men moving the coffin as an actor
remembering a past role; he “wore the permanent expression of grief stony on his face, an out-
of-work actor perpetually reliving the role where he bursts in and tells that the brave army is cut
to bits, that little Eyolf is gone after the rat wife and nothing but his crutch is left on the water to
cross his wet bed” (Journals 439). And among this great pageantry of life, Plath seeks to orient
herself through self-expression. She writes that, “I want to express my being as fully as I can
because I somewhere picked up the idea that I could justify my being alive that way...a
technique—to make arbitrary and temporary organization of my own personal and pathetic little
chaos” (Journals 45). Her diary allows her the space to be many selves, the woman whose
struggles render her “other,” as well as the woman who fits in with naturally her culture, who can
“laugh at what is canonically funny, sorrow for what is canonically sad” (Bruner 71) and fit in
with “the set of ‘givens’ in a life” (Bruner 71). Thus, through her diary, Plath is providing self-
justification for her life, producing a declarative “I am” statement and building a place to find
some semblance of order and sense of belonging even as she envisions herself a powerless
puppet in the midst of a tragi-comic theater piece.

And when Plath’s diary seeks to negotiate her turbulent feelings towards her mother,
Aurelia Plath, it also takes on the essence of theater, observing from an outside perspective. The
diary allows her to see herself staged within the play of parental relations to understand that
“when I commit suicide, or try to, it is a ‘shame’ to [my mother]…An accusation that her love
was defective” (Plath, Journals 448). In some entries, Plath actually assumes the role of her
mother, narrating what she envisions is Aurelia’s version of her suicide attempt: “Her daughter
tried to kill herself and had to disgrace her by going to a mental hospital: bad, naughty,
ungrateful girl. She didn’t have enough insurance. Something Went Wrong” (Journals 432). And
when acting out Aurelia’s perspective, Plath concludes that her mother blames her (and her
licentious sexuality) for their problems, judging that “It was her daughter’s fault partly…her daughter was all gaudy-dressed about to go out and be a chorus girl, a prostitute too, probably. (She had a lover, didn’t she? She necked and petted…and her pants were wet with the sticky white filth of desire…)” (*Journals* 432). But by performing her mother’s voice, Plath is able to apprehend not just her mother’s viewpoint, but the enabling (and thus, self-validating) power of writing her own life story. When Plath asks, “How, by the way, does mother understand my committing suicide? As a result of my not writing, no doubt. I felt I couldn’t write because she would appropriate it. Is that all? I felt if I didn’t write nobody would accept me as a human being” (*Journals* 448), she ultimately concludes that creating a surrogate textual self provides a relieving sense of meaning and alleviates her fears of being unloved or invisible and worthless. She continues, “Writing, then, was a substitute for myself: if you don’t love me, love my writing & love me for my writing. It is also much more: a way of ordering and reordering the chaos of experience” (*Journals* 448). Indeed, Plath agonizes over a crushing fear that her life is not really valid, and her diary is a continuing project in self-affirmation, a way for her to see herself in the text as a living, productive being.

A diary, then, is proof of an ordered, comprehended identity, whereas Plath feels that a life that leaves behind no tangible, recorded evidence is one that might well be meaningless. Plath writes of being wracked by “A panic, absolute & obliterating: here all diaries end – the vines on the brick wall opposite end in a branch like a bent green snake. Names, words, are power. I am afraid. Of what? Live without having lived, chiefly” (*Journals* 421). Much like Woolf, who sought to bolster her insecurity as a writer by denying it, Plath uses the diary to affirm her supremacy over her fears. Also like Woolf, Plath’s audience is often herself and those who have hurt her, though Plath’s audience is by far more blatantly addressed in clearly labeled
epistolary entries. She composes vigorously-worded missives to herself as a means of self-reassurance, excerpts letters to friends and lovers in her journals, and composes “unsent letters” to others as a means of catharsis: “– And so it seems I must always write you letters here that I can never send” (Journals 57). In the month before her 1953 suicide attempt, she writes many letters to herself in her diary; she tells herself on July 6, 1953, “The time has come, my pretty maiden, to stop running away from yourself…You are an inconsistent and very frightened hypocrite” (Journals 185). On July 14th, she writes, “Think. You can. You must, moreover, not continually run away while asleep – forget details – ignore problems – shut up walls between you & the world & all the gay bright girls – : please, think – snap out of this” (Journals 187).

