The Vastness of Small Spaces: Self-Portraits of the Artist as a Child Enclosed

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THE VASTNESS OF SMALL SPACES:
SELF-PORTRAITS OF THE ARTIST AS A CHILD ENCLOSED

by

MATTHEW J. BURGESS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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2014
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

THE VASTNESS OF SMALL SPACES:
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by

Matthew J. Burgess

Advisor: Professor Nancy K. Miller

A tent of bed sheets, a furniture fort, a corner of the closet surrounded by chosen objects—the child finds or fashions these spaces and within them daydreaming begins. What do small spaces signify for the child, and why do scenes of enclosure emerge in autobiographical self-portraits of the artist? Sigmund Freud’s theory that the literary vocation can be traced to childhood experiences is at the heart of this project, especially his observation that “the child at play behaves like a writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, re-arranges the things of this world in a new way.” Gaston Bachelard’s exploration of space and poetic reverie is also foundational, and I situate Freud’s “child at play” within Bachelard’s spatial topography in order to examine the ways in which enclosures facilitate the discovery and development of the child’s creative capacity. The paradoxical relation between smallness and vastness is a central theme in this dissertation; as the child imagines a world of her own within the small space, spatial constraints dissolve or vanish.

My first chapters consider representations of childhood space in the work of two British memoirists at midcentury, Virginia Woolf and Denton Welch, and in the third chapter, I analyze lyric self-portraits by three American poets of the postwar period:
Frank O’Hara, Anne Sexton, and Robert Duncan. Others have suggested that childhood enclosures are symbolic of “womb” or “cave,” but these interpretations fail to capture the complexity of meanings at play within these scenes. I argue that this recurring figure is less about a lost union with the maternal body or some atavistic memory of the beginning of history; rather, for the author tracing the origins of her creative vocation to childhood, the small space is where the artist is born.
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Rising in the Mind: A Preface

For nothing was simply one thing.
–Virginia Woolf, To The Lighthouse

I could locate the earliest stirrings of this project at various points on a timeline. I might recount the making of my own childhood spaces—there I am, five years old, tucking a sheet under a stack of books to make a hideout in the bedroom I shared with my older brother—but this is not my memoir. This dissertation examines scenes of childhood enclosure in mid-twentieth century self-portraits of the artist, and I remember the passage that sparked my interest in these small spaces. With a glance at my undergraduate transcript, I can reconstruct a specificity that may be, in part, fictitious: a twenty-one year-old Matthew Burgess, shoulder-length hair, earnest and closeted, reading Vladimir Nabokov’s Speak, Memory in a leafy alcove at the University of Virginia: “It was the primordial cave (and not what the Freudian mystics might suppose), that lay behind the games I played when I was four. A big cretonne-covered divan, white with black trefoils, in one of the drawing rooms at Vyra rises in my mind, like some massive product of a geological upheaval before the beginning of history” (22-23). I had a vague notion of what “the Freudian mystics might suppose” and the details of the furnishings were lost on me, but I was dazzled by Nabokov’s language and transported by his descriptions. He continues:

With the help of some grown-up person, who would use first both hands and then a powerful leg, the divan would be moved several inches from the wall, as to form a narrow passage which I would be further helped to roof snugly with the divan’s
bolsters and close up at the ends with a couple of its cushions. I then had the fantastic pleasure of creeping through that pitch-dark tunnel, where I lingered a little to listen to the singing in my ears—that lonesome vibration so familiar to boys in dusty hiding places, and then—in a burst of delicious panic, on rapidly thudding hands and knees I would reach the tunnel’s far end, push its cushion away, and be welcomed by a mesh of sunshine on the parquet under the canework of a Viennese chair and two gamesome flies settling by turns. A dreamier and more delicate sensation was provided by another cave game, when upon awakening in the early morning I made a tent of my bedclothes and let my imagination play in a thousand dim ways with shadowy snowslides of linens and with the faint light that seemed to penetrate my penumbral covert from some immense distance, where I fancied that strange, pale animals roamed in a landscape of lakes. (23-24)

This passage offered the double-thrill of visiting a distant Russia while simultaneously transporting me to my childhood home in California. “That lonesome vibration so familiar to boys in dusty hiding places” struck a chord—as a boy I believed I could hear the planet spinning—and the image of a bed transforming into a mountain landscape reminded me of my own early reveries. What impressed me, too, was the recognition that something so small and seemingly insignificant could be represented in the text, and I was beginning to identify what I was attracted to: a lyrical voice, the detailing of the personal and the particular, and autobiography. All of the works in this dissertation share aspects of this aesthetic.
More than a decade after my first encounter with Nabokov’s cave games, I encountered a similar passage in Nancy K. Miller’s graduate seminar, “Experimental Selves.” In “A Sketch of the Past,” Virginia Woolf casts even further back into her earliest memories of infancy, and she arrives at what “seems to be my first memory…It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed at the nursery at St. Ives” (Moments 64). She gives a rapturous account of listening to the waves behind a yellow curtain and hearing the “acorn of the blind” drawing back and forth across the floor. In her attempt to capture the intensity of this sensation (“which is even at this moment very strong in me”), Woolf employs the following metaphor: “the feeling, as I describe it sometimes to myself, of lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow” (65). The oddness of the grape image pricked me, and in a response for class I wrote: “How to account for this line? To begin with, it establishes an intimacy with the reader. It is a curious offering, a personal analogy—‘as I describe it sometimes to myself’—which is presumably part of an ongoing inner dialogue. And it is strange: suddenly we’re transported from the impressionistic realm of sense perception into a private flight of imagination, as if we’ve stepped aside from a Renoir to confront a Magritte. We are invited to see through the eyes of an infant. Miniaturized and suspended, we’re transported into a womb with a view.” The unfortunate pun suggests that by then I had adopted the lens of the “Freudian mystics,” and the two autobiographies, Nabokov’s and Woolf’s, jostled in my mind. Locating Nabokov’s book on the shelf—I had carried the same copy from college to California and back again to New York—I considered the connection. Several questions emerged: why does Nabokov anticipate, and preemptively dismiss, the “Freudian mystics,” and what does he mean by the primordial cave? Presumably, a Freudian
reading would draw a connection between the spatial enclosure and the mother’s body, e.g. the small spaces are “womb-like,” and the pleasure the boy experiences within them might indicate a longing for a maternal space. Instead, Nabokov asserts, “It was the primordial cave…that lay behind the games I played when I was four,” and he compares the furniture to “some massive product of geological upheaval before the beginning of history.” By suggesting a return to the origins of mankind, he attributes a different significance that seems as “mystical” as the Freudian reading. The emergence from the dark tunnel into the bright room, and the gradual passage from sleeping to waking inside a “penumbral covert”: is the four year-old boy reenacting his own birth, or he is reenacting the “birth of man”?

In another passage, Woolf speculates about the child’s “curious focus” and sense of spatial dimension: “How large for instance was the space beneath the nursery table! I see it still as a great black space with the table-cloth hanging down in folds on the outskirts in the distance; and myself roaming about there, and meeting Nessa…Then we roamed off again into that vast space” (78). Woolf helped me to identify a paradox central to this dissertation: why does the small space elicit a sensation of vastness? In the child’s imagination, Nabokov’s divan transforms into a massive geological event, and the tent of blankets becomes an immense mountain landscape. For Woolf, to be englobed inside a grape is to feel ecstatically released into sight and sound, and the space under the nursery table seems boundless. If Nabokov shaped my preliminary questions, Woolf’s childhood memories presented further points of inquiry. I remained unconvinced by the seeming alternatives of womb or cave; neither interpretation satisfied my sense that more
was “at play” in these scenes. Meanwhile, I began to find the figure of the childhood enclosure in more and more self-portraits of the artist.

While considering topics for my dissertation—all of which involved autobiography and childhood—a series of serendipitous events convinced me to pursue this investigation of small spaces. Claudia Zoe Bedrick, the publisher of Enchanted Lion Books, asked if I would be interested in writing a book about E. E. Cummings. In my research, I discovered that Edward Estlin Cummings had spent many boyhood hours in a tree house built for him by his father. He drew pictures and wrote poems in this snug space, and his father even installed a stove so he could stay warm on winter days. These details of the poet’s childhood stood out, as I had been invited once into the same apartment that Cummings’ had called home at Patchin Place in New York City, a tiny flat on a gated cul-de-sac in Greenwich Village. I remembered the narrow wooden stairs and the windows of his studio opening to trees. Cummings had lived there for almost forty years, making paintings and writing poems until the end of his life. Of this home, he wrote: “The topfloorback room…meant Safety & Peace & the truth of Dreaming & the bliss of Work” (Selected Letters 195). In a sense, this twentieth century poet had recreated his childhood tree house in Cambridge, Massachusetts into his home and studio in the middle of New York City. This is the same poet who had titled the memoir of his imprisonment during World War I The Enormous Room, and while reading Cummings’ six nonlectures, I came across the following reminiscence: “as a very young child, I first encountered that mystery who is Nature; here my enormous smallness entered her Illimitable being” (Six Nonlectures 32; emphasis mine). Once again, the link between spatial enclosure and artistic vocation—and between smallness and vastness—had
surfaced, and I became increasingly convinced that my topic warranted further consideration. (The children’s book, titled *Enormous Smallness: The Story of E.E. Cummings*, is due to be released in the spring of 2015, and I see it as the children’s book companion to this dissertation.)

Another coincidence occurred during the earliest phase of my prospectus. While teaching a composition course at Brooklyn College in February 2011, I assigned a narrative essay based on a childhood memory. At the same moment that I was deciding among several topics for this dissertation, a student, Adela Winter, submitted an essay titled “Autobiography of The Abstract-Surrealist as a 10-year-old.” In the first paragraph, she recalls wanting to become an artist “as early as three or four,” but as she grew older, “the biggest opposition” came from her father, who once blurted, “All artists are garbage!” Adela describes sneaking downstairs at night to draw (“I would have to wait to have the kitchen all of myself”) and she recounts one of her most memorable subjects. “I can remember…being fascinated by the genie bottle on *I Dream of Jeannie*. I would spend hours designing my own version of the inside and outside of the bottle. I would make the bottle more detailed and jeweled. The inside of the bottle had a large round couch. I would add beautiful pillows, and color the walls. I would draw it over and over.” The one student in the class who was a self-identified artist (and twenty years older than her classmates) remembered, at age ten, drawing and redrawing this imaginary enclosure. Of all the possible images to select when tracing her creative calling back to childhood, Adela had focused on a private, habitable bottle. Although an imagined space rather than a physical one, it was another spatial enclosure linked to the artistic vocation, and this alerted me to another iteration of the small space that recurs in this dissertation: if it is
difficult to locate a private space in the immediate environment, the small space may be
designed in the mind. Adela’s genie bottle had taken its place beside Nabokov’s cave
games, Woolf’s nursery table, and Cummings’ tree house. The questions motivating my
research were coming into focus.
Introduction: A Shelter for Daydreaming

Should we not look for the first traces of imaginative activity as early as in childhood? The child’s best-loved and most intense occupation is with his play or games. Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, re-arranges the things of this world in a new way which pleases him? It would be wrong to think he does not take that world seriously; on the contrary, he takes his play very seriously and expends large amounts of emotion on it…The creative writer does the same as the child at play.

– Sigmund Freud, “The Creative Writer and Daydreaming” (1907)

A tent of bed sheets, a furniture fort, a corner of the closet surrounded by chosen objects—the child finds or fashions these spaces and within them daydreaming begins. In the play of the imagination, what is small becomes vast: linens transform into snowy landscapes of mountains and lakes, and the space under the table seems a shadowy, limitless universe. What do small spaces signify for the child, and why do scenes of childhood enclosure emerge in autobiographical self-portraits of the artist? In this dissertation, I address these questions with “a poetics of small spaces.” Sigmund Freud’s notion that the literary vocation can be traced back to childhood experiences is at the heart of this project, especially his observation that “the child at play behaves like a writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, re-arranges the things of this world in a new way” (Freud Reader 437) Gaston Bachelard’s exploration of space and poetic reverie is also foundational, and in the chapters that follow, I situate Freud’s “child at play” within the spatial dimension in order to examine the ways in which these childhood enclosures facilitate the discovery and development of the child’s creative capacity. Bachelard invents the term “topo-analysis” to describe his method in The Poetics of Space, and he devotes much of his study to an examination of the house as “our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word” (4). Describing the ways in which
this formative space benefits its inhabitants, Bachelard explains: “the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. …Without it, man would be a dispersed being” (6-7). I argue that “small spaces” serve a similar salutary function for the child playing and dreaming within them.

