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THE HAUNTED HOUSE IN ST. IVES: GHOSTLY PRESENCES AND SENSUOUS MEMORIES IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S "A SKETCH OF THE PAST"

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Abstract

This article explores how Virginia Woolf's memories as worked into her piece of life writing "A Sketch of the Past" (1939-1940) can be perceived as *haunted*. Employing the tropes of the "haunted house" and "ghostly presences," we examine Woolf's "colour-and-sound memories" (Woolf 66) of her childhood summer home—Talland House in St. Ives—and its central spectral figure: her mother, Julia Stephen. To develop this, we situate "Sketch" within the broader field of life writing, emphasizing its fragmented and sensorial nature while discussing the hybrid and liminal characteristics of auto/biography. We then delve into the relationship between houses and memory (Lee 2020; Bachelard 1964) and the concept of hauntology (Derrida 1994; Rahimi 2021) to highlight the inextricable link between memory, space, and haunting as well as how Talland House emerges as a site of spectral memory, with Julia Stephen as its abiding ghost.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; A Sketch of the Past; life writing; memory; haunted house.

A CASA ASSOMBRADA EM ST. IVES: PRESENÇAS FANTASMAGÓRICAS E MEMÓRIAS SENSORIAIS EM "UM ESBOÇO DO PASSADO" DE VIRGINIA WOOLF

Resumo

Este artigo explora como as memórias de Virginia Woolf em "Um Esboço do Passado" (escrito entre 1939 e 1940) podem ser percebidas como *assombradas*. Através dos tropos de "casa assombrada" e de "presenças

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fantasmagóricas," examinamos as lembranças de Woolf sobre sua casa de verão na infância—Talland House, em St. Ives—e a figura espectral central: sua mãe, Julia Stephen. Para desenvolver essa análise, situamos "Esboço" no campo mais amplo de escritas de vida, enfatizando sua natureza fragmentada e sensorial, ao mesmo tempo que discutimos as características híbridas e liminares da auto/biografia. Em seguida, exploramos a relação entre casas e memória (Lee 2020; Bachelard 1964) e o conceito de obsidiologia (Derrida 1994; Rahimi 2021) para destacar o vínculo indissociável entre memória, espaço e assombração, onde Talland House se torna um espaço de memória espectral e Stephen sua presença constante.

Palavras-chave: Virginia Woolf; Um Esboço do Passado; escritas de vida; memória; casa assombrada.

The haunted house in St. Ives: ghostly presences and sensuous memories in Virginia Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past"

"Sou assombrada pelos meus fantasmas, pelo que é mistico e fantástico – a vida é sobrenatural."
— Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva* (1973)

Introduction

In the first paragraph of her auto/biographical[1] "A Sketch of the Past", Virginia Woolf writes, "two days ago— Sunday 16th April 1939 to be precise—[my sister] Nessa said that if I did not start writing my memoirs I should soon be too old. I should be eighty-five, and should have forgotten" (*MOB*[2] 64). Written sporadically between 1939 and 1940, the opening of this unfinished auto/biographical piece portrays Woolf's dealing with temporality and the inevitable passage of time, using her sister's prompting as her excuse to avowedly attempt to chronicle her life before age dims her memory. The opening of "Sketch" additionally highlights two other important functions of this text: as a way of dealing with grief and coping with the strain of writing the biography of one of her closest friends[3]; and as an attempt to regain a sense of control over her life amid the anxiety of a looming second world war. "Sketch" then provides valuable insights into Woolf's writing, as well as into her reworking of memory, love, loss, and space into text.

In this article we aim to investigate how Woolf's recollections can be understood as *haunted* in this fragmented piece of life writing. We employ the trope of a haunted house to investigate the "colour-and-sound memories" (*MOB* 66) of both her mother, Julia Stephen, and of Talland House, her childhood summer home in St. Ives, Cornwall. If certain life stories can remain "fixed inside one overpowering house, a house that can't be escaped from" (Lee 2020, 33), then Talland House serves as the very house that haunts Woolf, with Julia Stephen as its central spectral presence.