During this same time period she writes another missive, addressed as a “Letter to an Overgrown, Over-protected, Scared, Spoiled Baby,” to firmly inform herself that “It is not the time to lose the appetite, feel empty, jealous of everyone in the world because they have fortunately been born inside them-selves and not inside you” (Journals 543). She also writes in her diary to her former lover Richard many times after their difficult breakup, producing a long series of unsent letters: “Richard, you live in this moment…You are in my guts and I am acting because you are alive…I want to write you, of my love, that absurd faith which keeps me chaste” (Journals 198).

A later diary entry directs him to, “Please, just write me one very simple declarative sentence…kill your image and the hope and love I give it which keeps me frozen in the land of the bronze dead” (Journals 217). While the desired result—affirmation—is the same, it is clear that Plath approaches her audience with a directness unlike the unseen auditors of Woolf’s entries, and she directly addresses her specific issues (and even names people she is writing to in her diary) instead of denying her problems or leaving the audience implied.
In fact, her diary is a rehearsal site for self-esteem and she repeats mantras encouraging her to pursue a fully-realized life. Her diary contains many pointed “notes to self” and plans for self-improvement like the one written in April of 1956 where she forcefully insists upon dedicating herself to her desire for Ted Hughes, whatever the cost, reminding herself that “you have accepted his being; you were desperate for this and you know what you must pay…Consider yourself lucky to have been stabbed by him; never complain or be bitter…never accuse or nag – let him run, reap, rip – and glory in the temporary sun of his ruthless force —” (Journals 570). Plath is almost Benjamin Franklin-esque in her devotion to cultivating the self (and her self-conception) through her diary. In the “Back to School Commandments,” she exhorts herself in a numbered list to “be moderate, yet intense, and interested” and insists that “Attitude is everything: so KEEP CHEERFUL, even if you fail your science, your unit, get a hateful silence from Myron, no dates, no praise, no love, nothing” (Journals 538). In another 1956 entry, she writes a list of self-development goals and self-reminders which include “Be chaste” and “Work on inner life – to enrich,” as well as “listen more; sympathize & ‘understand’ people” (Journals 569). She adds at the end the encouragement to “write – you have seen a lot, felt deeply & your problems are universal enough to be made meaningful – WRITE –” (Journals 569). It would be reductive to see Plath’s personal exhortations to write, especially one written in her diary, as only urging herself to produce more poetry or fiction—the diary, too, is part of her body of work. She leaves behind proof of her life and its validity through her diary—she cannot detach and view her real body externally, but her entries are a projected body of solid, tangible text that gives her security, especially through its relevance to others afflicted by adversity.

Plath puts her sexuality on display, mingling a chaste, virgin persona with a persona of a worldly, experienced woman. Plath perpetuates a fictive virginal self by the divide between how
she depicts her friend Mary and herself (and girls who have had similar upbringings to Plath). She begins by saying, “Mary is me...what I would be if I had been born of Italian parents on Linden Street” (Journals 8), and thus clearly says that Mary’s life circumstances have ensured that she is nothing like Plath. Plath even illustrates the difference in their appearance in overt images of sexuality and purity; Mary’s “face [is] made up” and she is clothed “in a dark blue jacket,” while Plath is the picture of cleanliness and chastity “in a white dress, a white coat, with a rich boy” (Journals 8). And yet Plath clarifies that she finds herself filled with self-loathing “for my hypocrisy” (Journals 8)—perhaps a highly revealing statement in its admission that her projection of purity is not entirely candid and guileless.

Despite this subtle admission, the hint of some dark sexual taint or indiscretion haunts Plath’s depiction of Mary; she is a “fallen” woman, and no “rival” to Plath’s purity. And yet it is clear that there is something Plath finds alluring and intriguing about Mary (and her sexual nature)—perhaps that Mary seems to be forthright about her identity where Plath cannot help but create many fictive selves to live through. A later entry affirms this: “I would like to be everyone, a cripple, a dying man, a whore, and then come back to write about my thoughts, my emotions, as that person” (Journals 9). This admission serves to reveal both that Plath can imaginatively live through false personas she has created, but also allows her to declare her “real” self to be different from these darker selves she contains. By linking being “a whore” with other “undesirable” conditions, she emphasizes the illicit, filthy connotations of prurience, and thus draws attention to how she categorizes herself as not like these people. In fact, she is so unlike them, she cannot fully empathize, and must only be herself in the end: “But I am not omniscient. I have to live my life, and it is the only one I'll ever have” (Journals 9). The construction of fictive personas gives Plath the benefit of being able to acknowledge and live out
some of her less wholesome thoughts in front of the mirror of the diary, all while simultaneously being able to deny that these are actually her thoughts.