Regardless of whether the remembered childhood home is nurturing or impinging, the spatial enclosure functions as a kind of surrogate space—a small “house” for the developing self. The spatial constraints offer real or imaginary protection, a certain degree of privacy, and a sensation of psychic coherence: the child is snugly contained within the enclosure. Indeed, the small space is where the child first experiences her creative solitude. The world contracts to a more hospitable size, and she feels an empowerment, a sudden, unexpected agency. Within this within, the child begins to dream a world of her own, and spatial constraints fall away or vanish. “When he would dream in his solitude, the child knew an existence without bounds,” Bachelard writes. “His reverie was not simply a reverie of escape. It was a reverie of flight” (Poetics of Reverie 100). Moreover, this pleasure, this serious play, this commerce with the vast is what the artist seeks to repeat in answering the call of the artistic vocation. The competing interpretations—the enclosure as either “womb” or “cave”—fail to capture the complexity of meanings at play within these scenes, and while the purpose of this project is expand the possibilities, I contend that these scenes of enclosure are less about a lost union with the maternal body or some atavistic memory of the beginning of history; rather, for the autobiographer tracing the origins of her creative vocation to childhood, the small space is where the artist was born.
The first chapter, titled “A Small Space of One’s Own,” examines representations of childhood enclosure in Virginia Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past.” Woolf began this belated autobiographical project in April 1939, citing age as her primary motivation. (She was fifty-seven years old.) A few months earlier, Woolf had met Sigmund Freud in Hampstead, England, and I propose a link between this meeting and the memoir. Indeed, Woolf’s “Sketch” can be read as a kind of auto-analysis, less a narrative presentation of past events as a transcript of the search itself. One of her most notable stylistic innovations suggests Freud’s influence: “I think I have discovered a possible form for these notes. That is, to make them include the present… It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast” (74). Woolf implicitly acknowledges the provisional and the relational nature of life writing, and this distinction between the autobiographer (the I-Now) and the child self encountered in the autobiographical act (the I-Then) is important to my analysis. Furthermore, the experimental quality of the memoir and its status as an unfinished “sketch” rather than a polished portrait leave the text in an indeterminate state of emergence, and the reader is implicitly invited to participate in the interpretation of meaning.

“Sketch” opens with vivid reminiscences of two small spaces: the mother’s lap and the child’s bed in the nursery. Woolf delves into a series of impressions that arise when meditating on these moments, and ultimately her mother is depicted “as the whole thing” (83). She is at the beginning of all memory, represented spatially and temporally as the origin—“in the very center…from the very first.” The meaning of a particular enclosure depends on the child’s stage of development: Woolf’s lap memory seems to signal a pre-Oedipal union with the mother, whereas the memory of the bed in the
nursery suggests an increasing recognition of her separateness. It is this memory that
Woolf describes as “the most important of all,” and she recalls feeling “the purest ecstasy
I can conceive” (65). In her attempt to capture this sensation, Woolf includes two
metaphors, both involving spatial enclosures: the first, previously mentioned, of lying
inside a grape, and the second of a “globular, semi-transparent…picture of curved
petals.” The third enclosure—the space under the nursery table—signals an even further
degree of remove from the mother, and it is experienced as vast, I argue, because it
triggers an inward turn into a spacious, limitless interiority.

The deaths of Woolf’s mother when she was thirteen, and two years later, of her
half-sister Stella Duckworth, put an abrupt end to the “private adventuring” that took
place within the family structure. Virginia’s father replaced the mother as the new center
of the household, and in their effort to survive this shift, Virginia and Nessa formed “a
close conspiracy” in their “own private nucleus” (143). The language of enclosure is
revealing, as it introduces another function of the small space as a refuge from an external
environment that is threatening. In other words, if the environment is sufficiently
nurturing, the small space can be a snug world enclosed within the larger domestic
sphere, one in which the child experiences pleasure and contentment. But if the
environment is impinging, the small space takes on the quality of a necessary refuge or
safe haven. Many of the spaces I describe belong to the latter category: the small space is
the child’s attempt to establish some shelter for daydreaming.

A passage from Woolf’s diary provides a clue to the small-yet-vast space under
the nursery table. Leonard and Virginia Woolf had fled the bombing of London and
sought refuge in the country while she worked on her biography of Roger Fry. In an entry
dated Monday, May 13th, 1940, Woolf describes the contrast between the news of the Battle of Waterloo and her writing life. She notes that Leonard had stored sufficient gasoline in the garage for the couple to commit suicide should Hitler win, yet “we go on. It’s the vastness, and the smallness, that makes this possible. So intense are my feelings…yet the circumference (the war) seems to make a hoop round them” (Writer’s Diary 319). I was intrigued to discover “vastness” and “smallness” repeated here, yet the precise link was perplexing: what does Woolf associate with smallness, and what does she associate with vastness? I initially assumed that smallness corresponded to her personal feelings about her work, and that vastness corresponded to the larger external “reality” of the war. But for Woolf, smallness and vastness are not in opposition each other—they are connected. The vastness of the small space has little to do with physical dimensionality; rather, it describes the individual’s absorption in the imaginative realm, the expansion of the interior life or what Bachelard terms “intimate immensity” (193). The war threatens to render the artist’s feelings about her work meaningless, but through the inner life of the mind she can escape this constraining “hoop” into vastness.

In the conclusion of this chapter, I refer to “A Room of One’s Own” and compare the small space in childhood to the artist’s studio. Woolf famously makes the case that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Room 6), thereby arguing that the development of the artist has a spatial component. This resonates with my argument in several ways: the child “at play” in the small space is engaged in a similar activity as the adult-artist “at work” in her studio. The spatial constraints facilitate an inward movement, thus activating an imaginative interiority. Given this parallel, it is not surprising that the adult-artist recollecting childhood might trace the origins of her
creativity to a small space. There, the I-Then discovered the powers of her imagination, and here, the I-Now, remembers. As Freud writes, “a piece of creative writing, like a daydream, is a continuation of, and a substitute for, what was once the play of childhood” (Reader 442).

In “Out of the Dream Closet,” I examine the autobiographical writing of another British midcentury memoirist, Denton Welch. In an unfinished autobiography titled “I Can Remember,” Welch recalls small spaces from his childhood home in Shanghai such as “the tiny room which opened off my bedroom. I would sit in this small cupboard and polish my things by the hour, and as I polished my thoughts would flow easily and I would have strange ideas about the past” (Fragments 62). The origins of the adult-autobiographer are glimpsed in this vignette: the boy who engages in imaginative, past-pitched reverie in this “cupboard” grows into the man who composes autobiographical stories within his small room. In A Voice Through a Cloud, Welch’s final book which was left unfinished at his bedside when he died at age thirty-three, he remembers his sense of his own aesthetic vocation following the bicycle accident that nearly killed him: “I felt that somewhere inside me was so much power—if only I could dig a channel down which it could pour” (84). But Denton was stuck in hospitals and convalescent homes, and his journey throughout the book is largely about finding a space of his own where he can reestablish some independence and resume his creative vocation. Virginia Woolf’s correlation between the scarcity of women artists throughout history with the absence of a “room of one’s own” suggests that order to channel one’s aesthetic potential, one needs—among other things—a protective, private space in which to work: a small space wherein the artist can “dig a channel down” to an interior “power.”
The majority of my textual analysis focuses on three autobiographical novels that document Welch’s adolescence, and I argue that these books constitute a serial Künstlerroman. Unlike prototypical models of the genre such as James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* wherein the protagonists leave home to pursue their vocation, the fulfillment of Welch’s calling is contingent upon reestablishing a protective and private domesticity. His journey more closely resembles Woolf’s model in “A Room of One’s Own” insofar as the cultivation of his gift does not involve a Romantic departure into the Great Unknown, but rather his search for a more practical—and spatial—arrangement: four walls, a lock on the door, and a certain financial independence. Between the snug enclosures he recalls in his descriptions of early childhood and the small rooms where he lived and wrote his books, Welch spent his adolescence in a restless search for places where he could feel, if briefly, at home; that is, safe to daydream, to play, and to explore his inner world without impingement. I argue that the spatial enclosures that Welch finds, fashions, or imagines in these works resemble “holding environments.”

D.W. Winnicott is known for highlighting the significance of the environment in the development of the individual from a state of complete dependence on and identification with the mother, to growing degrees of independence and autonomy. One of his important contributions to object-relations theory is the understanding of how a child uses objects and spaces to negotiate this transition. Winnicott compares the relationship between the mother and the child with the analyst and the client; if the individual does not experience a sufficiently reliable space in which he can play and experience the spontaneous gestures of the True Self, he may comply with the demands
of his environment through the creation of a False Self. The spatial constraints—and the privacy therein—permit him a safe space to daydream and to drop the compliant position. Thus, these enclosures are “transitional spaces” that allow Welch to negotiate the difficult transition from the play of childhood to the creative work of the artist.

The three poems that I examine in “Lyric Self-Portraits of the Artist: Childhood Spaces of Frank O’Hara, Anne Sexton, and Robert Duncan” are similar to the autobiographical texts of Virginia Woolf and Denton Welch in that childhood spaces can be linked to the artistic vocation, yet these self-portraits are compressed into comparatively brief poems. I pay particular attention to the ways in which their formal concision juxtaposes the I-Now with the I-Then, and I consider the different trajectories that each poet charts from the child in the small space to the poem’s speaker recollecting the past. In “Autobiographia Literaria,” O’Hara condenses his narrative into four brief quatrains. He is a boy playing by himself in “a / corner of the schoolyard” in the opening stanza, and by the poem’s conclusion, the speaker jubilantly announces: “And here I am, the / center of all beauty! / writing these poems! / Imagine!” (11). For the child who doesn’t fit in, or who doesn’t wish to, the corner of the schoolyard suggests an attempt to locate privacy along a perimeter: a small space for the self. This move from “corner to center” mimics the poet’s traversal from a physical space in which he feels alienated into an interior, imaginative realm within which the author, the one “writing these poems,” is ecstatically centered in his own subjectivity. The stark contrast between the melancholic and maladapted I-Then with the triumphant I-Now may be O’Hara’s way of sending up the genre (the title of the poem is a spoof of Coleridge’s book-length work), yet the poignancy of the poem is not lost in the ironic pose.
Whereas the boy in O’Hara’s poem exiles himself to a corner of the schoolyard, the girl in Sexton’s “Those Times…” is exiled within the family home. “I was locked in my room all day behind a gate, / a prison cell” (118). Denied the freedom of movement, the child retreats into the smaller enclosure of the closet. Similar to the space under the table in Woolf’s night nursery, the spatial constriction and the darkness within the closet awaken the child’s imagination. Here, the agency in the poem shifts from passive to active: “I grew into it like a root / and yet I planned such plans of flight” (120). In the shelter of this small space, the I-Then begins to intuit her creative vocation, and the future becomes imaginable as something one might design: “I planned my growth and my womanhood / as one choreographs a dance” (120). In the final stanzas, Sexton names her mother as the perpetrator of these injustices; she is the one “came to force me to undress…I was spread out daily / and examined for flaws” (120-121). Sexton juxtaposes the I-Then with the I-Now and draws a connection between the childhood trauma and the artistic development. The girl tries to protect her heart by stuffing it into a shoe box—another image of enclosure—but the I-Now inherits a hole nonetheless, an absence that is, paradoxically, the source of her poetic gift: “all that would remain / from the year I was six / was a small hole in my heart, a deaf spot, / so that I might hear / the unsaid more clearly” (121). So the bedroom is a prison, but the closet is the space where Sexton discovers and develops a liberating subjectivity. While O’Hara moves from “corner” to “center” in his poem, Sexton leaves the silence of the closet and tells her family secrets in bold, confessional poems: “my life, in the end, / would run over my mother’s like a truck” (121). The girl was born of her mother, but Anne Sexton, the poet, may have been conceived in that closet.
In “Childhood Retreat,” Robert Duncan writes of another childhood hideout in the “perilous boughs” of a tree (Ground Work 49). The boy climbs to experience the actual view it affords (“that / widening of the world”) but he also seeks the interior expansion that is activated in this space—the widening of his inner world. As in “Autobiographia Literaria” and “Those Times…”, Duncan positions the I-Now and I-Then in relation, but he inverts a pattern in O’Hara and Sexton’s poems. Rather than charting the growth of a lonely or victimized child into the central, empowered position of the adult poet, Duncan elevates his child self into a position that is literally and figuratively “above” the recollecting adult. In the conclusion of the poem, the boy is in the treetops and the grown poet is beneath him:

the boy I was
calls out to me
here to the man where I am  “Look!
I’ve been where you
most fear to be.” (49)

This sudden apostrophe in the final lines is notably similar to O’Hara’s “and here I am!... Imagine!” but instead of the adult speaker addressing the reader, the child addresses the grown poet. In these final stanzas, past and present blur, spatial distances close, and the I-Then directly addresses the I-Now. While I argue that the small space is analogous to the artist’s studio in the first two chapters, here I propose a connection between the childhood enclosure and the lyric poem. Both the small space and the poem are miniature worlds that are spatially compressed and charged with meaning, and under certain conditions, this concision triggers the sensation of expansion. The child begins to experience agency in this space, and within these boundaries, he has imaginative control. The poet has
similar dominion over the lyric poem; each image, syllable and line break is subject to her design. The lyric poem, Helen Vendler explains, gives the reader access to “the innermost chamber” of the poet’s mind. (xl) The paradox is that the poem, however personal, “is a script for performance by its reader. It is…the most intimate of genres, constructing a twinship between writer and reader” (xl). What does this reveal about the autobiographical self-portrait in which the solitary child is figured within a small space? The representation of the child enclosed may constitute a response to the child’s wish to be joined by a sympathetic presence within a space of his own creation.