Embracing the idea of haunting in Woolf's founding piece of life writing requires that we investigate the nuances of this text, as well as of life writing in general. We deem important, therefore, to begin by investigating the distinctiveness of "Sketch" within the broader landscape of auto/biography. In the first part we thus highlight some aspects of life writing, juxtaposing the complexities of this field with Woolf's first "highly sensual" (*MOB* 66) first memories. In the preface to the book *The Life of Houses*, Hermione Lee—Woolf's biographer and a renowned scholar of life writing—suggests that a house can embody stories, histories, memories, and ways of life. The exploration of such spaces comprises what she describes as "life-writing as housework" (xiii), highlighting the importance of houses in the investigation of one's life and work. In the second part, we then delve specifically on the idea of houses and haunting, bringing into evidence Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1964, translated

by Maria Jolas) and Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology (*Specters of Marx*, 1994, translated by Peggy Kamuf) here emphasized by Sadeq Rahimi's book *The Hauntology of Everyday Life* (2021).

As we conduct this hauntological (and affectionate) "housework" (Lee xiii) of Talland House, we hope to put into evidence Woolf's reflections on memory and ghosts, ultimately contributing to the legacy of this piece of life writing and to explorations of space in life writing and narrative more widely. It is important to highlight here that we add "affectionate" to Lee's concept of "housework" to invite us to embrace a sensuous engagement of Woolf's work, aligning with her own sensorial language and with Benjamin Hagen's (2017) proposal for a sensuous pedagogy of Virginia Woolf. As he explains, this pedagogy "extends beyond literary taste, encompassing all sensations (aural, visual, tactile, spiritual) and emotions (horror, joy, sorrow, excitement) that move, initiate, and even sustain critical and creative thought" (268). In foregrounding these sensuous and emotional dimensions, we acknowledge how researching is not only analytical but also deeply intimate, shaped by the embodied experiences of writers, researchers, and texts.

"Many bright colours; many distinct sounds": juxtaposing life writing with Virginia Woolf's first memories

Although "Sketch" brings its own avowal by Woolf that it is her attempt to write her memoirs (*MOB* 64) it also brings her foundational definition of "life-writing" (*MOB* 80), our preferred term for identifying "Sketch." As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001) explain, a memoir is a form of life writing that focuses on specific experiences, emphasizing personal reflection and self understanding, as well as highlighting the writing process and the author's subjective perspective (7). Considering that Woolf focuses on her childhood memories and constantly comments upon the nature of her own writing, "Sketch" would certainly fit into this category; however, the piece presents the characteristics that extrapolate the memoir, including those features of the diary and of the essay, and thus requiring a more capacious categorization. Therefore, when on May 2, 1939 Virginia Woolf decides to add the present moment to her memories—"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" (*MOB* 75)—she also gives a diaristic quality to her original memoir and this "platform" of the present adds a significant layer of complexity to her recollections by putting the present into a conversation with the past. It is important to note, furthermore, that Woolf was an avid diarist and a reader of diaries[4], keeping the practice of diary-writing for more than forty-four years and leaving a legacy of more than thirty notebooks—including the years that she was writing "Sketch"—, as she mentions in a diary entry of 13 April 1939: "finished my first 40 pages—childhood &c—well under the week" (Woolf 214).

Not only did Woolf have a close relation to the diary-writing, but she was also a professional essayist who even wrote about life writing—such as the case of "The Art of Biography," published in 1939—and did many reviews of volumes of correspondences and edited diaries throughout her life. If we take into consideration Smith and Watson's description of the autobiographical essay—a referential form of text that stem from personal experience through speculations on socio-cultural contexts (5), adopting a critical perspective in relation to certain themes—we can consider that such essayism is also present in "Sketch." This can be exemplified, for instance, when she writes about herself at the same time that she comments on the task of the memoir writer and first proposes "life-writing" as this process: "here I come to one of the memoir writer's difficulties – one of the reasons why, though I read so many, so many are failures. They leave out the person to whom things happened . . . and the events mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened" (*MOB* 65); "if we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile *life-writing* becomes" (*MOB* 80, emphasis added). As Diane Cousineau (1993) describes, Woolf was "ultra conscious of the proportions and limitations of the form and knows only too well all that memoirs invariably and inadvertently leave out" (51). Her memoirs, albeit "tentative, fragmented, unfinished as they are, [therefore] do more to move toward the possibilities of what auto[/]biography might be than the most complete of life stories" (51). In this way, this "ultra conscious" life writing piece cannot be defined simply as a memoir, essay, or diary: it is neither as well as a combination of all three.