Plath acts out a number of sexual selves, trying on different personalities and exercising their possibilities; sometimes she comments wryly on herself as an equally chaste and sexualized creature, the quintessential “American virgin dressed to seduce…in for an evening of sexual pleasure”, but she is a “nice girl” who will “demure at a certain point” (Journals 13). As she describes her evening dancing with a young man, she notes in a parenthetical aside that her culture creates a paradoxical standard of innocence and experience, as “(Dancing is the normal prelude to intercourse. All the dancing classes when we are too young to understand, and then this)” (Journals 14-5). Her diary allows her to verbalize her struggles with her desires and the repressed 1950s view of women’s sexuality as transgressive, shameful behavior, admitting that “I have too much conscience injected in me to break customs without disastrous [sic] effects; I can only lean enviously against the boundary and hate, hate, hate the boys who can dispel sexual hunger freely…while I drag out from date to date in soggy desire, always unfulfilled” (Journals 20). And perhaps nowhere is performance as evident as in the sexually-experienced, world-weary, jaded voice projected in Plath’s infamously controversial “abortion” entry: “Abortion. Suicide. Affairs. Cruelty. All those I know. How everything shrinks on return – you can’t go home again…all those rainbow extensions of dreams lost luster, shells out of water, color blanching out” (Journals 306-7). There is no record of Plath getting an abortion, nor does her diary ever mention one again; it appears that the inclusion of “abortion” in this entry was merely an affectation of worldliness and disenchantment.

Janet Schaw also exhibits a tendency to performance, and she successfully masquerades as a “Lady of Quality” in her journal when she was not of the aristocracy at all. In fact, Janet’s
father was actually “a farmer unable to support his growing family” (Bannet 140), and her brother Robert, whom she was going to visit in North Carolina, had been sent “out to North Carolina as a boy to be indentured to a Scottish-American merchant” (Bannet 140). The “Lady of Quality,” then, was actually Schaw’s affecting naïve, “observant visitor” persona that she created as a nod to the “travel narrative’s typically unprimed observer-recorder…the quintessential proper lady” (Bannet 138). According to Bannet, Janet Schaw deliberately constructed the satirical persona of an aristocratic lady so that she could ironically comment upon the poor treatment of Scottish migrants and indentured servants in the eighteenth-century trade triangle between Scotland, the West Indies, and North Carolina. She debunks Schaw’s claims of innocent observation, as “Janet and her family were…implicated personally in the emigration of poor Scots” (Bannet 140) and Schaw understood the problems faced by men like Mr. Lawson, who, like her brother, had been forced to enter indentured servitude.

Janet Schaw’s diary recounts the tale of Mr. and Mrs. Lawson who, “were, till lately, in very affluent circumstances” (Schaw 37) until the landlord of the farm Mr. Lawson’s family had rented for generations raised the rent “far beyond what it could ever produce” (Schaw 37). While Mr. Lawson told the tale of how “he was forced to give up his all to the unrelenting hand of oppression” (Schaw 37), she notes with ostensible innocence that many other emigrants chimed in, relating his story to their similar circumstances. They collectively “composed a tale of wo[sic], flowing from the same source, Viz’ the avarice and folly of their thoughtless masters” (Schaw 37). Yet her omission is a noteworthy deceit; Schaw records the sad plight of the emigrants without ever personally commenting on her own family’s similar conditions—her father had “to abandon farming for a post in customs” (Bannet 140)—or likening Mr. Lawson’s fate to her brother’s indentured servitude. In fact, similar economic need had provoked the very
trip she is on; her father had her other brother Alexander, with whom she was traveling, “appointed Searcher of Customs” (Bannet 140) in the West Indies. While recounting Mr. Lawson’s tale, Schaw maintains her aristocratic façade and never reveals that “own immediate family had thus been dispersed to the three corners” (140) of the trade route between Scotland, the West Indies, and North Carolina. By performing the aristocratic self, Schaw finds a way to subtly reveal the injustice she perceives in the tyranny of the Scottish landlords, whose practices forced these men into oppressive servitude by driving them off the land, and the greed of the ship’s owner, who is selling the emigrants into servitude to pay for their journey overseas.