In her article “The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir” Nancy K. Miller explains that “in autobiography the relational is not optional. Autobiography’s story is about the web of entanglement in which we find ourselves” (544). While examining the ways in which the artist-autobiographers remember—and frame—their child selves within spatial enclosures, I contend that the textual encounters between the I-Now and the I-Then are further complicated by the presence of the reader, which Miller identifies as “the autobiographer’s most necessary other” (545). These scenes of the child playing, hiding, or daydreaming in the small space possess a resonance both for the artist-autobiographer as well as for the reader. We become “the guest invited in, the unknown, self-selected other whose response matters” (545). For example, in Woolf’s description of her “most important” childhood memory, she writes: “I could spend hours trying to write that as it should be written, in order to give the feeling which is even at this moment very strong in me” (65). Here the autobiographer acknowledges the presence of the reader; she wants to “give the feeling.” Winnicott, in his famous paper “On the capacity to be alone,” explains that child’s ability to be solitary
and to enjoy this solitude, is actually based on a paradox: “it is the experience of being alone while someone else is present” (qtd. in Abram 32). In these self-portraits of the artist, the autobiographer revisits the child in scenes of enclosure, and the reader is also invited into these small spaces. The “presence” of the reader may increase the autobiographer’s pleasure by lending our attention to reminiscences she enjoys recalling, but within this site of encounter between I-Now and I-Then, another relation is figured between child, author, and reader. In some cases, representations of childhood enclosure may constitute a retrospective attempt to join the child in the small space, and if we listen, as Duncan listens to the boy in the treetops, or as Sexton puts an ear to the hole in her heart that speaks, the child may have something to tell us.
Chapter I: A Small Space of One’s Own: Virginia Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past”

All the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being wants them to remain so. He knows instinctively that this space identified with his solitude is creative...

– Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space (1958)

In the opening pages of “A Sketch of the Past,” Virginia Woolf describes three small spaces from her early childhood: the mother’s lap, the child’s bed, and the “vast space” under the nursery table. While these scenes often signal a longing for the maternal body, they also serve as originary moments in the narrative of artistic development. Two interrelated questions help to illuminate the meanings of these spaces: what is the child’s experience within them, and what do these scenes represent for the artist-autobiographer recollecting her past? As I explore the enclosure as a site of artistic self-discovery, I pay particular attention to the “great black space” beneath the nursery table and the paradoxical relationship between smallness and vastness. I demonstrate the significance of this small-yet-vast space by tracing its correspondence to two metaphorical enclosures in “Sketch”: the “great hall” of childhood and the “private nucleus” of adolescence. Finally, I argue that the childhood enclosure is analogous to both the artist’s work and to the artist’s studio; in and within these spaces, the writer creates a world of her own.

I. Regarding a Framed “Sketch”

Before turning to Woolf’s earliest memories, I want to address the ways in which the framing of the memoir and its status as an unfinished “sketch” influence my analysis of the various childhood enclosures. The opening paragraph begins with a diaristic note:
“Two days ago—Sunday 16th April 1939 to be precise—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—witness the case of Lady Strachey” (64). In this offhand way, Woolf identifies her sister as the coaxter of the narrative, and by extension a witness and authenticator of the text. Age and the threat of loss of memory are suggested as a primary motivation for writing. The year immediately casts its shadow, and soon the war enters the narrative frame. Despite the casual tone of these opening sentences, a certain anxiety is evident, and Woolf proceeds by deemphasizing the ambition of the project: “As it happens that I am sick of writing Roger’s life, perhaps I will spend two or three mornings making a sketch.” From the outset, the text is treated as a respite from a more demanding project, a “sketch” that may or may not come to fruition. Woolf is turning from a biography set for publication to an autobiographical experiment, yet she also seems to be girding herself for the task at hand. By relinquishing any claims to its success or even completion, she downplays the undertaking.

On the other hand, Woolf stages her authority in this opening paragraph: “There are several difficulties. In the first place, the enormous number of things I can remember; in the second, the number of different ways in which memoirs can be written. As a great memoir reader, I know many different ways” (64). Thus, even though this is only a sketch, Woolf has countless memories from which to draw, and she proclaims to know the genre well. She was not only a voracious reader of memoir, she also experimented with autobiographical writing throughout her life.¹ From her juvenile writings in the

¹ In her biography of Woolf, Hermione Lee explains: “Her intention to use the diaries for an autobiography was curtailed by her death. And the piecemeal history of her posthumous publications has meant that, until recently, her autobiographical writings—some of her finest work—are not as well known as her novels, her diaries, and her letters. But she does write several
Stephen children’s collaborative newspaper *Hyde Park Gate News* (Lee 33) to her numerous contributions to Bloomsbury’s Memoir Club, Woolf was familiar with the attractions—and mortifications—of self-referential writing. She was dissatisfied with the crucial omissions in all forms of life-writing (the “inner life” and “sex” among them), and she thought deeply about how to overcome Victorian inhibitions in order to expand the genre. According to biographer Hermione Lee, “the inhibitions and censorships of women’s life-writing is [sic] one of her most urgent subjects…She wants to find new forms for ‘women’s as yet unnarrated lives’” (13).² Woolf was intermittently tempted toward revelation in her own writing, but she also experienced the “perpetual fear of egotistical self-exposure” (17). When she ventured into taboo topics in one of her contributions to the Memoir Club, the sting of her friends’ seeming response was keenly felt, and she chastises herself in her diary: “‘What possessed me to lay bare my soul!’” (qtd. in Lee 17).

This opening paragraph of “Sketch” is a glimpse into the mind of an autobiographer beginning a belated text. Part disclaimer and part pep-talk, she undercuts the seriousness of the undertaking while simultaneously declaring that she possesses the necessary tools—mnemonic and intellectual—to proceed. Woolf then sweeps aside various considerations about form (*the many ways*) and content (*the many memories*):

“But if I begin to go through them and to analyse them and their merits and faults, the mornings—I cannot take more than two or three at most—will be gone” (64). The scarcity of time is reiterated, and the reader can gather the reasons: because of the

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² Hermione Lee writes that Woolf “is always writing to her friends urging them to write their life-stories. She wants them to fill a gap: ‘Very few women have yet written truthful autobiographies. It is my favourite form of reading’” (13).
biography of Roger Fry, because of the imminence of old age, because of the impending war. Perhaps “a sketch” is all Woolf has time for, but one senses, too, that she is navigating the internal censors that have prevented a substantial autobiographical project thus far. Her youth is strewn with torments, and in these beginning sentences, Woolf seems to be steeling herself—and soothing herself—in preparation for the journey. *In the face of loss and death, I will make a sketch.* “So without stopping to choose my way, in the sure and certain knowledge that it will find itself—or if not it will not matter—I begin: the first memory” (64). The reader notes the encouraging self-assurance—as well as the fatalistic aside. This final sentence of the first paragraph reads like a deep breath before taking the mnemonic plunge.

In addition to Vanessa’s encouragement, her desire for “a holiday” from her biography of Roger Fry, and her sense that time was limited, something else may have inspired Woolf to begin her autobiography in this particular way. In January 1939, Virginia Woolf met Sigmund Freud in Hampstead, England. “He was old and ill, and had been got out of Vienna just in time. They talked about Hitler, and he gave her a narcissus. A few months later she began to read him at last” (Lee 710).³ This encounter is an extraordinary moment in cultural history: the meeting of two modernist visionaries during the beginnings of World War II. It is tempting to read Freud’s gift of the narcissus as prescription or permission, a coded encouragement of Woolf’s imminent self-exploration. Lee describes Woolf’s various responses to Freudian theory while asserting

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³ Woolf distrusted the reductive tendency of Freudian theory, the way it seems to diminishes the individual to drives and instincts.
that what she read “in this first part of the war affected her profoundly” (710). Did Woolf’s reading of Freud motivate her to begin “A Sketch of the Past”? Lee writes:

She had always liked the idea of being hidden, of escaping self-consciousness through impersonality. But this had always clashed with her desire for recognition and her fascination with her self—or selves. Now, her outsider’s campaign for anonymity and obscurity was thrown into violent confusion…as a new reader of Freud she was thrust dramatically towards the kind of auto-analysis she had always feared and resisted. (710)

Though unstated in the opening paragraph of “Sketch,” Woolf’s actual and textual encounters with Freud likely influenced the explicitly self-referential writing she had previously “feared and resisted” yet also apparently desired.

Freud’s theories might have suggested certain stylistic approaches as well. With its free-associative quality and lack of a strict narrative coherence, much of “Sketch” reads like auto-analysis. The text is often conversational and full of rhetorical questions, and the act of writing tends to yield revelations (i.e. “But now that for the first time I have written it down, I realise something that I have never realised before” (71)). Woolf focuses on specific memories (however ambiguous or indeterminate), describes them with sensory detail, and quickly pivots to another thought or idea. Indeed, Woolf’s memoir is as much a description of the past as it is a transcript of the search itself. Freudian psychoanalysis demonstrated the significance of childhood experiences, popularizing the notion that childhood has a formative influence on the adult. In

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4 She mentions reading Freud in “Sketch”: “But in me, though not in her, rage alternated with love. 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; and is called ambivalence” (108).
“Sketch,” Woolf juxtaposes the child and the adult-autobiographer within the frame of her memoir:

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. (75)

Woolf’s acknowledgement of the provisional and relational nature of life-writing is one of her innovations. Freudian theory had shown that memory is unstable, shifting, and deeply subjective, and Woolf foregrounds this shiftiness. As Lee notes, “the elusiveness of the self almost becomes its subject.” Since a fixed, polished portrait is necessarily a fiction, a sketch may be truer to experience. “In its refusal to make any pretence at a polished, coherent presentation of the ‘self,’” Lee continues, “‘Sketch of the Past’ begins to look like that new mode of women’s life writing she has been recommending for so long” (18).

The auto-analytical quality of Woolf’s memoir places the reader in an intriguing relation to the narrator. The reader is less the intended addressee of a completed narrative than a listening witness following the train of Woolf’s thought as she casts back into the past. Thus, “Sketch” implicitly positions the reader as a co-interpreter of the memories that rise in Woolf’s mind. The analogy she chooses to describe her text in progress suggests her method of composition, but it is also revealing of the reader’s position. We regard a sketch differently from a finished portrait. We imagine the artist’s hand in the act
of composition, we sense the pencil’s impression on the paper, and we wonder what it might have looked like if pursued to completion. We add color or detail according to our own intuitive flashes of the image taking shape. A self-portrait triggers even further reflections. We search for glimpses of the artist’s inner life, some clue that might solve the mystery of their particular genius. We wonder about the artist’s relationship to herself—or selves—and pay close attention to what is highlighted and what is obscured. The experimental, auto-analytical quality of Woolf’s “Sketch” invites the reader to become a participant in the creation of this unfinished self-portrait. Woolf does not present all of her memories as clearly legible or emblematic; rather, she speculates about them as they arise, leaving her text in a state of emergence, open to interpretation.

II. Earliest Impressions: The Maternal Lap and the Nursery Bed

Two early memories appear in the second paragraph of Woolf’s memoir: one of sitting in her mother’s lap and one of lying in her bed in the nursery at St. Ives. In the first, Virginia is a baby nestled into her mother’s floral dress.5 “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” (64). The narration oscillates between speculation and assertion; the memory is so resonant and somehow that she “can still see” the colors, yet these impressions are punctuated with “I think” and “I suppose.” The paragraph continues in this peculiar way: “But it is more convenient artistically to suppose that we

5 Lee’s use of the verb “ensconced” carries an even stronger sense of being snugly enclosed: “She is ensconced in the place she first remembers, her mother’s lap” (104).
were going to St. Ives, for that will lead to my other memory…and in fact it is the most important of all my memories” (64, emphasis added). The exploratory nature of this “sketch” gives the reader a glimpse into Woolf’s mind in the act of composition. Through this meta-commentary, Woolf exposes the artifice of autobiographical writing while simultaneously making subjective assertions: “and in fact it is the most important of all my memories.” Curiously, what isn’t disputed is her suggestion that personal memory can reach as far back as infancy. This alternating between certainty and uncertainty somehow distracts from the implausibility that these are actual memories.

Woolf remembers “red and purple flowers on a black ground—my mother’s dress” (64). When I first read the passage, I mistakenly substituted “background” for “black ground,” thus missing the subtle metaphor; her mother’s dress is compared to the “ground” itself, as if the two are indistinguishable to the child. Her clothing is somehow a part of her, vividly animated by her person—not a floral print dress but “the flowers she was wearing.” The child faces the mother’s body, away from the unremembered surroundings. The sense of her mother as the center from which everything radiated is repeated elsewhere in “Sketch”: “she was the whole thing” (83), “she was the centre; it was herself” (84). When Woolf revisits this memory later, she elaborates: “Certainly there she was, in the very centre of that great Cathedral space which is childhood; there she was from the very first. My first memory is of her lap; the scratch of some beads on her dress comes back to me as I pressed my cheek against it” (81). In this second iteration of the maternal lap, Woolf’s mother is presented as a deity or a saint, the child’s object of worship. She is at the beginning of all memory, represented spatially and temporally as the origin —“in the very center…from the very first” (81, emphasis added).
Woolf’s description of childhood as “that great Cathedral space” bestows a sense of
grandeur and wonder to these early years, while touching upon the dialectics of smallness
and vastness that I explore later. Another addition is the sensory detail: “the scratch of
some beads on her dress.” The first description is primarily visual; Woolf’s inclusion of
the “scratch” that “comes back to me” suggests a somatic response. Furthermore, this
shift to present tense raises questions about the embodiment of these childhood memories
and the possibilities of mnemonic regression.

In her book *Architexts of Memory*, Evelyn Ender compares Woolf’s description
with similar passages in Proust and Nerval, noting that “the originating point of the
rememberer’s biography lies in a preoedipal experience of fusion with the maternal
body” (196). Woolf’s memory of her mother’s lap demonstrates this absorption. They are
so close, in fact, that the mother isn’t fully seen. Woolf explains: “I suspect the word
‘central’ gets closest to the general feeling I had of living so completely in her
atmosphere that one never got far enough away to see her as a person” (83). Again, the
mother is figured as a kind of habitable planet, possessing an atmosphere in which one
could live. Though Woolf cannot see her mother for the flowers, the maternal body is the
center of the child’s world.