"Sketch" is additionally a text that has been left behind many times and even accidentally discarded, as Woolf admits in the text itself: "19th July 1939. I was forced to break off again, and rather suspect that these breaks will be the end of this memoir" (*MOB* 98); "June 8th 1940. I have just found this sheet of notes, thrown away into my waste-paper basket" (*MOB* 100). While there is a sort of neglect towards the material document, "Sketch" also underwent a revision process[5], indicating a consideration of readership and of planned publication. This can be further emphasized Woolf's desire to transform it into a book—"shall I ever finish these notes […] [and] make a book from them?" (*MOB* 100): with Woolf's fame and the success of her earlier books, such as *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1929), it is possible that she had a preoccupation with her legacy and her literary contributions.

This double character as a draft and a planned book of life writing also matches with ambiguous character of life writing in general. In her exploration of epistolarity in literature, Brigitte Diaz (2016) argues that letters resist classification as a specific genre: "rebellious to any generic identifications" (11, our translation[6]), they exist in "a borderline space – at the same time inside and outside the literary" (53). As she explains, letters emerge as a sort of "anti-genre" (50), defying and resisting any traditional categorizations. Similarly, in her book *How to Read a Diary* (2019), Desirée Henderson writes that the diary can be seen as a "fuzzy genre," one that "borrows from many different, preexisting forms"

(6). She describes diarists' "refusal to conform to literary norms" (18), where the act of writing a diary is also an "act of claiming selfhood through writing [that] is laden with political and ideological significance" (67). Therefore, the letter's stubbornness, along with the diary's subversion, illustrate how life writing occupies a liminal (Diaz 53) and hybrid (Henderson 6) space. Smith and Watson call attention to these "new modes of subjectivity" (109), addressing that the "desire of autobiographical subjects to splinter monolithic categories that have culturally defined them" (109). They advocate, then, for new frameworks that challenge established ideas of memory, identity, and experience. Life writing becomes therefore a hybrid in-between space; a locus of subversion against policed boundaries, perfectly suited to the "colour-and-sound memories" (*MOB* 66) of "Sketch." For these reasons, instead diminishing its richness, reading "Sketch" as a piece of life writing makes the genre's associations with fragmentary and rebelliousness to any fixed categorizations a more powerful text. As Mesquita (2021) explains,

> [Sketch's] highly lacunar characteristic, far from being a problem, is what makes it powerful. Unlike a continuous text, ellipses and silences matter more in memories because they offer the chance of recreation and re-elaboration, and it is out of these hiatuses that Woolf writes her memories during the last two years of her life. (78)

The fragmentary nature of "Sketch" then puts into evidence how silences and gaps in memory allow for artistic reinterpretation. This fragmentary aspect is further enhanced by how memory is (re-)shaped in it, as sensuous recollections are remembered along with gaps, pauses, and reconstruction of these ruptures. The title itself already portrays its rough character: it is a *sketch* of the past, a word that can be thought of both in drawing and writing, where outlines, shapes, lines, and traces convey the idea of the draft of the whole. In his book *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer), Paul Ricoeur writes about "memories that spill over the threshold of memory, presenting themselves one by one or in bunches . . . or in sequences more or less amenable to being put into narrative form" (22). As he explains, these recollections can be treated as "discrete forms with more or less discernible borders, set off against what could be called a memorial backdrop" (22), similar to Woolf's synesthetic impressions in "Sketch," where recollections are presented nonchronologically, without clear outlines and marked only by traces of sensory experience. We can visualize this as we turn to Woolf's first memories, where she juxtaposes the first two recollections, outlining the sensations they evoke and transforming them in the process of writing:

> I begin; *the first memory*. This was of red and purple flowers on a black ground – my mother's dress; and she was sitting either in a train or in an omnibus, and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close; and *can still see* purple and red and blue, I think, against the

> black; they must have been anemones, I suppose. Perhaps we were going to St Ives; *more probably*, for from the light it must have been evening, we were back to London. It is more *convenient artistically* to suppose that we were going to St Ives, for that will lead to my other memory, *which also seems to be my first memory*, and in fact it is the *most important of all my memories*. If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of *hearing* the waves breaking; one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one two, behind a yellow blind. It is of *hearing* the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is *of lying and hearing* this splash and seeing this light, and *feeling*, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling *the purest ecstasy I can conceive.* (*MOB* 64-65, emphasis added)