Schaw’s diary possesses a second persona in addition to the satirical aristocratic figure. She projects herself as a brave “woman in the world” embarking upon great adventures; her words contain a true edge of both resourcefulness and defiance of feminine conventions. In North Carolina, she finds herself “without some male protector” (Schaw 200) and she waits “till the midnight patrol” (200-1) comes to receive an escort home, marching with them on their way to check on the slaves before they accompany her home. This would have been a highly unusual experience for a woman of the time to be out after midnight with a patrol group, but she says of herself, “You have formed a very wrong idea of my delicacy; I find I can put it on and off like my piece of dress” (201). The self that Schaw seeks to project is one hardly prone to being prissy, but is instead practical, versatile, and not rigidly obsessed with her feminine appearance, both in physical body and mental habit. Schaw’s diary persona has virtually no concern with adhering to feminine customs; as “a single woman in her late thirties, Schaw proudly presents herself as untrammeled by the multiple and intricate codes governing the behavior of younger women” (Coleman 176). In Antigua, she discovers that “the young Ladies drank nothing but Lime-juice and water” (Schaw 80). However, defying convention, she decides “to be a rebel to a
custom that did not appear founded on reason” (81), choosing instead to drink “a bumper of the best Madeira I ever tasted” (81). As mentioned before, Schaw also rejects the West Indian custom of masking that her traveling companion Fanny Rutherford mimics, disdaining the “cultivated whiteness of complexion that she clearly regards as yet another irrational West Indian custom” (Coleman 178). Instead, Schaw declares that “I have always set my face to the weather; wherever I have been” (Schaw 115), establishing a character who is mature, experienced, and well-traveled. Schaw’s defiant declaration of being a “brown beauty” (115) is significant in her self-identification and “emancipation from the artificiality and oppressive commodification of women’s beauty” (Coleman 179). She sees herself as a Romantic figure, the rebellious, self-sufficient traveler. Therefore Schaw clearly projects not only an aristocratic persona as the titular “lady of quality,” but creates a self-envisioned myth of a woman who is strong, insightful, and unrestricted by foolish customs. This self is particularly interesting when combined with her earlier racism and concern for British custom, but the diary allows a dual self-construction of public and private personas that exist simultaneously even if contradictorily.
As all of these diaries serve to show, the performative nature of the diary is not disingenuous, but moderates the many faces of the self in a meaningful and purposeful context. In particular, the nature of the event being recorded often serves to shape how the diarist projects his or her fictive persona: survivors of traumatic incidents sometimes document their trauma through distancing, creating a self that has not suffered in order to record testimony and give voice to the self that has. Re-living and re-writing a fictive self through diary writing allows the writer control and understanding of the self which has experienced and then changed in the interval of time between the event, the recording, and the rereading. This fictive self is not necessarily formed deliberately, but in autobiographical testimony of traumatic events, there is a distinct “splitting within her ‘self’ between ‘deep-lying memory’ and ‘ordinary memory’” (Anderson 131). As one survivor of Auschwitz admits, “I live within a twofold being. The Auschwitz double doesn’t bother me…As though it weren’t I at all” (131); for her, the formation of a fictive self is necessary for her to function and in order for her to record the memories she feels that she must depart from them. Indeed, much like autobiography, the traumatized self which gets recorded in a diary entry is already a departure, always distanced in time from the occurrence of the event itself; this is true regardless of how soon after the event the diary account was written.

The distancing of time and memory, and its impact on the fictive self, is a facet of diary recording that Sylvia Plath’s diary demonstrates frequently and is even self-conscious of. Plath is aware of this latent distance when she writes of what she wants to record, but realizes the
moment is already past: “I want to talk about getting the bus home, and my walk down from Weston road, and what I talked about to myself on the way to this room, this chair, this instant, (which is gone, even as my pen scratches the first ‘i.’)” (Plath, Journals 54). Plath even expresses frustration with the necessary gap between actuality and recorded reality, admitting, “after something happens to you, you go to write it down, and either you over dramatize it or underplay it, exaggerate the wrong parts or ignore the important ones. At any rate, you never write it quite the way you want to” (Journals 10). But the inaccuracy of the diary entry is part of its necessary cathartic function, especially in traumatic memories. In Plath’s attempt to describe an upsetting experience in which she had to fend off the unwanted advances of a boyfriend named Ilo, she agonizes over the need to purge her experience on paper knowing that there will be an inescapable disparity between the occurrence and the account of it, but she finally decides that, “I’ve got to put down what happened to me this afternoon…No matter how it comes out, I have to write it” (Journals 10). In the recounting, Plath recalls that as she was walking with Ilo to the barn where he was staying so that he could show her some sketches, they passed by a woman named Mary Coffee, and Plath “felt her looking at me rather strangely. Somehow I couldn’t meet her eyes” (Journals 10). Though at the time Plath would have no knowledge that Ilo would forcefully kiss her in the barn despite her vigorous protestations, her diary account is heavily foreshadowed with a sense of shame, and embarrassment leading up to the traumatic event.