Woolf’s second memory (“which also seems to be my first”) is another vivid
scene of enclosure. She is a young child of indeterminate age dozing or waking in bed in
St. Ives:

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. (64-65)

Even though Woolf cannot place these first memories in precise chronology, this scene seems to arise from a later stage of development. Similar to the memory of her mother’s lap, she is snugly enclosed, but here she is distanced from the mother and keenly conscious of various aural and visual sensations: “hearing” and “seeing” and “feeling.” The child is old enough to be cognizant of her environment insofar as she can perceive its strangeness: “it is impossible that I should be here.” In this case, the seeming “impossibility” of “being here” is simultaneous with “the purest ecstasy I can conceive.” Lee’s analysis of Woolf’s passage is relevant to my argument that the artist is born within these small spaces: “So she ‘conceives’ her first sense of herself, gives birth to herself, out of that room, half a century away. She wasn’t born there, but she was six months old when she was first taken there” (23, emphasis added). Lee repeats the verb “conceive” from Woolf’s description of the remembered ecstasy to suggest that this memory of the nursery constitutes a retrospective self-birth.

Woolf declares that this nursery scene is “the most important of all [her] memories” (64). What is its particular significance? Is the child adrift in a blissful liminal state, finely attuned to her surroundings, or is she caught in an astonished trance? One’s interpretation may depend on the definition of “ecstasy.” Is the sensation described similar to “intense joy or delight” or does it more closely resemble the “state of being
‘beside oneself’, thrown into a frenzy or a stupor, with anxiety, astonishment, fear or passion” (“Ecstasy’)? Notably, the Greek etymology of “ecstasy” is “out + of place.” With this in mind, the preceding phrase—“it is impossible that I should be here”—suggests that the child may be experiencing something different from what I initially considered a deeply pleasurable connection to this space. On the contrary, the child’s heightened awareness might be triggered by the acute feeling of being “out of place.” Far from being centered within the maternal lap, this bed in an unfamiliar room is foreign to the child, and this “ecstasy” may be mingled with anxiety or bewilderment. Woolf declares that the she “cannot describe” the ecstatic feeling, yet she clearly distinguishes it from the “next memory” of walking through the gardens at St. Ives, which induced “a complete rapture of pleasure...It was rapture rather than ecstasy” (66). My point is not to argue the relative definitions of ecstasy and rapture, but to question whether this particular childhood memory, the one that her “life...stands upon,” is a singularly pleasurable one. The thought (or “feeling”) that occurs to the half-asleep half-awake child is: “it is impossible that I should be here.” Upon closer analysis, Woolf’s most important memory involves an intense sensation of being “out of place” or “alien.” However lovely the “here” in question (and Talland House at St. Ives is described elsewhere as a kind of prelapsarian Eden), it is clear that her “most important” memory—this scene of enclosure within the childhood bed—does not involve a cozy feeling of being at home in the world, but rather this overpowering, if exquisite, feeling of being “out of place.”

This raises important distinctions for my analysis of childhood enclosures: do the small spaces recollected by the autobiographer significantly differ depending upon the

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6 The OED’s first definition of rapture is “a state, condition, or fit of intense delight or enthusiasm.”
stage of the child’s development? What are the differences between the small spaces in which a child is placed, and the ones wherein the child places herself? And how does the process of becoming a person who places oneself relate to the formation of subjectivity and further, the formation of the artist? In infancy and early childhood, the baby is almost entirely at the effect of her environment: she is more object than subject. When the mother is bodily present, as in Woolf’s first memory of her mother’s lap, the child does not distinguish between herself and her mother. She is still absorbed by the maternal body: this “small space” signifies a pre-Oedipal phase. The memory of the bed at St. Ives, as Woolf acknowledges, is likely a later memory, and it presents an Oedipal triangulation between child, mother and father. When she returns to the memory and “fix[es] my mind upon the nursery,” she remembers that it had a balcony; there was a partition, but it joined the balcony of my father’s and mother’s bedroom. My mother would come out onto her balcony in a white dressing gown. There were passion flowers growing on the wall; they were great starry blossoms, with purple streaks, and large green buds, party empty, part full. (66)

The child who lay in bed in the nursery perceives the proximity of her parents’ bedroom. One could read these “starry blossoms” and “purple streaks” as symbolic of the mother and father. Compared to the earlier memory of the lap, the child is at a remove from the maternal body, and this separation involves both an anxiety and a thrill. She has been placed in an unfamiliar setting, but the potential shock is softened by her belief in the parents’ proximity as well as the repetitive sounds of the waves and “the acorn of the blind.” In a way, the child relies on her senses to orient herself in this alien environment.
Following the declaration that she felt “the purest ecstasy [she] can conceive,” Woolf lapses back into meta-commentary about the “memoir writer’s difficulties” and the “failures” of the genre. (65) She lists various pieces of information we normally expect from an autobiography in an almost parodic rehearsal of the conventions: “Who was I then? Adeline Virginia Stephen, the second daughter of Leslie and Julia Prinsep Stephen, born on 25th January 1882, descended from a great many people, some famous, others obscure; born into a large connection, born not of rich parents but of well-to-do parents…” (65) These things interest her less than the “intensity of the first impression” and herein lies her innovation: in turning away from the biographical facts toward explorations of memories and feelings—an attempt to describe the inner life and not merely the outer reality. Still, the question persists: why did this early memory make such a deep impression? In search for the answer, Woolf entertains logical possibilities as well as intuitive clues. “But of course there was one external reason for the intensity of the first impression: the impression of the waves and the acorn of the blind; the feeling, as I describe it to myself, of lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow—it was due partly to the many months we spent in London. The change of nursery was a great change” (65). The grape image first seems a digressive oddity; the ostensible purpose of this sentence is to account for the cause of the memory’s intensity. Woolf offers an explanation—the change of scenery caused the impression—and yet inserted into the sentence is this curious grape.

Woolf appears to be less interested in the logical explanation than exploring the sensation itself, and she revisits the nursery memory with two images of enclosure—
further representations of the representation. “Lying inside a grape” is a fetal image; it suggests the child in the womb. As Ender notes, it is “suggestive of the deepest of regressions—to a maternal space” (53). Yet the “feeling” combines the nestled repose of the fetus in the womb with the ability to see “through a film of semi-transparent yellow.” The film of yellow recalls the blind against the window in the nursery, and it also heightens the feeling of containment. What might it feel like to lie inside a grape? Perhaps a sensation of being suspended in space while simultaneously being enclosed; to feel weightless, free of gravity, yet also contained.

Lingering over the remembered rapture, Woolf continues with a further representation of the nursery memory: “If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver, and green. There was the pale yellow blind; the green sea; the silver of the passion flowers” (66). As if sensing that she has insufficiently captured the nursery memory, Woolf ventures an ekphrastic experiment. If she were an artist creating a visual representation of this memory, Woolf would choose this particular palette. She would not paint a literal image of herself in the nursery; rather, in her effort to capture the “feeling” of the memory rather than a literal picture, she employs surrealistic techniques. “I should make a picture that was globular; semi-transparent. I should make a picture of curved petals; of shells, of things that were semi-transparent; I should make curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline” (66). Like the grape, this globular portrait of flowers and shells is an image of enclosure, illuminated and magnified as if to draw the viewer in. (One is reminded of the up-close focus and pastel tint of a Georgia O'Keefe painting.) Then the imagined art object becomes even stranger: “Everything would be large and dim; and what was seen would at
the same time be heard; sounds would come through this petal or leaf—sounds indistinguishable from sights” (66). What began as a painting is transformed into an imaginary three-dimensional installation, perhaps a room or “a space” in which the viewer participates. The effect is synesthetic; a blend of sight and sound that would evoke this heightened childhood sensory-perception. (“Hearing” is repeated several times in the first description, and it is the sensory experience the grape image lacks.) The grape and the globular portrait are metaphorical spaces created by Woolf to describe the actual spaces. By abstracting and reimagining these enclosures, Woolf demonstrates the impulse to “find a form” that will capture the experience.

### III. Beneath the Nursery Table

The first two memories of small spaces seem to be pre-linguistic, and as I argued, representative of a pre-Oedipal and Oedipal stage of development. In the third, Woolf remembers herself as a fully ambulatory young girl exploring the domestic sphere. This is not a small space in which the child is placed, but one in which the child places herself. With this shift, the child is becoming less an object to be placed than a subject with a degree of agency. “To place oneself” suggests a larger set of processes of locating oneself in an environment, of coping with its constraints and exploiting its limited freedoms and privacies, and of imagining—and creating—alternative spaces with different rules and conditions.

In contrast to the previous two memories of childhood enclosure, Woolf does not emphasize this memory as especially emblematic or important; rather, the scene is offered as an illustration of a child’s “curious focus”:
How large for instance was the space beneath the nursery table! I see it still as a great black space with the table-cloth hanging down in folds on the outskirts in the distance; and myself roaming about there, and meeting Nessa. ‘Have black cats got tails?’ she asked, and I said “NO”, and was proud because she had asked me a question. Then we roamed off again into that vast space. (78)

Woolf imagines the space under the table as a dark landscape of some breadth—the hanging table-cloth is “in the distance.” Why is this small space perceived to be vast? The relative scale of an adult and a child doesn’t account for the felt limitlessness of the enclosure; rather, the small space triggers the imagination of the child and spatial limits vanish. The word “outskirts” suggests multiple meanings. In a zeugmatic twist, it refers back to the table-cloth through a metaphoric association (like a skirt it “hang[s] down in folds”), while also adding to the sense that this space is a shadowy terrain with outlying areas. One could argue that this encounter between sisters takes place beneath a skirt, suggesting a proximity to and protection from a maternal body, e.g. “to hide behind your mother’s skirt.” The space under the nursery table is not offered to the reader as a legible metaphor for the birth of the artist. Rather, it first appears as an aside—more as an illustration of “how a child sees” than as a foundational memory as with the other two enclosures which are given such emphasis: the lap and the bed at St. Ives. I emphasize the space under the nursery table because I believe it possesses more significance than Woolf suggests. The reader follows the artist-autobiographer’s gaze beneath the table to regard this tableau; this is not only a memory of a childhood encounter between sisters, it is also a textual encounter between the I-Now and the I-Then. Is the table-cloth, in a sense,
her own skirt—the adult narrator peering beneath the table to regard her child self? Or is the child the mother to the woman?

Within this enclosure, which is both safe and shadowy, young Virginia and her sister freely explore without any fixed purpose or destination (the verb “roam” appears twice). The space beneath the nursery table also can be viewed as a kind of closed theater—an imaginative space separated by a curtain (the hanging table-cloth) that allows the participants to play without intrusions. The two “players” stage an encounter with dialogue, in which the older sister poses a question to the younger. The emphasis in Virginia’s booming negative (“NO”) and the concomitant feeling of pride are also significant. She is addressed by her sister and therefore recognized as a possible authority—a person who knows things. This foreshadows the sisters’ reciprocal recognition and encouragement of each other as artists and therefore can be read as a formative moment that possesses an imprint of Virginia’s future life. Lee describes the close relationship between Vanessa and Virginia: “Two sisters, a writer and a painter, mutually influencing each other’s work, collaborating artistically, sharing friends and ‘life-styles,’ and spending their years as intimates, confidantes, and neighbours” (116). Detailing their history, Lee points out that their encounter under the table is a shared memory:

The first memory of this relationship, for both, was of meeting in the dark secret place underneath the nursery table at Hyde Park Gate. …The sisters confirmed each other’s view of life in a secret space below and inside the life of the family. Virginia is characteristically proud of making an impression. There is freedom and space between them as they wander off again. (117)
Under the nursery table, Virginia and Vanessa identify each other as kindred, creative beings. The sisters are engaged in parallel, imaginative play, and this pre-figures their later relation as sister-artists. Lee notes the fugitive quality of the small space: though it is “below and inside the life of the family,” it is also “secret.” As with many other childhood enclosures, the finding or fashioning of the space constitutes an act of rebellion or independence, an attempt by the child to locate a private space beyond or beneath the grown-ups’ gaze.

This under-the-table passage from “Sketch”, written in 1939-40, closely resembles a scene in an earlier autobiographical piece, “Reminiscences,” written in 1907-8. Woolf is nearly sixty years old when she recalls the space beneath the nursery table in the passage above; below she describes the same memory at the age of twenty-five in an essay intended for Vanessa’s son, Julian Bell.7

I remember too the great extent and mystery of the dark land under the nursery table, where a continuous romance seemed to go forward, though the time spent there was really so short. Here I met your mother, in a gloom happily encircled by the firelight, and peopled with legs and skirts. We drifted together like ships in an immense ocean and she asked me whether black cats had tails. And I answered that they had not, after a pause in which her question seemed to drop echoing down vast abysses, hitherto silent. In future I suppose there was some consciousness between us that the other held possibilities. (29)

The recurrence of this childhood space in two memoirs written thirty years apart suggests its significance as a shared origin story. In addition to the curious interplay between

7 Jeanne Schulkind notes that “according to Quentin Bell, it was begun before Julian’s birth (February 1908) when Virginia was spending the summer holidays of 1907 in Playden, just north of Rype, where the Bells were staying” (Moments 25).
spatial smallness and vastness—a temporal paradox emerges in this passage. The “time spent” in this space was brief, yet the romance seemed “to go forward” continuously. So this childhood enclosure is somehow outside of both time and space—and in a sense, it continues to happen in the imagination. Another striking contrast between the two passages is the presence of others on the perimeter. In this passage, the “dark land” is surrounded by people, whereas the perimeter is comparatively vacant in the later version. These people are abstracted (“a gloom…encircled…and peopled”); they become thing-like in the backdrop of the fantasy taking place, almost blending into the furniture. This device is employed in other childhood narratives wherein the point of view remains eye-level with the young protagonist with the adult world taking place separate, detached, oblivious.