From these first recollections where remembrance and oblivion merge, several aspects can be observed. Firstly, the word choice highlights how perspectival, disjointed, and synesthetic these recollections are. Through her vivid descriptions of flowers (anemones) and various hues, we thus begin to grasp the sensory language that shapes her memories, particularly those connected to her childhood years and her visits to Cornwall. Here, we can also note the tentativeness of "Sketch," marked by its contradictions, which happen when Woolf presents her "first memory," followed by "another (*more important*) first memory". Secondly, Woolf's "first" memory is not just one, but two, a *double memory* that surpasses monolithic definitions of a single recollection, just as "Sketch" breaks with the notions of draft/publication or of memoir/diary/essay. Finally, from this passage we note that one of the earliest and most central images of her life is not tied to a specific place, but to movement, displacement. In the same way that Woolf's first memory embraces a transitional space—that is neither fully St. Ives nor London but an enclosed space linking them (train *or* omnibus)—, "Sketch" also lies in this in-between place.

Another important aspect that surrounds these first recollections is related to the narrative practice of invention or, as Woolf calls them, "artistic conveniences." Coming back to her memory of her mother's lap, Woolf writes how, in the light she can see from her memory, she believes she was actually returning to London; however, she deliberately chooses to situate the memory in the trip towards St. Ives, shaping her recollection to connect it with another. The seemingly small choice of situating this recollection in the direction of St. Ives brings forward the intricacies of life writing, especially in what concerns the linking of memory, space, and narrative. When Woolf chooses the direction of travel despite acknowledged evidences to the contrary, she also puts into question the idea of truth in "Sketch," as she shows how memories may be artistically reworked to be woven together in the fabric of the text. This helps to break up with the notion that auto/biographical texts can simply be read as historical documents of truth (a function previously commonly attributed to them). Being aware of this helps us to read "Sketch" in a more critical way, subverting binarism of truth/lie, fact/fiction. In fact, "truth" in a piece of life writing is subjective: it is not the case that

we cannot trust auto/biographical subjects, but rather that we must be aware that they offer their own truths, embedded in memory, identity, and intention. As Smith and Watson explain, "life narrative[s] cannot be reduced to or understood only as historical record . . . they offer subjective 'truth' rather than 'fact'" (10).

Memory, then, plays a crucial role when reading and understanding life writing and the idea of subjective truth. What one remembers and how one chooses to write about these memories matter, and sometimes, as Woolf herself would explain "the things one does not remember are as important; perhaps they are more important" (*MOB* 69). This idea of remembering and forgetting aligns with Ricoeur's notion that memory is the light cast upon the darkness of oblivion (40). If oblivion, then, is the shadow, it might be illuminated by the colorful hues, shapes—and even sounds?—of Woolf's sensuous language. These flimsy aspects of memory—where the subjective I finds itself in the gaps between remembering and forgetting—therefore offer space for *invention*. In the preface of her book *Becos da Memória* (2017), Conceição Evaristo explains that between an experience and the transformation of it into a narrative we find ourselves in a space of invention. She claims that her memorialist novel is actually a "fiction of her memory" (10) underscoring the retrospective nature of life writing along with the possibility of reinvention when memories fade. As she argues, in the narration of an experience there is "a space of deep profoundness, and it is precisely in this place that invention explodes" (11). This fictionalization can be noted in the transformation of one's memories into an indeed fictional work, as we will further observe—"I rubbed out a good deal of the force of my mother's memory by writing about her in To the Lighthouse" (*MOB* 108)—but also here, where Woolf's recollections are affected by the artistic convenience of changing the direction of (one of) her first memory(ies).

Returning to St. Ives through both writing and recollection becomes a way to make these recollections happen again, illustrating how "to theorize memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency is to begin to understand the complexities of autobiographical subjectivity and its *performative nature*" (Smith and Watson 48, emphasis added). However, one last aspect that connects these recollections with the complexities of life writing is Woolf's thought-provoking idea that these memories might be so powerful that they can *exist on their own*. As she explains, these recollections sometimes feel more real than the present moment, a powerful characteristic that makes her suspect whether they can exist by themselves:

> The strength of these pictures – but sight was always then so much mixed with sound that picture is not the right word – the strength anyhow of these impressions makes me again digress. Those moments – in the nursery, on the road to the beach – can still *be more real than the present moment.* This I have just tested. For I got up and crossed the garden . . . [the gardener] was digging the asparagus bed; . . . [the daily help] was shaking a mat in front of the bedroom door. But I was seeing them through the sight I saw there – the nursery and the road to the beach. At times I can go back to St