When Mary Coffee greets Ilo with a “hello,” Plath finds that Mary spoke “in an oddly colorless voice” (Journals 10), and when some kids “singsong, ‘Oh, Sylvia,’” (Journals 10) as Plath and Ilo walked by, she claims that her “cheeks burned” (Journals 10) with humiliation. In Plath’s recollection, innocuous actions take on a magnified, more sinister meaning, reflecting her deep horror at both Ilo’s kiss and the prospect of others knowing about Ilo’s kiss.
Therefore, in her diary account it is clear that Plath’s post-traumatic emotions color the pre-traumatic ones, and as a result, events before and after the kiss mirror each other. The uncomfortable observation by Mary Coffee before Ilo’s kiss closely parallels the eyes Plath feels watching her after she walks out “Past Mary Lou…who stood there, a silent, dark presence” (Journals 11) and a group of farm boys whose “eyes glittered with malicious delight” (Journals 12). The children who called her name before the kiss have been conflated with “the little colored children, who called my name in the corrupted way kids have of pronouncing things” (Journals 11) as a distraught Plath leaves the barn. Yet in creating the fictive self of a woman who was ashamed of the terrible, unspoken event even before it occurred, Plath is able to relive the shame from a safe distance, musing at the end of her account that “it might have happened in a dream. Now I can almost believe it did” (Journals 12). Recording the events has given her a measure of command and sense of relief that she does not have to bear the shame alone—those feelings are now safely held on the page by a “surrogate” version of herself that she created and directs. She has become instrumental in her own telling, the scribe of her personal development.

Autobiographical theory understands the distance fundamental to scribing (and inscribing) oneself in text—the aforementioned theater of autobiography explores notions of dissociating so that one may better perceive oneself. However, distance does not just encompass the space between the self and the textual creation, but the time elapsed between the happening and the telling. The autobiography, of course, is not just about creating and projecting a self-myth, but reconciling the many selves of the past, present, and future. As autobiography theory attests,

A narrator, in the here and now, takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the progress of a protagonist in the there and then, one who happens to share his name. He
must by convention bring that protagonist from the past into the present in such a way that the protagonist and the narrator eventually fuse and become one person with a shared consciousness. Now, in order to bring a protagonist from the there and then to the point where the original protagonist becomes the present narrator, one needs a theory of growth or at least of transformation. You need a prescription that will allow the callow pear-stealing boy to turn into the thoughtful St. Augustine now caught in a struggle between faith and reason. The boy, of course, becomes an instrument in the telling. His life becomes dedicated to the theory or story into which his destiny is fitted… If initially the child was father to the man, now (in autobiography) the man reclaims the role of being father to the child. (Bruner 69-70)

Therefore, the diary too, by virtue of its continuing and progressive form (a diary or journal cannot be composed of a single entry, after all) requires the ever-evolving continuum of the self from past to present—like the autobiography, the present self must author the past self. Much as the autobiographer’s narrative account “should also be or appear to be order preserving, in the sense of preserving or appearing to preserve sequence—the sequential properties of which life itself consists or is supposed to consist” (70), the diary also imposes an order-making structure upon the life accounts it contains. This engineered coherence brings the disparate selves of past and present together and arranges an orderly, linear sense of growth.

Virginia Woolf, fascinated with the idea of a continuously changing identity through individual experience (and how writing mediates that experience), came to the understanding that the dated diary format allows the recording of the past self through the lens of the present self. The implicit distance in a diary’s text allows the writer the stability to achieve self-reflection. Therefore, in “A Sketch of the Past,” the memoir written in diary-esque dated blocks
from 1939 to 1940, Woolf establishes why she has begun to record the dates in which she works on the segments:

2nd May… I write the date, because I think that I have discovered a possible form for these notes. That is, to make them include the present—at least enough of the present to serve as a platform to stand upon. It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast. And further, this past is much affected by the present moment.

What I write today I should not write in a year’s time. (Woolf, “Sketch” 75)

She appropriates the diary form because she sees the evolution of the self over a dated interval as a useful form to reconstitute her life. This “inaccurate recall” of the diary entry—not just encompassing the “gap” in time, but the distance between the life event and the consciously or subconsciously controlled, recorded event—often helps to produce a retroactive understanding of the significance of a traumatic event. This understanding is a vital contribution to the formation of the diarist’s development, which is a departure from the original self who lacked both understanding and mastery over the event and its impact on the self. The evaluation of trauma creates distance between the lived event and the textual event, and subsequently divides the self which experienced the event from the recorded self, as “it is not until after the [traumatic event] that real knowledge of the trauma is possible” (Kaufman qtd. in Anderson 133). By reliving the event on the page, the writer can control the experience in a way that was not originally possible; it is a parachute jump after a traumatic free-fall.