The earlier passage differs from the companion passage in “Sketch” in other ways. Vanessa poses the same question about black cats having tails but something happens before the younger sister issues her verdict. “But I answered that they had not, after a pause in which her question seemed to drop echoing down vast abysses, hitherto silent.” The echoing pause is dramatized. Why does this whimsical question trigger such profound reverberations? Is it the thrill of being addressed by her sister, or is it possible to decode the question by exploring what it means to “have” or “not have” a tail? Considering that the two drifting sisters are surrounded by “legs and skirts,” the question may have a sexual aspect. They are presumably wandering around on hands and knees, eye-level with the waists of seated adults on the perimeter. The echoing abysses activated by Nessa’s question are described as “hitherto silent,” which suggests a shock or awakening. This question may rivet Virginia because it awakens some dimly intuited
sense of sexual difference. Virginia’s booming negative could be read as a refusal of the phallus (tails), or conversely, an assertion of the feminine. The black cat can signify superstition or bad luck, but it also suggests female genitalia.

This passage also contains a simile that is absent from “Sketch of the Past”: “we drifted together like ships in an immense ocean.” These two ships may represent Vanessa and Virginia navigating a household with sexual and emotional threats lingering beneath the surface of Victorian manners. Perhaps the sisters are not merely playing, but also exchanging information about the “legs and skirts” which surround them, speaking in a childhood code. Lee points out that Virginia lived with various sexual threats in early childhood: “Jem Stephen’s uncontrolled priapic incursions, a man who used to hang about Hyde Park Gate and expose himself to the children (fearfully remembered in The Years), and, it seems, a sexual assault by Gerald Duckworth in very early childhood” (123). She further explains that “over and over again in [Woolf’s] re-creations of the imaginative world of childhood, there is a moment of fear or shame or panic, the image of a safe private world being invaded, often with the strong sense of sexual threat” (125). So the possibility that the playful exchange between Vanessa and Virginia has a sexually coded component seems plausible, especially since Vanessa’s question triggers such a visceral response.  

IV. The “Great Hall” and “Our Own Private Nucleus”

8 Story-telling (and particularly collaborative storytelling, with Nessa) became a way to mitigate fear and anxiety: “The night nursery was vast too In winter I would slip in before bed to take a look at the fire. I was very anxious to see that the fire was low, because it frightened me if it burnt after we went to bed. I dreaded that little flickering flame on the walls…These were early fears; for later, when Thoby had gone to school, leaving Nessa to take his monkey Jacko to bed with her, no sooner was the door shut than we began story-telling” (78-9)
Unlike the maternal lap and the nursery bed, the space under the table is not presented as one of Woolf’s “most important” memories, let alone as a legible metaphor for the birth of the artist. As previously mentioned, it first arises as an illustration of the curious way “a child sees.” Yet Woolf’s description of this space appears in two autobiographical texts written thirty years apart, and it is a memory shared by the two sisters.\textsuperscript{9} I wish to demonstrate the significance of this small-yet-vast space by tracing its connection to other metaphorical enclosures in “Sketch.” As I have shown, once Woolf identifies a particularly resonant or meaningful space, she sometimes abstracts and envisions this space in other forms. For instance, her experience in the nursery bed at St. Ives transforms into the grape and the globular portrait. Here, I argue that the space under the nursery table expands into a metaphor for childhood—the great hall—and later contracts into “the private nucleus” of adolescence.

In the paragraph following the nursery table passage, Woolf shifts from a description of specific early memories to a synopsis of childhood. She is approaching the subject of her mother’s death, and the appearance of this summary signals the closing of one period and the beginning of another:

Many bright colors; 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 \textit{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, \textit{roaming about}, in that space of time which lasted from 1882 to 1895. (79, emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{9} This is characteristic of other small spaces in this dissertation; the artist-autobiographer often includes these scenes of childhood enclosure without highlighting them as legible metaphors or origin stories. Still, they “rise in the mind” again and again.
Woolf moves from the space under the table and suddenly views childhood as if from a distance. The gesture is analogous to a cinematic effect in which the camera, tightly focused on some specific scene, swiftly pans out until the place is viewed from an aerial perspective—or outer space. The colors, sounds, people and moments of her childhood are abstracted, collected, and “surrounded by a vast space,” and a period of time—the first thirteen years of Woolf’s life—is figured as “that space of time” “This is how I shape it,” Woolf declares, but what shape can the reader perceive in this “rough visual description”?

Here the reader can see Woolf’s “sketch” taking shape from sentence to sentence. She is searching for a form that will suffice—and presumably that will enable a transition from childhood memories toward the more difficult task of describing her mother’s death. The way in which Woolf adapts the previous description of the space under the table and begins to transform it into a metaphor for childhood in general is revealing. First, she sees herself as a child “roaming about” with Vanessa in “that vast space” under the nursery table, and one paragraph later, she sees herself as a child “roaming about” in “that space of time” which was “surrounded by a vast space.” In addition to the textual proximity of these two descriptions, the repetition of these phrases demonstrates the correspondence between the remembered space and the emerging metaphor. The sketch continues to develop: as if sensing that this “visual description” is too “rough,” Woolf then envisions another possible form. In a sense, she takes this collection of childhood details and places them within a metaphorical enclosure: “A great hall I could liken it to; with windows letting in strange lights; and murmurs and spaces of deep silence. (79) With the introduction of the “great hall,” childhood as previously figured becomes
enclosed and situated within spatial boundaries. Woolf clarifies the previous metaphor and “places” it, frames it, gives it a spatial container. The metaphor remains conditional—“I could liken it to”—which reads like a note for possible future revision—a sketch.

Once again, Woolf is drawn to a spatial image of enclosure, but she emphasizes that the space is dynamic:

But somehow into that picture must be brought, too, the sense of movement and change. Nothing remained stable long. One must get the feeling of everything approaching and then disappearing, getting large, getting small, passing at different rates of speed past the little creature; one must get the feeling that made her press on, the little creature driven on as she was by growth of her legs and arms, driven without her being able to stop it, or to change it, driven as a plant is driven up out of the earth, up until the stalk grows, the leaf grows, buds swell. (79)

A contemporary reader can envision fast-motion cutaways from the growing girl within this curiously lit hall to a sped-up clip of a plant’s growth, but the cinematic technologies that Woolf imagines are advanced for her time. As with her other ekphrastic experiments in “Sketch,” like the globular portrait that turns into a multi-media art installation, Woolf takes a literal, remembered space and abstracts it into metaphorical representations that seek to expand the possibilities of the visual image. Here, she emphasizes the paradoxical nature of this space: it is enclosed yet kinetic, murmuring yet silent, space yet time. “That is what is indescribable, that is what makes all images too static, for no sooner has one said this was so, than it was past and altered” (79). Perhaps this is why the sketch is the
most apt analogy for her autobiographical experiment. Woolf is attempting to describe what is beyond description, and she is searching for new forms that will capture the complexities of a life narrative.

The same paragraph that opens with the synopsis of childhood and evolves into the description of the “great hall” concludes with a return to the maternal lap: “How immense must be the force of life which turns a baby, who can just distinguish a great blot of blue and purple on a black background, into the child who thirteen years later can feel all that I felt on May 5th 1895—now almost exactly to a day, forty-four years ago—when my mother died” (79). With this sentence, Woolf links three “selves” on an imaginary timeline—the baby, the thirteen-year-old, and the adult-autobiographer—and her mother’s death is the indelibly etched date uniting the three. The mention of the “blot of blue and purple on a black background” conjures her mother’s floral dress, the vivid first memory that opens the memoir. Woolf omits “red” from the previous description, draining the brightness of the image so that the flowers now resemble a bruise. In a sense, the childhood section begins and ends in her mother’s lap, and when describing Julia Stephen six paragraphs later, Woolf transforms this “great hall” into a grander spatial metaphor: “Certainly there she was, in the very centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood” (81). The specific memory of the space under the nursery table leads to a metaphor for childhood in general, which in turn transforms into a great hall, and again, into a cathedral. The space under the nursery table at Hyde Park Gate—the small enclosure that is mysteriously vast—expands outward and transforms into these metaphorical enclosures.
This repeated outward expansion—of smallness that opens into vastness—constricts immediately upon the mother’s death. Virginia is thirteen years old, poised on the threshold between childhood and adolescence. Woolf repeatedly describes her mother as being the center of her childhood, and after she dies, Stella endeavors to serve as surrogate. But with Stella’s death two years later, this fragile balance is destroyed. What Woolf previously describes as a cathedral is reduced to a “great echoing shell,” which suggests a cathedral in ruins—half-destroyed, stripped of its sacred center. (One is reminded of the bombing raids taking place as Woolf is writing “Sketch.”) Whereas her mother had been the central presence of Virginia’s childhood, the father comes to the fore in adolescence, and this reversal is devastating. Woolf employs contrasting metaphors of spatial enclosure to describe these two periods in stark contrast. The mother’s space conjures vastness and enchantment, while the enclosures associated with the father suggest confinement and danger. In childhood, Woolf characterizes herself as roaming about, dashing up and downstairs, both a participant and a private adventurer. In adolescence, she imagines herself as a gibbering monkey in a cage or a tremulous butterfly beside its broken case. “My father now falls to be described, because it was during the seven years between Stella’s death in 1897 and his death in 1904 that Nessa and I were fully exposed without protection to the full blast of that strange character” (107). To be “exposed without protection” marks a further shift in the spatial metaphors used to describe life in Hyde Park Gate. Any privacy or “private adventuring” is now impossible.

So how do these two sisters, co-explorers of the space under the nursery table, cope? Woolf employs another image of enclosure: “It thus came about that Nessa and I
formed together a close conspiracy. In that world of many men, coming and going, in that big house of innumerable rooms, we formed our own private nucleus. I visualise it as a little sensitive center of acute life; of instantaneous sympathy, in the great echoing shell of Hyde Park Gate” (143). In part, the balance between men and women has been upset, and now Virginia and Nessa are in a “world of many men.” Elsewhere in the memoir, Woolf lists all the rooms in Hyde Park Gate, but here they are “innumerable.” Why does she exaggerate? Perhaps she means to capture the psychological panic associated with this shift in balance between men and women; the sister no longer have the presiding, protective presence of a maternal figure. In this space, the men have access to all the rooms, whereas the girls are confined to certain spaces. The movement of these “many men, coming and going” cannot be controlled, and as we learn, some of these men open and close the doors of her bedroom without permission or warning. In the absence of a center, the two sisters join together to form their “own private nucleus.” While this is not a literal space, it calls to mind the space under the nursery table; a small space shared by the two sisters who will become artists. “I visualise it as a little sensitive center.” The nucleus of a cell contains the map or blueprint of the outer structure; in a sense, the “close conspiracy” between Nessa and Virginia is to survive their present situation, and to form, amidst difficult and sometimes brutal circumstances, the map of their future life; they re-configure their future life together. For the time being, they are stuck in this male-dominated world, but what happens within this nucleus alters the outer conditions of their lives.

This is similar to what occurs in the small spaces in childhood, especially when these enclosures are found or fashioned as an alternative to the environment in which the
child finds herself; a different world is dreamed of—one which the dreamer seeks to create in her life and work. Woolf continues:

Together we shaped our own angle, and from it looked out at a world that seemed to both of us much the same. Very soon after Stella’s death we realised that we must make some standing place for ourselves in this baffling, frustrating whirlpool. Every day we did battle for that which was always being snatched from us, or distorted. (143-44)

Woolf uses the word “angle” to suggest a point of view, a perspective on the world in which they resided. The private nucleus allows them to temporarily play the roles assigned to them with this world without being fully absorbed within it. They “looked out at a world” from their own co-created “angle” or “standing place”; in this way, they remain—at least in part—outside of it. The small space is where you begin to shape your own angle; it is private enough that you can be critical of the life of the family and to create a separate space that establishes boundaries, even if imaginary, between the inner and the other, between the life of the individual and the life of the family.

VII. Trauma and Epiphany: The Space in the Long Hot Grass

While contemplating the loss of her mother, Woolf speculates about the connection between trauma and her aesthetic vocation. In the following passage, she reflects on the deaths of her mother and Stella, and “of the damage that their deaths inflicted” (136). Over forty years later, Woolf wonders whether any benefit emerged from the tragic loss: “If there is any good (I doubt it) in these mutilations, it is that it sensitizes. If to be aware of the insecurity of life, to remember something gone…if it is a
good thing to be aware of all this at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, by fits and starts—if, if, if—. But was it good?” (137) The doubt expressed within the parenthetical offers a counterweight to her search for silver linings. These competing strains continue in the passage: note the skeptical interjections “—if, if, if—” alternate with repeated rhetorical questions: “But was it good?” Woolf searches for some explanation for the violence, some consolation amid “these mutilations,” and what she identifies as potentially beneficial in some way is a heightened sensitivity. Then she sketches the imagined alternative, acknowledging the hypothetical nature of the question:

Would it not have been better (if there is any sense is saying good and better when there is no possible judge, no standard) to go on feeling, as at St. Ives, the rush and tumble of family life? To be family surrounded; to go on exploring and adventuring privately while all the while the family as a whole continued its prosaic, rumbling progress; would this not have been better than to have had that protection removed; to have been tumbled out of the family shelter; to have had it cracked and gashed; to have become critical and skeptical of the family—?