> Ives more completely than I can this morning. I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen *as if I were there*. That is, I suppose, that *my memory supplies what I had forgotten*, so that it seems as if it were happening *independently*, though I am really *making it happen*. (*MOB* 67, emphasis added)

As we can note here, these powerful memories can become stronger than the present moment, making them exist "independently." Rahimi writes that "hauntology indicates a disjointing of time where *past and future are present*, and *present is absent*, and consequently it necessitates a *pantemporal* formulation of human thoughts and experience" (6, emphasis added). Bringing these ideas together, we argue that if recollections can be so powerful that they take on a life of their own, then Woolf's house in St. Ives—more real than the present moment, as she describes—may remain suspended in time, existing independently of conventional notions of past and present. Likewise, we add that Julia Stephen can be seen as the ghost haunting summers that never happened: the end of a childhood that could have been. These aspects will be explored in the next section.

"Certainly there she was": Talland House and the ghosts of childhood

In Bachelard's phenomenological study of the house, *The Poetics of Space*, the philosopher highlights the importance of doing a "topoanalysis," this is, a "systematic psychological study of the sites of [one's] intimate lives" (8). According to him, houses are repositories of memories and emotions; and locating and investigating these intimate dwellings is an essential study of one's lives. The writing of lives, therefore, "involves writing about houses" (Lee xiii), and a house may contain "the countless alveoli space [of] compressed time" (Bachelard 8). Virginia Woolf's life was filled with many relevant houses[8] that helped shape her memories and writing. From these dwellings, Maggie Humm (2022) explains that Talland House, Woolf's childhood summer house in Cornwall, is "the most significant in Virginia Woolf's life and work [as] the house and St Ives landscape appear in her major modernist works: *Jacob's Room*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*" (1). They are also "so infused in Woolf's imagination that she returned again and again as an adult" (3).

Bachelard argues that "over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us" (14), showing a special concern to the house that marks one's childhood and early years. As he explains, other houses undoubtedly mark our memories and gestures as well, but to return to the old house, the *first house* is to surprisingly find "the most delicate gestures, the earliest gestures suddenly come alive, [that] are still faultless" (15). He concludes: "the house we were born in has *engraved within us* the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting" (15, emphasis added). This suggestion that our first home functions somehow as a foundational microcosm—a miniature world where we learn to relate to space and construct emotional memories—establishes the framework for how we experience and feel in other places we inhabit throughout

our lives. While Woolf's first house was 22 Hyde Park Gate in London—where she lived until she was twenty-two years old—here we argue that Talland House is actually this foundational home, the one that shapes Woolf's imagination as both a child and an adult and that serves as the place where the ghost of her mother, Julia Stephen, haunts. Woolf's description of childhood helps to further illustrate these ideas better. She writes,

> Many bright colours; many distinct sounds; some human beings; caricatures; comic; several violent moments of being, always including a circle of the scene which they cut out: and all surrounded by a vast space – that is a rough visual description of childhood. This is how I shape it; and how I see myself as a child, roaming about, in that space of time which lasted from 1882 to 1895. (*MOB* 79)

We can start with the period of time that shapes the images of her childhood: 1882 (the year that Virginia Woolf was born) to 1895 (the year that her mother passed away, which is also when the Stephen family stopped going to Talland House for their summer vacations). When, then, in 1939 Woolf defines her childhood as spanning from 1882 to 1895, she also marks the end of her childhood with the death of her mother and the end of Talland House, making this space haunted by the marks of these profound losses. Rahimi explains that "haunting is about a nullified possible future that a bygone existence (be it the self or an other) was experienced to promise" (6): the ghost is therefore not what has gone or is in the past, but actually "an advocate of the promised future that was unrightfully canceled when the past was destroyed" (6). Over time, then, Talland House becomes not only the place of these profound losses, but also the repository of Woolf's early joy, her ideal of happiness, with the promises of summers that could have been, memories with her mother that could have happened. As biographer Hermione Lee (1996) explains in *Virginia Woolf*, for Woolf "happiness is always measured . . . against the memory of being a child in that house" (33), and the writer's constant returns to these childhood memories lend them a haunted quality, where:

> Again and again, she marks the past by returning to the same scenes, the rooms, the landscapes, the figures of her life, like the ghosts revisiting their haunted house in her story of that name. Back she goes to the scenes of childhood: the blind tapping on the window of the bedroom at St Ives, the lighthouse beam going round, the sound of the waves breaking on the shore. (Lee, *Virginia* 20)

Coming back to Woolf's description of childhood, it is important to note that that amidst the "several violent moments of being" (*MOB* 79), human beings stand out as "caricatures; comic" (*MOB* 79). As she explains, as a child people often seemed like caricatured characters from Dickens—"they were caricatures; they were very simple; they were immensely alive" (*MOB* 73)—, and some figures in her childhood imagination remain unchanged because they passed away while she was

still young: "I see them exactly as I saw them then" (*MOB* 73). According to her, this perception can also be applied to places: "I cannot see Kensington Gardens as I saw it as a child because I saw it only two days ago" (*MOB* 75). The interference of the present in her childish imagination sets them apart from the suspended synesthetic recollections of her childhood, highlighting how certain places are preserved in time through a child's memory. Talland House, therefore, remains an almost mythical place in Woolf's imagination, once again existing on its own. This sense of mythic suspension is further heightened as Woolf spent thirteen summers of her life at this house—a limited time that seems to shield it with a kind of "veil" shaping her childhood memories. In "Sketch," she describes this vividly:

> Talland House seemed to *suspend sound*, to let it sink down slowly, as if it were caught in a *blue gummy veil*. The rooks cawing is part of the waves breaking—one two, one, two—and the splash as the wave drew back and then it gathered again, and I lay there half awake, half asleep, drawing in such *ecstasy* as I cannot describe. (*MOB* 66, emphasis added)

This half-conscious memory—"half awake, half asleep," where once again recollections are only presented in outlines and fragmentary shapes—captures the intense emotions associated with Talland House, a place suspended in sensorial recollections and ecstasy (or "rapture," as Woolf would then change: "it was rapture rather than ecstasy" (*MOB* 66); "I am . . . the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture" (*MOB* 67)). In her reading of "Sketch," Cousineau writes that the merge of image and sound in this passage is essential, as "repetitions and contrasts, and the rhythmic phrasing, echoing the movement of the waves and leading to the crescendo of the last sentence, all create a sensuous medium that moves the reader close to the rapture that Woolf describes" (53). This rapture (made of sounds and images) is so intense that it transcends human relationships—"I could . . . write a great deal here not only about my mother and father but about uncles and aunts, cousins and friends. But I do not know how much of this, or what part of this, made me feel what I felt in the nursery at St Ives" (*MOB* 65). Juxtaposing these ecstatic recollections with the notion that "the life of a house is, also, a story of time. . . which often include[s] memories of houses . . . abandoned choices . . . [and] ghosts from the past" (Lee, *Life of Houses* xiii), we encounter the haunted house of St. Ives: a place that preserves, among its ghostly residents, the most genuine and raw idea of happiness.

Yet Talland House is more than just a repository of rapturous impressions and Virginia Woolf is not alone in this haunting space, as another important also resides in this space: her mother, Julia Stephen. Woolf writes that even though her mother died when she was thirteen, she could not describe her as easily as the other Dickensian "caricatures" or "complete people" (*MOB* 80) that she had described before: "the theory, though true of them, breaks down completely with her" (*MOB* 80). To Woolf, it is symbolic that her first memory is in her mother's lap, as Stephen was "central . . . the whole thing" (*MOB* 83); "the very centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood" (*MOB* 81); "the creator of

that crowded merry world which spun so gaily in the centre of [her] childhood" (*MOB* 84). Following her mother's death, the Stephens never returned to St. Ives[9], casting both Julia Stephen and in Talland House as a mythical place where the essence of childhood happiness and ecstasy remain suspended: "she was the whole thing . . . Talland House was full of her" (*MOB* 83).