Therefore, the diary account is a way for the diarist to “re-experience the inner trauma of plummeting without support and understand its meaning” (Anderson 133). Diaries are useful for post-event re-experiencing and self-evaluation. The diarist obtains a greater understanding of the significance of events in retrospect, after having laid them out on paper to make order and
meaning of them. Only then can life experiences be applied to one’s understanding of oneself and help one both become the self one wishes to be and successfully mediate future experiences. This controlled re-living through diary writing is a way to present and better understand one’s own testimony even as it departs from reality, and the nature of the fictive self serves to ensure that even as the textual double conceals the reality of events, it also reveals something through what has been intentionally concealed. For example, in the case of Plath’s traumatic kiss, she has taken control of the memory in the retelling and is able to see things in writing the diary that she could not see before, noting that “It seemed of no significance then, but now I remember how Ilo had shut the door, had turned on the radio so that music came out” (Plath, Journals 11). The distance between herself and the “character” self she has made in her diary allows her an almost disassociated out-of-body experience; it enables her to watch her life unfold from a new perspective with added clarity and detail. The entry also serves to reveal how devastating the moment is to her.

Virginia Woolf clearly exhibits a dissociated two-fold persona when recording traumatic events in her diary, as clearly seen from her diary’s declaration that she possessed no inner life. Indeed, her subterfuge, whether done intentionally or not, successfully distracted some; reviewer Nona Balakian writes, “Nothing yet published about her so totally contradicts the legend of Virginia Woolf than this first volume of her projected complete diaries,” (qtd. in Woolf, Diary I) and Keith Cushman wonders that there is “No torment or psychic struggle here” (qtd. in Woolf, Diary I). Even this savvy literary audience has allowed the general assumptions of the diary genre to cloud their judgment. They rely only on surface reading and clearly miss the true implications of her diary’s seemingly outward-looking focus. Virginia Woolf’s diary has proven notable to critics not for what it says, but for what it does not say, and yet, they fail to understand
that its silence speaks volumes, a testimony of sorts. Woolf never directly references any mental breakdowns, for example, choosing to only mention them on rare occasion obliquely or euphemistically coding them as a “catastrophic illness” (Woolf, *Diary* V: 24). That Woolf was circumventing a painful subject is clear, and her avoidance says much about her coping strategies and how her diary participated in constructing a normative self. In her diary, she can declare a day in which she records no mental turmoil and her most substantial activity was that she “shopped in Oxford Street; went to Warings; liked the china cups: think of buying a dinner service” to be “A fairly specimen day” (*Diary* IV: 195). Woolf’s diary is hiding just as much as it is revealing, and underneath the vivacious social observations there is much to be gleaned about Woolf’s inner life—her agonies are merely detached and subverted.

As seen in the diary of Sylvia Plath, control over her legacy meant revisiting trauma in her diary, whereas for Virginia Woolf, there was a similar assertion of revisionary control over her afflictions, but the means of empowerment was just the opposite. Woolf steadfastly refused to record her trauma in her diaries, denying it the right to exist in her life record. Virginia Woolf’s autobiographical writing, such as “A Sketch of the Past,” certainly reveal she believes there is action going on behind the curtain of any façade she may have built in her diary: in fact, it is in this autobiographical essay that she reveals her idea that there is more to a person’s life than the surface appearance. She believes that there are moments of deeper meaning beneath the everyday, “hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order” (Woolf, “Sketch” 72). This is in great conflict with her diary’s statement denying her inner life; it is apparent that there is more to Woolf’s entries, then, than life’s “ordinary gray.” After all, her abiding belief in the inner life is adamantly affirmed as no fleeting concept, but one that she has long contemplated and held: “I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is
a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern” (“Sketch” 72). What, then, can be understood about the veracity of Woolf’s entries and their superficial sheen? Firstly, it is not the inclusion of the mundane in Woolf’s diary that rings false; indeed, a lack of the ordinary, outer life would also be just as inaccurate a recollection as one that privileges only extraordinary moments of great emotion or interior reflection. However, it is certainly erroneous to assume that a surface reading of her diary is entirely genuine; it certainly will not suffice to show the current of thought that she has subordinated or suppressed. There remains the question, however, if Woolf’s direct focus upon the cotton wool of her life is a deliberate deception meant to conceal the pattern of trauma and introspection underneath, or if the detriment of capturing inner insight and the subjugation of profound “moments of being” are inadvertent byproducts of Woolf merely seeking to record the true nature of her life’s ordinary moments.