Perhaps to have remained in the family, believing in it, accepting it, as we should, without those two deaths, would have given us greater scope, greater variety, and certainly greater confidence. (137)

Woolf employs metaphorical enclosures as she articulates an important distinction: the child who is “family surrounded,” who feels “sheltered” inside the domestic sphere, enjoys the freedom to “go on exploring and adventuring privately.” This description recalls the scene under the nursery table: Virginia and Vanessa roaming about, sensing the family on the periphery but imaginatively traveling into a “vast space.” One
implication here is that a child who feels a degree of security within the family shelter can create her own spaces within the domestic sphere; she can negotiate these thresholds with a degree of ease. These two spheres—the personal and the familial—are not necessarily in opposition to each other, and perhaps there is less anxiety at the threshold.

Woolf wonders if the benefits of remaining within the family shelter would have resulted in greater “scope…variety…and confidence.” Would she have been smarter, more well-rounded, in possession of a more secure disposition? Perhaps, but then again, had the mother continued as the presiding center of family life, would Virginia and Vanessa have defied social conventions and become artists? Would Bloomsbury have become what it became? This is a provisional question, and Woolf poses an alternative:

On the other hand, I can put another question: Did those deaths give us an experience that even if it was numbing, mutilating, yet meant that the Gods (as I used to phrase it) were taking us seriously, and giving us a job which they would not have thought it worthwhile to give—say, the Booths or the Milmans?” (137)

While the question remains unsettled, the implication is clear: the traumatic losses suffered at this young age may be linked to the sisters’ artistic vocations. As an alternative to a strictly punitive narrative or one of cruel chance, Woolf sketches a partially consoling alternative: these deaths are intimately connected to the aesthetic calling. “The Gods” have given a blessing within the curse: it is a sign of having been chosen. The challenge, then, is to employ this sensitivity and awareness in their work.

The link between her mother’s death and the awakening of her aesthetic sensitivity is highlighted in an earlier passage in which Woolf describes the period immediately following May 5th, 1895: “it was partly that my mother’s death unveiled and
intensified; made me suddenly develop perceptions, as if a burning glass had been laid over what was shaded and dormant...as if something were becoming visible without any effort” (93). Her mother’s death has a revelatory effect, and her acute artistic sensitivity coincides with this loss. Though she repeatedly refers to the death as a mutilation, she also associates it with a sudden illumination, and she recalls a textual epiphany that takes place in the same period. Virginia and Vanessa are together in the tall grass in Kensington Gardens:

we lay down—Nessa and I—in the long grass behind the Flower Walk. I had taken The Golden Treasury with me. I opened it and began to read some poem. And instantly and for the first time I understood the poem...It was as if it became altogether intelligible; I had a feeling of transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them: to foretell them as if they developed what one is already feeling. ‘One seems to understand what it’s about’, I said awkwardly. I suppose Nessa has forgotten; no one could have understood from what I said the queer feeling I had in the hot grass, that poetry was coming true...It matches what I have sometimes felt when I write. The pen gets the scent. (93)

The two sister-artists nested in the tall grass is another scene of enclosure that resonates with the space under the nursery table. Both scenes include the sisters enclosed in close proximity and both figure an epiphany involving language. “Do black cats have tails?” is itself a childish poem that Virginia somehow “understood.” Virginia as a child in the vast space under the table, and again as an adolescent in the hot grass — in these spaces with her sister, she suddenly understands the code: “words ceased to be words and become so
intensified that one seems to experience them...” Virginia’s profound childhood
experiences as speaker and reader eventually lead to her vocation as writer: “It matches
what I have sometimes felt when I write.”

VIII. The Vastness of the Smallness

In the following passage of Virginia Woolf’s diary, dated Monday, May 13th, 1940, she describes the feeling of satisfaction from having completed a section of her
book on Roger Fry. “I admit to some content, some closing of a chapter and peace that
comes with it, from posting my proofs today. I admit—because we’re in the third day of
‘the greatest battle in history’” (319). This first sentence establishes a pattern throughout
the entry—a series of juxtapositions between personal feelings and the sociopolitical
realities. Woolf’s feeling of satisfaction in having completed a portion of her project is
tinged with guilt—and dwarfed in consequence—when set against the violence of the
war. Then news from the Battle of Waterloo intervenes, and then she alternates between
quotidian detail and radio dispatches from the war. “It began (here) with the 8 o’clock
wireless announcing as I lay half asleep the invasion of Holland and Belgium. The third
day of the Battle of Waterloo. Apple blossom snowing the garden. A bowl lost in the
pond. Churchill exhorting all men to stand together” (319). First she describes her
alarming wake-up call and then lists four consecutive fragments: two minor domestic
descriptions sandwiched by events of international consequence. [War] [Blossoms] [Lost
bowl] [War] The entry continues as follows:

These vast formless shapes further circulate. They aren’t substances: but they
make everything else minute. Duncan saw an air battle over Charleston—a silver
pencil and a puff of smoke. Percy has seen the wounded arriving in their boots. So my little moment of peace comes in a yawning hollow. But though L. says he has petrol in the garage for suicide should Hitler win, we go on. *It’s the vastness, and the smallness, that makes this possible.* So intense are my feelings (about Roger); yet the circumference (the war) seems to make a hoop round them. No, I can’t get the odd incongruity of feeling intensely and at the same time knowing that there’s no importance in that feeling. Or is there, as I sometimes think, more importance than ever? (319, emphasis added)

Woolf is commenting on the ways in which the political or societal catastrophes can obscure and diminish the personal. She mentions “vast formless shapes” that “circulate” and “make everything else minute.” The next line seems an illustration of this effect: “Duncan saw an air battle over Charleston—a silver pencil and puff of smoke.” Seen from a distance, the individual human loss in the burning, crashing plane becomes not only tiny but curiously aestheticized, and the government-issued boots turn the individual wounded soldiers into a generalized mass: “the wounded arriving in their boots.” Here is the conflict at play within a single sentence: “So my little moment of peace comes in a yawning hollow.” The personal is pitted against, or within, a collective catastrophe. The consequences of a Hitler victory seem so dire that suicide is their backup plan, but in the midst of this uncertainty, “we go on. It’s the vastness, and the smallness, that make this possible.”

The vastness and the smallness make what possible? Presumably, continuing to live in such dire circumstances. *Going on.* A perplexing question lingers: what does Woolf associate with smallness, and what does she associate with vastness? One might
assume that she associates intense emotions with smallness and the war with vastness.

But this is complicated by the following image: “So intense are my feelings (about Roger); yet the circumference (the war) seems to make a hoop round them.” The intense personal feelings—small, personal, intimate experience—are expansive, but the reality of the war presses back. The war is that outer limit, the impinging reality, which threatens to make her work meaningless. The small and the vast are not at odds; on the contrary, they are interconnected. Woolf is saying: it is the vastness of the smallness that makes going on possible, and the war is this constricting hoop. In other words, the artist’s feelings about her work, the daily engagement with the creative process allows her to pass through this hoop—is what gives life meaning in spite of the news of the war and its imminent threats.

The penultimate sentence in the diary entry of May 13th, 1940, restates the paradox. “No, I can’t get the odd incongruity of feeling intensely and at the same time knowing that there’s no importance in that feeling.” The adult artist cannot reclaim the innocence (or ignorance) of the playing child, yet she must feel—against logic and in spite of the evidence to the contrary—that her creative labors have meaning. She must believe that smallness contains vastness. Woolf concludes with a glimpse of optimism: “Or is there, as I sometimes think, more importance than ever?” Her oscillation between despair and hope recalls Freud’s essay “On Transience,” written in 1915 amidst the destruction of World War I. Freud opens with an anecdote about a despairing young poet who cannot enjoy the beauty of the countryside because of his conviction that it was “fated to extinction.” He then reflects: “The proneness to decay of all that is beautiful and perfect can, as we know, give rise to two different impulses in the mind. The one leads to
the aching despondency felt by the young poet, while the other leads to rebellion against the fact asserted” (qtd. in von Unwerth 215). Woolf seems to be teetering between these two states, while noting that the interconnection between “smallness, and the vastness” is what allows her to continue.

Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* illuminates the dialectics of smallness and vastness. In the chapter “Intimate Immensity,” he tracks Baudelaire’s promiscuous use of the word vast. Although the poet apparently watched his use of adjectives, “he did not keep a close eye on his use of the word ‘vast.’ Whenever a thing, a thought or daydream was touched by grandeur, this word became indispensable to him” (191). Citing numerous textual instances, Bachelard concludes that “the word vast is a metaphysical argument by means of which the vast world and vast thoughts are united. But actually this grandeur is most active in the realm of intimate space” (192). Bachelard’s analysis of Baudelaire can be applied to Woolf’s space beneath the nursery table. The vastness of the dark space is less about physical dimensionality; rather, it describes the child’s absorption in the imaginative realm, the sudden expansion of the inner life that occurs in the small space. The “grandeur” is intimate—it is within. “Here we discover that immensity in the intimate domain is intensity, an intensity of being, the intensity of a being evolving in a vast perspective of intimate intensity” (193). The space under the nursery table is not vast, of course; “vastness” describes the intensity of the child’s feeling as she delights in the expansion of her imaginative powers. As Bachelard notes: “The word vast reconciles contraries” (192). Continuing to live and write in spite of the imminent threats is possible because of the “intensity” within the “intimate domain”: the vastness that resides within the smallness. “Large issues from small,” writes Bachelard, “not through the logical law
of a dialectics of contraries, but thanks to liberation from all obligations of dimensions, a liberation that is a special characteristic of the activity of the imagination” (154-155).

IX. A Small Space of One’s Own

In “A Room of One’s Own,” Woolf famously argues that for a woman to be a writer or an artist, she needs to have a room and an income. One of the necessary conditions for a person to become an artist is therefore spatial; the walls of the room prevent intrusion and interference from the outer world as she conducts her apprenticeship with a degree of privacy. Woolf also notes that the room should have a lock on the door. (103) The room forms a protective barrier from the impinging realities of an indifferent or potentially hostile world. For the child, the small enclosure serves a similar function. It induces a creative play and a daydreaming imagination. In both cases, the small space provides access to an “intimate immensity,” what Bachelard would call “a cosmic sense.” The outer world is large, but the imagination is vast.

The aesthetic vocation is linked to the childhood discovery of imaginative play as well as the recognition of being “other” or “out of place.” The aesthetic form is analogous to the childhood enclosure because it is a “space” of her own making. The child who becomes an artist discovers her ability to create forms that orient and place. Like the small space, the aesthetic form provides a “place” to inhabit. When the adult-artist looks back to the past and imagines the origins of her development, she discovers her child-self daydreaming under a table. The artist’s studio—the “room of her own”—is a place of privacy where she continues this serious play. So the image of the child in the enclosure prefigures the adult artist in her room or studio, and for the adult-artist
recollecting her childhood, these scenes within small spaces are originary figures in the narrative of aesthetic development. Within the childhood enclosure, the child begins to intuit her gift for figuration, and the artist-autobiographer is drawn to this small space because it is the place where the artist was born. She goes into her studio and the childhood “play” becomes her work.
Chapter II: Out of the Dream Closet: Denton Welch’s Serial Künstlerroman

Our house is our corner of the world…it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word. – Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

I admired every human being in the world who, on top of a million, million horrors, yet built a nest, a haven, and calm place. – Denton Welch, *A Voice Through a Cloud*

On June 9th 1935, Denton Welch was struck by a car while bicycling in the suburbs of South London. He was a twenty-year-old student at Goldsmith School of Art, traveling to his uncle’s vicarage on a holiday weekend. As he recovered consciousness in a hospital ward, he learned that his spine had been fractured, and for several months, he was paralyzed below the chest. Some doctors considered his condition to be incurable, but Denton slowly regained use of his legs and determined to resume his apprenticeship as an artist. Limited in his movement and frequently confined to his bedroom, he began painting a series of self-portraits. But Denton grew dissatisfied with his progress as a painter, however, and gradually he turned to writing as his primary form of creative expression. As biographer James Metheun-Campbell notes, “The beginning of [his] career as an author in 1941 coincided with his abandonment of the self-portrait... He had come to visualize writing as the most effective means of discovering and developing his personality” (81). Denton would continue to draw and paint, but henceforth autobiography became his dominant mode. In a sense, he didn’t abandon the self-portrait so much as change mediums.

At twenty-five years old, Welch embarked on his first book-length work. He intended it to be an autobiography from birth titled “I Can Remember,” but after fifty
pages, he set it aside. His next attempt was *Maiden Voyage*, published in 1943 to considerable acclaim. Edith Sitwell, who had written the foreword, assured him that he was a “born writer,” and in a letter she informed him that she “could not remember another first book that had been so well received” (Metheun-Campbell 127). Denton Welch’s literary career was launched, but at the moment of his debut in 1943, few readers realized that the young author was an invalid. He persevered and was prolific under the circumstances, but his injuries eventually led to his death on December 30th, 1948— one week before his third book was published, with his fourth in manuscript beside his bed, nearly complete. He was thirty-three years old.