Like a ghost haunting the living, the mythology surrounding Julia Stephen in Talland House seems to hover at the boundaries of life and death. Woolf explains that this is perhaps because throughout almost her whole life "the presence of [her] mother obsessed her, [as she] could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as [she] went about [her] day's doings" (*MOB* 80). This ghostly presence—an "invisible presence who after all play so important a part in every life" (*MOB* 80)—haunted Woolf until she was forty-four years old (*MOB* 81), when she *exorcises* it by writing *To The Lighthouse* (1927):

> It is perfectly true that [my mother] obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was fourty-four. Then one day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse*; in a great, apparently involuntary, rush. One thing burst into another. Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind, so that my lips seemed syllabling of their own accord as I walked. What blew the bubbles? Why then? I have no notion. But I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. (*MOB* 20)

The idea of exorcism—here illustrated by the act of ceasing to be obsessed by her mother by writing her novel—highlights a final yet essential question has been haunting the lines of this article: is haunting necessarily a bad thing, and are ghosts necessarily evil presences? When we think of the word "haunting," which is already embedded in its cursed characteristic of obsession, possession and even torment (as well as of Woolf's "exorcism" of her mother in her novel), the answer seems to be yes. As Ilona Bell (1986) explains, Woolf's feelings towards her mother and Victorian ideals, "oppression, hardship and grievance[,] . . . had disappeared, once [they] had been ex-pressed [sic], in the novel" (171), highlighting the assistance of this novel-exorcism. Similarly, in the introduction of *MOB* (1985), Schulkind highlights that in "Sketch" Woolf only writes about her mother with such perception and understanding because of the "cathartic experience of writing *To the Lighthouse*" (13).

Additionally, it is important to note here that while Woolf was writing "Sketch" in 1939, she was also reading Freud's work, as she describes in both this life writing piece and in her diary: "it was only the other day when I read Freud for the first time, that I discovered that this violently disturbing conflict of love and hate is a common feeling" (*MOB* 108); "began reading Freud last night; to enlarge the circumference, to give my brain wider scope, to make it objective; to get outside" (Woolf 248). Although these entries are dated December 1939 and Woolf's idea of exorcism was written around April, it is undeniable that the

ground-breaking ideas of psychoanalysis were already hovering her head, as she herself admits: "I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. An in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest" (*MOB* 81).

However, even if the idea of exorcism of Julia Stephen's ghost in her novel emphasizes the negative aspect of haunting, connecting Talland House with the idea of happiness melts the boundaries of this. Though inspired by another house[10], in her brief yet evocative short story "A Haunted House" (published in 1921), Woolf plays with the concept of ghost stories. Rather than malevolent spirits, ghosts in the story move through the house as they relive their past love and memories and the "narrative is configured via the hide-and-week played by the dead couple and the narrator" (Dede 2024, 312). In her hauntological reading of the story, Demet Karabulut Dede argues that the ghostly couple transforms the house into a heterotopic space, blending past, present, and future as "they and the house have become the same thing" (313). This challenges the idea of space by creating a locus of encounter that "serves as a way of resisting the rigid conceptualizations of spatio-temporality" (Dede 315), breaking with the notion of the ghost as a maleficent being that seeks to torment the living. This can be further connected to Bachelard's idea of "felicitous spaces": intimate dwellings that evoke feelings of comfort, nourishment, and nostalgia. Bachelard proposes a sort of "topophilia," this is, an investigation of spaces that "may be defended against adverse forces[:] the space we love . . . , [an] eulogized space" (xxxi), and the house haunted by memories, rather than a cursed place, becomes a wistful one.

The juxtaposing of felicitous spaces with exorcism, both present in the haunting of Talland House and the ghost of Julia Stephen portray how there is not, after all, a "good" or "bad" haunting. If then Talland House can be seen as felicitous space haunted by Woolf's idea of happiness at the same time that Julia Stephen haunts Woolf in an obsessive manner that she needs to exorcise her in her writing, once again "Sketch" breaks with fixed boundaries, here emphasized what *haunting* can mean. The idea of "hauntology," proposed by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, therefore emphasizes this idea: a portmanteau of "haunting" and "ontology," hauntology expresses the idea that *to be* means *to be haunted*. Ontology seeks to establish stable being by exorcising ghosts; however, in doing so, it paradoxically conjures them, as presence is always haunted by absence: "ontology is a conjuration" (Derrida 202). Rahimi further explores this by explaining that "all human experience is fundamentally haunted" (1) and a hauntological reading would not seek to exorcise, but rather to "recognize and address the endless ghosts that are created by the very act of human perception and cognition, and hence subjective experience" (1). He concludes: "hauntology does not ask, 'to be or not to be'; it claims instead the simultaneous playfulness of 'to be *and* not to be'" (4) and if we are successful in our hauntological reading, we "animate a text/subject through an outpouring of ghosts and other spectral entities from the otherwise silent depths of the text/psyche" (4).