However, it is clear that Woolf intentionally downplays the most emotionally fraught, significant moments of her life, flattening moments of being where she is feeling particularly thoughtful and engaged. Woolf’s frequent insistence upon the pedestrian tends to overshadow the moments of being in her diary—even when revealing trauma, she tends to do so in a dispassionate voice, with great restraint or brevity, or in a way that underplays its significance. In fact, this strategy is employed throughout her diary; particularly noteworthy examples are the entries in which she addresses the 1937 death of her nephew, Julian Bell, who was killed driving an ambulance in the Spanish Civil War. Woolf learned of his death on July 20, 1937 and resumes her diary on August 6th, commenting almost glibly, “Well but one must make a beginning,” (Woolf Diary V: 104) before saying, “Its [sic] odd that I can hardly bring myself, with all my verbosity—the expression mania which is inborn in me—to say anything about Julian’s death” (Diary V: 104). As always, Woolf’s ventures into greatly revealing, emotional territory in her
diary are marked with restraint. She prevents herself from too much introspection over the previous ten days she spent with her grieving sister Vanessa, cutting off her ruminations by declaring, “No no, I will not go back to those days” (Diary V: 104). Despite her resolve to remain detached, she begins to contemplate the qualities of death: “it brings close the immense vacancy, & our short little run into inanity” (Diary V: 105) and then fully admits her coping strategy for dealing with introspection is to avoid it. Woolf rejects rumination upon death and immerses herself instead in the ordinary of daily life, saying, “Now this is what I intend to combat. How? How make good what I protest, that I will not yield an inch or a fraction of an inch to nothingness… Work of course. I plunged on Monday into Congreve, & have about done him this morning” (Diary V: 105). She is empowered to downplay traumatic events by aligning them with her everyday work, and this reordering of experience makes her grief tolerable. It is clear that the systematic, day to day ordering that is integral to the diary form allows Woolf the control and the space to manage her life—she draws up a map to survival, if you will, in recording the list of work and various distractions she will use to distance herself from her grief. By denying her pain in her diary she acknowledges its existence, but does not allow it room in her daily recorded routine to expand beyond trivial importance.

The entry continues on in a curious mix of the personal and impersonal, each tentative step into revelatory territory combatted by a matter-of-fact dive back into listing the prosaic: “Well, theres 3 Guineas to finish: the last chapter, now I suppose its stiff & cold. But I will try that tomorrow: then polish off Congreve: then earn £200, so they say, with a story: & so to Roger this autumn” (Diary V: 105). When she concludes her entry with the realization that “Nessa is alone today,” (Diary V: 106), she follows it up with, “A very hot day—I add, to escape from the thought of her” (Diary V: 106). The following entry written on August 11, 1937 contains much
of the same technique. She jumps from reflecting about whether she should leave her husband alone to sit with her grieving sister Vanessa, who “was again in the submerged mood” (Diary V: 106) to concluding that there is “no use in thinking—I mean in analysis. I shall have a long walk this afternoon, to Piddinghoe: walk myself serene; play bowls, read; & not think of little arrangements” (Diary V: 107). Therefore, it is apparent that Woolf does more than just capture the banal quality of day to day living; she focuses on it entirely in relentless lists as a way of deflecting attention (perhaps both hers and that of any future readers) from her innermost thoughts and personal turmoil.

Woolf’s elusiveness and choice of impersonal topics are an intentional choice; she writes in her penultimate diary entry of March 8, 1941, a mere twenty days before her suicide:

No: I intend no introspection. I mark Henry James’s sentence: Observe perpetually. Observe the oncome of age. Observe greed. Observe my own despondency. By that means it becomes serviceable. Or so I hope. I insist upon spending this time to the best advantage. I will go down with my colours flying. This I see verges on introspection; but doesn’t quite fall in…Occupation is essential. And now with some pleasure I find that its seven; & must cook dinner. Haddock & sausage meat. I think it is true that one gains a certain hold on sausage & haddock by writing them down. (Woolf, Diary V: 357-8)

It is in this entry, where Woolf admits an intentional concealment of the personal by burying it underneath the impersonal, her inner life of depression covered (and displaced) by the commonplace haddock for dinner, that the audience can begin to see the sophisticated rhetorical strategy Woolf has engaged as both a means of coping with her mental issues and constructing a persona for her readers. By distancing herself from her depression, mentioning it in only in the most aloof and disinterested of ways, she finds that she can better manage it. Additionally, she
superimposes her private distress with the material, frivolous, or ordinary, which does not just blot out the source of her pain by denying it, but also serves to diminish its significance by likening it in importance to menial matters. It is certainly interesting that she uses her dinner meat to illustrate the technique of how she grasps a thing by writing it; even when revealing crucial insight into her mind, she insists upon minimizing it with a commonplace example.