The total body of work that Welch completed in his lifetime—poems, short stories, novels, journals, drawings, paintings, even a meticulous restoration of a Victorian dollhouse—constitutes a considerable artistic achievement. One of his self-portraits hangs in the permanent collection of the National Portrait Gallery, and his autobiographical novels have inspired such admirers as William Burroughs (“When asked what writer has most directly influenced my own work I can answer without hesitation: Denton Welch”) and John Waters (“Maybe there is no better novel in the world than Denton Welch’s *In Youth Is Pleasure*” (*Role Models* 164)). Two biographies have been written to date, but only one book-length study of his work has been published. As noted by *Contemporary Authors Online*, “few twentieth-century
authors of elevated style and finished prose are more deserving of renewed attention than Denton Welch, and…no gay writer more demands literary resurrection.” Yet, in spite of repeated calls for critical reconsideration, Denton Welch remains more of a cult hero than a securely canonical author.

I. Childhood Home and Abroad: “I Can Remember”

Maurice Denton Welch was born on March 29th 1915 in Shanghai. His mother, Rosalind, was an American Christian Scientist whose family had made its fortune in shipping, and his father, Arthur, was a successful English businessman. The youngest of four sons, Denton was also the smallest. His father called him “‘Microbe’, ‘Maggot’, or ‘Flea’, clearly with reference to his diminutive size, which was in marked contrast to the athletic physique of his older brothers” (De-la-Noy, 22). From a young age, he travelled widely with his mother, visiting relatives and his brothers at boarding schools in England. They lived in hotels and rented houses, and they spent long stretches on ocean liners. Welch recalls fragments of these early trips in the first few pages of “I Can Remember,” but his extended recollections begin in the Welch family home in Shanghai. At age six, his attraction to small spaces is evident:

Now settled a time of living almost entirely in myself, the last stage of infancy, a quiet time of playing with my brother in the garden, building houses in the bushes and hiding in the branches of the camphor tree…We had a swing shaped like a boat; it would fly up at one end and into the scented bushes and one was lost for a second in the pink froth, to be torn out again like a rushing wind. (21)


13 Robert Phillips, Denton Welch, for Twayne’s Author Series, 1974.
In addition to houses in bushes and perches in trees, Welch writes about the interior of the house in great detail, and he often associates these small spaces with imaginative reverie. He describes “the tiny room which opened off my bedroom. I would sit in this small cupboard and polish my things by the hour, and as I polished my thoughts would flow easily and I would have strange ideas about the past” (62). The origins of the artist-autobiographer appear in this vignette: the small space is the child’s version of an artist’s studio, an enclosure where his thoughts “flow easily.” This child who dreams about the past while “polishing” his things grows into the author who writes on pads of paper in his small cottage. He “wrote in longhand with a Parker Duofold pen, filling penny exercise books with his big scrawl; and he usually wrote five-hundred to six-hundred words a day… When he had found himself with his writing, Welch experienced a happiness he had not realized since childhood” (Phillips 32). Indeed, Welch’s oeuvre can be seen as an obsessive polishing of his past, and this passage from “I Can Remember” touches on a central theme of the dissertation: that childhood creativity and the artistic production of adulthood are connected by the figure of the spatial enclosure. The child discovers his imaginative power within the small space, and the artist “recreates” this space in his studio.

Welch’s descriptions of his childhood home demonstrate a resonant connection to this formative space, but he was rarely at home for long: “All my childhood was spent in travelling backwards and forwards from China to England and England to China. In this way my mother divided her time equally between my father and my brothers” (“I Can Remember” 51-52). In 1924, at age nine, Denton “learnt with horror” that he would be living in England at his first boarding school. (62) This change, and the increasing
periods of separation with his mother, haunted Denton. The restlessness and anxiety that characterizes much of his writing about adolescence emerges here, and “I Can Remember” breaks off shortly after the first mention of his mother’s illness. She had been suffering from Bright’s Disease, which limited her travel to and from England, and Denton was sent to St. Michael’s in Sussex. He “was desperately unhappy to go, especially since his mother was at the other end of the globe and in failing health” (Metheun-Campbell 16). Denton’s mother wrote to him that she was looking forward to their reunion in the middle of June, but before the end of the school year, he was summoned into the headmaster’s drawing room receive the news: Rosalind Welch had died on March 3rd 1927. She was forty-one, and Denton was eleven. Shortly after his wife’s death, Arthur Welch sold the family home and moved into an apartment in Shanghai. As De-La-Noy notes, “Though his father made the occasional visit to England, from now on Denton was in every practical sense an orphan” (De-La-Noy 34). Thus, at the threshold of adolescence, Denton was suddenly motherless and without a real home to which he could return, and the blissful reminiscences of childhood end here:

Bachelard describes the “chief benefit” of the house on the psyche of its inhabitants: “the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace…Without it, man would be a dispersed being” (6-7). What happens when one is expelled from the house, and the environment offers no suitable substitute? Many of the enclosures that I examine in this chapter serve as surrogate spaces that offer, if temporarily and less reliably, the benefits that Bachelard describes.

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14 Welch and Woolf lost their mothers at the threshold between childhood and adolescence; Welch was eleven and Woolf was thirteen. For both autobiographers, the mother’s death is an event that is central to their artistic development, yet their narratives simultaneously lead to and swerve away from the traumatic event.
They provide real or imaginary protection for daydreaming, and within these reveries, Denton experiences the expansive power of his imagination. The small spaces also offer a sensation of coherence or integration: the self is contained within spatial limits. Finally, in some instances these spaces prefigure a future space that Denton seeks, and place of privacy and protection “with a little money, a little room, and work he loved to do” (In Youth is Pleasure 14).

* * *

In addition to the early years of childhood described in “I Can Remember,” Welch wrote extensively about his adolescence in three book-length works: Maiden Voyage (1943), In Youth Is Pleasure (1945), and A Voice Through a Cloud (1950). Together, these autobiographical novels form a serial Künstlerroman charting the origin and development of the aesthetic vocation. James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and D.H. Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers are two prototypical examples of the genre, and both conclude with the protagonists leaving home to pursue their aesthetic vocation. This departure is significant, as it marks the rejection of conventional life in favor of the artist’s high adventure: Stephen Daedalus must “fly by the nets” of family, nation, and religion (Joyce 303), and Paul Morel, in the famous final sentence of the novel, turns his back to the home of his childhood: “He walked toward the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly” (Lawrence 464). Denton Welch’s trajectory is different insofar as he is a wayward adolescent searching for “a nest, a haven, and calm place” (Voice 82). He is grieving the loss of his mother, and with her, his connection to the home of his childhood. At the same time, he is grappling with the emerging awareness of his homosexuality as well as his calling as an artist. For Welch, the realization of his aesthetic vocation is
contingent upon reestablishing a private, protective domesticity; his journey is less about setting forth into the grand unknown than locating a room of his own. Between the snug enclosures of childhood and the small rooms where he lived and wrote his books, Welch spent much of his adolescence in a restless search for spaces where he could explore his inner and outer worlds without impingement. Having lost his mother, his home, and later, his ability to move about freely, he struggles to find his way in an environment that often seems hostile to his development.

Drawing from D.W. Winnicott’s psychoanalytic theories, I argue that the small spaces in Denton Welch’s autobiographical self-portraits serve as holding environments on the artist’s journey from childhood to maturity. Adam Phillips summarizes the underlying question that Winnicott seeks to address with his theory of transitional phenomena: “how does the infant make the transition from being merged in with the mother to being separate?” (Phillips 103). Winnicott posits that the child uses “transitional objects” to negotiate the increasing degrees of separation from the mother, and in the event of “good-enough” care, he moves progressively from a state of absolute dependence to relative independence in the “transitional space.” The environment must be sufficiently reliable to allow the child to relax, to daydream, and to play. Play is a crucial concept in Winnicottian theory, for it is “in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self” (Playing & Reality 54). Moreover, Winnicott considers the therapeutic environment to be a kind of “transitional space” or “holding environment” wherein a child or adult can recover from insufficient handling or traumatic impingements.
Winnicott’s description of a holding environment is analogous to the spatial enclosures that Welch finds, fashions, or imagines in these autobiographical self-portraits. In Winnicott’s formulation, the holding environment involves the child in proximity to the mother or the client in relation to the analyst, but in the absence of a significant m/other, the solitary individual may seek out a space that serves a similar function. Indeed, the privacy and safety within the spatial constraints of the enclosure permit the child to relax his vigilance so that he can play and daydream. The small space is a refuge from the environment’s demands to comply and compromise; in it, the child begins to surrender the mask of the False Self and experience the spontaneous gestures of the True Self. As Susan Stewart notes in her book, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, “the major function of the enclosed space is always to create a tension or dialectic between inside and outside, between private and public property, between the space of the subject and the space of the social” (68). Winnicott makes a similar point about the transitional space, which exists “as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated” (Playing and Reality 2). The spatial enclosures allow Welch to bridge not only his inner and outer worlds, but also the play of childhood and the work of the artist.

II. Fitting In As Best One Can: Maiden Voyage

Denton Welch’s first novel is divided into three sections. In Part I, Denton runs away from boarding school, retracing a previous pilgrimage he had made with his mother. Nervous and out of money, he arrives on his aunt’s doorstep and reluctantly
agrees to go back to school for one term. He then receives an invitation to visit his father in China, and in Part II, Denton sails with his brother to Shanghai. In Part III, he explores the city of his childhood, collects antiques, and makes a trip into the Interior with his father’s friend. Back in Shanghai, he prepares for his return to England, filling his trunks with his dead mother’s belongings before boarding the ship. Denton’s refusal to go back to school in the opening chapter precipitates the titular “voyage,” but for a boy who had traveled widely from a very early age, what is “maiden” about it? This is the first journey that he undertakes alone, and of his own volition. Denton’s escape from boarding school “had been a highly symbolic turning-point in his life. It was his bid to establish a definite identity and to register a protest that he did not accept the inevitability of following a prescribed course in the future” (Metheun-Campbell xi).

A series of encounters preceding his departure for China reinforces this theme. As his final semester at Repton comes to a close, Denton goes to the Art School to gather his things. His instructor, Mr. Williams, sends him off with the following counsel: “Well, goodbye, Welch. Go on with your drawing. Don’t let them make you do anything else.” In this rare moment of affirmation, Denton has an epiphany: “I decided that I wanted to be a painter. I collected my drawings and went out feeling warm and comfortable” (67). Shortly thereafter, when he reports for a “farewell lecture” by the headmaster, he receives the following advice: “My experience is that one must accept one’s environment and fit into it as best one can; otherwise life is nothing but beating one’s head against a brick wall” (69). These alternatives—to fit it as best one can, or to beat one’s head against a brick wall—relate to Winnicott’s theory of the True and False Self. The headmaster advocates the socially acceptable solution; to acknowledge the environment as inflexible
and to adapt accordingly. Yet Winnicott observes that compliance can lead to the creation of a False Self. In contrast, “the True Self is the theoretical position from which comes from the spontaneous gesture and the personal idea. The spontaneous gesture is the True Self in action. Only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real.

Whereas a True Self feels real, the existence of a False Self results in feeling unreal or a sense of futility” (qtd. in Abram 279-280). The artist must align himself with the True Self in order to pursue his vocation; conversely, he must reject the social imperative to conform and comply. Denton’s persistent need to find “a place of his own”—inextricable from his pursuit of an aesthetic vocation—underscores the conflict of all three autobiographical novels. His environment pressures him to comply with its demands, but he repeatedly resists. Whether arising from a refusal or an inability to fit into environments that don’t fit him, Denton seeks out a series of small spaces, both literal and imaginary, in which he can experience his True Self.