In this article we have sought to highlight the spectral and haunting dimensions of "A Sketch of the Past," exploring how memory, loss, and space intertwine in Virginia Woolf's writing. We have examined how her sensory recollections, particularly those tied to Talland House and her mother, create an affective landscape where the past does not merely persist but overlays the present. Through a hauntological reading, we have developed a layered understanding of how Woolf's work engages with the echoes of memory and the presence of absence. As Dede notes, Woolf herself has become a spectral figure, lingering in our thoughts and continuing to shape literary studies: "meditation on spectrality and haunting in Woolf's literature is long overdue, both because Woolf has become a specter for us as she keeps affecting our thoughts and wandering in our works, and also because there are specters that recur in her literary corpus haunt it" (311-312). Woolf's meditations on loss and memory are not just thematic but spatial, shaping both her life writing and the way we, as readers, encounter her work.

Reflecting on her mother's death, Woolf writes that she felt some sort of "calm, sadness, and finality" in the stillness of that "beautiful blue spring morning" (*MOB* 84): her mother was dead, but that was not the end. The spectral presences, haunted houses, and lingering recollections in "Sketch" remind us that memory is never truly past—it haunts, it resurfaces, and it reshapes our present. In this way, Woolf's legacy continues to haunt us, inviting us to confront our own ghosts, our own sensory recollections, and the ways in which spaces continue to inhabit us long after we have left them.

Notes

1. Liz Stanley in her *Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (1995) proposes the slash to indicate the slide from biography to autobiography and vice versa and to suggest that these genres are not as separate as other theorists of the autobiography seemed to imply.
2. "A Sketch of the Past" is the longest of the pieces in *Moments of Being*, a collection of Virginia Woolf's life writing published posthumously by Jeanne Schulkind first published in 1976. We are using the second edition (1985) of this book, with its revised transcription.
3. At the time, Virginia Woolf was working on *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940), about the English painter and art critic Roger Fry (1866-1934). As she explains in "Sketch," writing her memories was also a way of taking her mind off the book: "as it happens I am sick of writing Roger's life, perhaps I will spend two or three mornings making a sketch" (*MOB* 64).
4. For more details on this subject, see Barbara Lounsberry's three-volume collection *Virginia Woolf and the diaries she read*, published respectively in 2014, 2016, and 2018.
5. Although not the usual long and precise revision that Woolf would usually submit her novels, in Gabriela Zetehaku's visit to the British Library on August 8, 2024, she had the opportunity to see the manuscript of "Sketch" and found the typewritten text with pencil or pen corrections, including omissions signalized by strikethroughs, change of words and sometimes even whole sentences or ideas to include and/or modify.

6. We are using a Brazilian Portuguese translation of this book by Brigitte Hervot and Sandra Ferreira. All quotes were loosely translated by us. "As cartas são textos híbridos e rebeldes a quaisquer identificações genéricas. Gênero literário indefinível, flutuam entre categorias vagas" (11); "o epistolar torna-se a forma livre por excelência: *o antigênero*, rebelde" (50); "correspondência, espaço limítrofe – ao mesmo tempo dentro e fora do literário" (53).
7. Our translation. Original (in Brazilian Portuguese): "Tenho dito que *Becos da memória* é uma criação que pode ser lida como ficções da memória. E, como a memória esquece, surge a necessidade de invenção" (10); "Também já afirmei que invento sim e sem o menor pudor. As histórias são inventadas, mesmo as reais, quando são contadas. Entre o acontecimento e a narração do fato, há um espaço em profundidade, é ali que explode a invenção. Nesse sentido venho afirmando: nada que está narrado em *Becos da memória* é verdade, nada que está narrado em *Becos da memória* é mentira" (11).
8. Thirteen in total: one in St Ives, Cornwall (Talland House); nine in London and suburbs; and three country retreats in East Sussex.
9. This was the last time the Stephens visited St. Ives together as a family, with Woolf's father included. Years later, Woolf returns with her siblings to revisit their childhood home. She writes about it in her early journals (Cornwall diary, *A Passionate Apprentice*).
10. In his autobiography, Virginia Woolf's husband Leonard Woolf writes that "A Haunted House" (1921) was based on Asheham House, the Woolfs' country retreat in Sussex from 1912 to 1919: "It was Asham and its ghostly footsteps and whisperings which gave Virginia the idea for *A Haunted House*, and I can immediately see, hear, and smell the house when I read the opening words" (57).

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