But it is also apparent that Woolf recognized that both diary and autobiographical writing were acts of control over her life, from commanding the telling of what was once a seemingly uncontrollable factor of her life (like war or depression) to directing even the menial details, like dinner: when Woolf says in her diary that she gains a “certain hold” on the haddock and sausage by recording them, she admits as much. In fact, Woolf is quite self-aware of the power of writing to grant the author a commanding sense of orchestrating life (and even all of reality). In “A Sketch of the Past,” she conceptualizes the writer’s great ability to make the intangible and transient permanent, and to weave the fabric of the world itself, to “make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together” (Woolf, “Sketch” 72). Sylvia Plath’s diary echoes this sense of permanency and dominion over the facts of her existence through writing, declaring that “Writing is a religious act: it is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reloving of people and the world as they are and as they might be. A shaping which does not pass away like a day of typing or a day of teaching” (Plath, Journals 436). In both of their respective diaries, shaping the self that they “replace” and “rewrite” through their diaries is a way for them to mediate their life experiences. Woolf’s diary allows her to embody “normality” and step away from the greatly insecure, troubled version of the self that interferes with the sociable, witty, carefree woman, and
Plath’s diary lets her organize her sexual impulses, fiery passions, and deep-seated fears into a confident, successful, and loved self. Both Woolf and Plath’s views on writing should also be recognized as statements about the procreative faculty of their diaries to give an enduring voice, producing an identity-making exchange between themselves and the world around them.

After all, the diary is a receptacle of a cohesive identity, fusing together the projected “better” or “normal” self and the traumatized self. The multiple nature of the selves transcribed in a diary, then, allows the diarist a meta-commentary power over his or her life: the ability to write the self through retrospectively commenting, and then rewrite and re-comment upon the self until what was once memory becomes the final life story, the self-myth one has left behind. Plath wrote that “It’s hopeless to ‘get life’ if you don’t keep notebooks” (Journals 273)—without the recorded memory, she feels incomplete, missing a portion of her own mythology. This self-myth is not necessarily a falsehood; the “meta” power of the diary allows the self to become the myth as time passes and the actual memory fades. The only surviving memory is actually the memory of the diary entry; the true recollection blurs until it only contains what is preserved in print. But does this self-written myth diminish the diary’s “truthfulness”? Inherent in any human text are questions of fiction and identity, even if the constructed nature of the text is not deliberate; therefore, a subjective work like a diary can simply have no objective “truth” or “reality,” and thus questions of subjectivity and audience must always remain.
Conclusion: The Individual Face and the Community Face of a Unified Diary Self

In autobiography, seeking self-justification and control through the telling of one’s life is understood as the key impulse; one seeks to unite oneself with the set of “normal” impulses and societal positions, while simultaneously justifying one’s story as extraordinary and worth sharing. “For ‘what makes the telling justifiable’ is also a commitment to a certain set of presuppositions about oneself, one’s relation to others, one’s view of the world and one’s place in it” (Bruner 76). This rhetorical technique produces a world in which the self is both validated as unique and coherently situated in the center of its socio-cultural canon, producing a sense of “stability in self-conception, but [which] also permits the autobiographer to maintain a sense of alliance with others” (Bruner 76) because “autobiography (like the novel) involves not only the construction of self, but also a construction of one’s culture” (Bruner 77). But by understanding diaries as an equally constructed performance, they can be more accurately perceived as the meaning-making, self-creating texts that they are instead of sealed, inaccessible documents rendered unintelligible by the nature of their concentrated, enclosed privacy.

Woolf, Plath, and Schaw all wrote diaries that are highly representative of this self-making and world-building rhetorical ethos; the fictiveness of the constructed self and the audiences the self plays to are no less a facet of the diary genre than the autobiography genre. Composing for an audience, real or imagined, and creating a multi-faceted self are necessary facets of diary’s identity-forging process. Even a diary that records a terse listing of daily activities or events is also projecting some idea of the self: it may produce a fictive persona who appears to be productive and rational, one not prone to imaginative wondering, self-reflection, or garrulosity—a person wholly devoted to duty—and yet, it is still an ordering of the self.
Diarists project personas in an effort to make sense of themselves and their life experiences as singular—Woolf struggling with her public and private faces of a woman writer, Plath consumed with her psychological turmoil and fear of never living or being loved except through writing, Schaw seeking to affirm herself as a self-sufficient, trailblazing traveler. They also try to find their connection as a part of the larger whole in myriad ways; Woolf tries to validate herself as part of a group of writer-artists, Plath sees herself as part of a grand, orchestrated cycle of human adversities, and Schaw situates herself within the right order of the British Empire. Their diaries all create a life-validating identity; each diarist has established herself at the center of a self-conceived world. They have marked their selves as worth telling by projecting their stories as simultaneously disparate from and inclusive with the general life experiences of their respective cultures.
Bibliography


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