**Lavatory**

The first enclosure that appears in *Maiden Voyage* is the lavatory: a small room with a lock on the door, where even a child can gain privacy for a certain duration. (In fact, the opening chapter begins and ends in two train bathrooms.) Following his initial escape, Denton boards a train to Salisbury “in the opposite direction” of his school: “I thought, I’ll go there. I had seen it once with my mother; we had been to look at a cathedral. She was dead now” (1). His choice of destination is not entirely coincidental, and thus the act of running away also initiates a search for his dead mother. Denton now sees himself as a fugitive on the loose, and the lavatory offers temporary haven. “It was a corridor train, and as it pulled out I went to the lavatory and locked myself in. I knew that
nobody could be looking for me yet, but I felt safer there” (1). The bathroom offers safety and privacy in the midst of public space, and it is one of the few places where he can be alone without the threat of intrusion. This moment of solitude allows Denton to reflect on what he’s done:

I suddenly felt terribly glad. I looked at my face in the glass. I was so anxious and happy that I thought I looked mad. I pulled my hat this way and that, wondering how to disguise myself. I thought I might dress up as a woman if I could get any clothes. I knocked the dent out of my hat, making it look like a girl’s riding-hat. I was so excited that my face was red, with sweat on it. (2)

Denton’s act of non-compliance results in a surge of exhilaration. The single-person lavatory with a lock on the door is a site of self-encounter in a mirror and a threshold where transformation might occur. As noted throughout Welch’s writing, others frequently see him as a “sissy,” and here Denton seeks to disguise himself by knocking the “dent out” of his hat. Dent-on (pronounced Dent-in), dent-out: in a curious twist, his name becomes coded as absence or inversion. To knock the “dent out” would be to restore the form to some prior fullness, as if the “undented” Denton might “pass” more as a girl than an effeminate boy. This possibility thrills Denton, and it is fitting that this reverie takes place in the lavatory—a private enclosure within the public sphere where he can be alone with his thoughts and experiment with his identity. Clark Kent steps into the telephone booth and emerges as Superman, but for mere mortals, the fantasy ends with a flush or a lift of the latch, and the thrill of transformation fades. Like Prufrock, we “prepare a face to meet to the faces that [we] meet,” and emerge as our ordinary selves.
Witches’ Cauldrons

When Denton agrees to return to Repton for the remainder of the term, he is “surprised to discover that he had achieved a notoriety and even respect such as he had never previously experienced” (Metheun-Campbell 28). Knowing that his days are numbered and enjoying his improved reputation, Denton tolerates the remaining time in part by sneaking away whenever possible:

If there was time before evening school I would branch off into the fields, behind the Gym where the Witches’ Cauldrons were. There were deep holes in the ground with brambles growing over and almost roofing them sometimes…I used to climb down into one of the cauldrons and sit there thinking. Only a small sheet of sky appeared above… Nobody came here now. I had it all to myself. (63)

These earthen enclosures offer Denton a temporary privacy and place where he can daydream in peace. Laying in a hole in the ground “with brambles growing over” suggests a kind of burial: he might be “playing dead” or thinking about his dead mother. Whatever the nature of his reverie, the enclosure is a temporary refuge where he can surrender his vigilance. Bachelard would call this “reverie,” whereas Winnicott might use the term “going-on-being.” As a boy with no home to retreat to, Denton seeks a haven where he can wander without impingements. The desire to have “it all to myself” is a universal wish of childhood, but some “fit in” more easily than others; for them, the process of adapting is not such a strained process. For the creative child, or the queer child, or the child who is in some way out of place, this process can be excruciating or even impossible, so they search for spaces—pursue them, create them, or transform spaces imaginatively—so as to feel—if temporarily—in place.
Floating Jewel-Box

In the beginning of Part II, Denton sets sail for China. Metheun-Campbell notes, “it is likely that Denton had not been to Shanghai since his mother’s death over five years earlier” (31). So Denton’s previous pilgrimage to the places where he had spent time with his mother resumes with his journey east. Aboard the ship, his creative activity also awakens. The first morning at sea, Denton “began to draw. I sat in a corner of the deck and drew the coiled ropes, the lifeboats, the ventilators and any other strangely shaped thing. It made me happy and contented. I did not think about myself at all” (94). Other passengers express interest in his drawing, and one woman was “persistent as a bird, swooping down to peck at my drawing every moment. At last I gave it up and leaned back against the side of the ship while she talked” (95). Denton seeks a corner where he can engage in his creative activity unmolested, but once again his privacy is violated.

The ship is an enclosed space, but one in which he is enclosed with others. What interests Denton is a solitary, private space. This violation of privacy on board the passenger ship likely leads to his subsequent fantasy of a smaller vessel. This reverie emerges from a conversation with some new passengers, a wealthy American family whose yacht “had broken down and had been left behind for repairs while they went on to Hong Kong” (105). When Denton overhears the mother describing the interior saloon, it catches his attention. She loudly boasts that “every bit of it is thirteenth-century lacquer” that had been extracted from a ruined temple.

It seemed silly and vulgar to tear old Chinese lacquer out of a temple and fit it into a ship’s saloon. I tried to visualize it. I saw the saloon shimmering gold and silver and red. I realized suddenly that it would be beautiful. It would be like
floating on the water inside a jewel-box. On rough days the ship would groan and creak and the waves would be like glass mountains, but inside the lacquer saloon there would be peace and silence… (105-6)

Denton imaginatively transforms the opulent and ostentatious yacht into a floating jewel-box. He is drawn to this fantasy of being insulated and protected, surrounded by “peace and silence” while the storms rage outside. This is a dream of an impermeable interior: the ship may “groan and creak” but this other space “within” is impenetrable and imperturbable. While the lacquer interior acquires this sound-proof, leak-proof quality, the ocean outside, though still ominously immense, becomes curiously fragile, with waves “like glass mountains.” This particular small space is an object of his imagination, rather than the dream of a literal space. These reveries offer escape from the physical realm into imaginary landscapes, and by extension, they inspire daydreams of a future privacy.

**The Packing Trunk**

When Denton is packing in Kai-feng in order to return to Shanghai, he peers through a door and notices that Mr. Butler’s servant is packing his objects in separate tins. “No tins had been provided for my things, so I wrapped them lovingly in my clothes and put them in the bottom of my trunk. I enjoyed the work of fitting all my possessions into the trunk. It seemed to draw me together, to make me more concentrated inside myself” (167). The trunk is a small space over which he has control. This is not a space that Denton literally or imaginatively enters, but this passage suggests a somatic correspondence between the “possessions” and the disparate “parts” of the self: by assembling the objects together neatly and snugly into the small space outside himself, he
feels a corresponding concentration inside himself. The absence of tins may be related to
the absence of a protective exterior for the self; Denton is not built like others (his
brothers, the other schoolboys) and he is ill-equipped to deal with his environment. So the
“loving” wrapping of his clothes suggests a metaphor for his own self-care, and for a boy
who spent his childhood travelling, the trunk is an apt metaphor—it is both a version of
the self, and also a portable, compactable home.

In the conclusion, however, home is not found, his mother cannot be recovered,
and the closest he comes to locating her is by claiming her possessions. Denton clings to
objects as if to capture some trace of his mother, but the restless search for a place
continues. Welch’s first autobiographical novel is about his refusal to follow the
prescribed path, the discovery of his artistic calling, and his realization that there is no
going back. Thus, this “voyage” is a failed one insofar as it culminates in a deeper
awareness of what he has lost. On the other hand, he has established a stronger sense of
independence, and his return to England signals a renewed determination to go his own
way. In Winnicottian terms, Denton has asserted his allegiance to the True Self versus the
False Self. His refusal to “fit in as best he can” means that he must carve out his own
space in an environment that is inimical to his nurturance as an artist. His apparent failure
at the conclusion of the novel is tempered by the reader’s awareness that his journey
continues; he is still “at sea,” but he has not surrendered his search.

III. “Tiny Hermitages”: *In Youth is Pleasure*

As soon as Denton had finished proofreading his manuscript of *Maiden Voyage* in
1943, he was so excited about his future as a writer that “his pen could hardly keep pace
with all the schemes and ideas flooding into his mind” (Metheun-Campbell 121). His contract with Routledge included an option for two further books, and he promptly set to work on a sequel titled, “A Novel Fragment,” which centered on his life at Goldsmith’s art school following the return from China. He set this aside and began an autobiographical account of a walking tour that he had made following his first term, but it would not develop into a book-length work. An unexpected telegram from Edith Sitwell with an invitation to lunch precipitated his change of course. (In spite of their previous correspondence, Sitwell and her protégé had never met.) Welch recalls the following exchange in his journal: “‘Now I think it is the time for you to do something violent and vulgar,’ she said. Her words struck a bell in me. ‘That’s what I’m longing to do,’ I said” (Journals 70). According to Metheun-Campbell, “the first exercise book devoted to In Youth Is Pleasure bears the date ‘April 20th 1943’, the day after he had been to meet her at the Sesame Club” (127). So rather than following his first book with a chronological sequel, Denton recalls a summer holiday when he was fifteen—the year preceding his account in Maiden Voyage. Welch chooses to write his second book in a third-person narrative style, giving his protagonist the name Orvil Pym, but the autobiographical correspondence to his own life is clear. Prior to production, Welch included a subtitle, “A Fragment of Life Story with Changed Names,” but it was “deleted by his cautious editor from the published edition” (De-La-Noy 34). Although Welch clearly wished to be read autobiographically, the use of the third person may have allowed him to be more daring in his second book, and he certainly delivered on Sitwell’s dare. Even John Waters calls In Youth Is Pleasure “so precious, so beyond gay, so deliciously subversive” (Role Models 164).
In Youth Is Pleasure continues several of the themes of Maiden Voyage, but instead of a sixteen-year-old boy escaping from school and traveling to China, a fifteen-year-old boy spends the summer at a labyrinthine hotel with his father and brothers. His mother is dead, his father is emotionally distant, and aside from occasional fraught encounters with his brothers, Orvil wanders the grounds by himself. Several internal conflicts stir beneath the surface: his mother’s death, his emergent homosexuality, and his feelings of loneliness and isolation. Similar to Maiden Voyage, Welch’s second novel charts another “failed” journey, insofar as the boy cannot escape or locate a new home. The enclosures that recur throughout In Youth Is Pleasure offer refuge, privacy, or imaginative flight, and the artistic vocation serves as a beacon as he endures his present miseries.

A Little Room

When Orvil becomes lost in the “dark crooked passages” of the hotel on his first day, a friendly maid calls it “a proper Chinese puzzle” (12). “Then suddenly he saw the hotel as a terrifying labyrinth, with the Minotaur waiting for him somewhere in the dark”

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15 Confined in both time and space, the action is limited—Orvil bicycles to churches and antique shops, he canoes down the river, and he engages in various solitary erotic fantasies—but two episodic sequences punctuate the narrative. In the first, Orvil becomes charmed by an older married female friend of the family named Aphra who visits for a few days. She seems to be a kind of surrogate mother figure and Orvil takes comfort in her attentions, but while exploring a dark grotto late at night, he discovers Aphra and her brother having sex. In the second, Orvil spies on two young boys and an older man who are camping in a wooden hut beside the river. The boys are tanned and athletic, and the older man, a masochistic headmaster from the East End, bosses them around with pleasure. Orvil longs to join the trio, but he can’t bring himself to greet them. Later, when he returns to the hut to find that the boys have gone home, Orvil spends a few hours with the nameless man: they sing songs, talk, and even take turns tying each other up with rope. The scene is sexually charged, but in the end, “nothing” happens. In the climax of the novel, Orvil dazedly discovers himself “at the opening in the bushes which lead to the Mission hut” (130). The headmaster catches Orvil spying and chases him down; they struggle and Orvil surrenders, confessing: “I don’t understand how to live, what to do” (135). When the man asks about his mother, Orvil finally tells his story at length, and the man replies, “But you can’t stop still at your mother’s death” (137).
Welch sets the scene with this mythological allusion, and Orvil is the unlikely hero who wanders about, searching for something that he can’t quite name or understand. Later, alone in his room, “he was filled with a spiritual misery. If only he could die! he thought. Or if he could be free, quite free, with adult rights fully protected; with a little money, a little room, and work he loved to do” (14). In this reverie, Orvil imagines the following alternatives: his own death, the resurrection of his dead mother, or some future independence. Notably, he comforts himself with the thought of “a little room” of his own. In the meantime—before this envisioned space can be attained—he consoles himself with daydreams of tiny hermitages and dream closets. The small spaces he finds or imagines function as temporary “holding environments” until he can find a room of his own.

As in Maiden Voyage, the spatial enclosures sometimes signal a regressive desire to return, to go back to early childhood and recover some feeling of home, and to reconnect with the memory of his mother. Robert S. Phillips regards several episodes of enclosure as “a symbolic return to the womb” (79). But this interpretation overlooks the complex—and frequently conflicting—desires that occur within and around the site of enclosure. I use the terms regressive, escapist, and progressive to describe three differing tendencies. In some instances, the small space suggests a regressive fantasy of return—of return to origins, the maternal body, or the childhood home. In other cases, the small space appears as an escapist daydream, a distant hermitage or other imaginary enclosure that bears little resemblance to any actual space, past, present or future. Yet, the “little room” that appears in the passage above exemplifies a progressive reverie insofar as it forecasts a potential future home or studio. The progressive reverie is tied to the artistic
vocation: the vision of a future space that would fit him, and in which he could become the artist he envisions. All three books are characterized by this ambivalence: a part of Welch longs for the past and wishes to return to his mother, to some persistent yet elusive memory of home, but another part of him understands the impossibility of a return and therefore—if reluctantly—envisions some possible future home. Thought he rarely lingers over these glimmers of a possible future, they persist, and the aesthetic vocation calls him out of the past and into the future. Thus, the small space can signal a desire for a literal space, an environment in which he does not need to fit himself in some Procrustean contortion, but rather a comfortable and protective enclosure that allows him to live and work in peace, which is his decided purpose and greatest wish.

**The Wardrobe**

In the opening of Chapter 3, Orvil becomes obsessed with an “old-fashioned book on physical culture” (42). Staring at the bodies of muscular men inspires him to begin his own exercise regime. At the end of each series of calisthenics, he strips the blankets off the beds, wraps his body, and shuts himself inside the wardrobe. “He did this in an attempt to bring about a profuse sweating; this was something the book strongly recommended” (42). But Orvil was dissatisfied with the amount of sweat that his body produced by this method, so

one morning he decided not to get into the wardrobe but to shut himself in an even more confined space, the bottom drawer of the dressing-chest. Being small, he found he was able to fit into the drawer, but as soon as he tried to shut it, by pushing against the drawer above, he was overcome with the horror of being a prisoner. (42)
Is Denton enacting a symbolic return to the womb, or is he playing out a masochistic fantasy? In the following passage, Orvil’s mind flashes to a book of “dark woodcuts” of Eastern dungeon scenes, in which prisoners were locked in crouched, contorted positions for life. “Orvil saw himself as one of these prisoners. He was locked in a box for ever, lying in his own excrement, screaming to straighten his legs and back, never being able to…” (43). This fantasy is not necessarily consoling, but Denton takes pleasure in these self-torments. They allow him to feel safe because of his ability to control them, to turn them off and on at his own whim. Though he cannot control his actual circumstances, he is the omnipotent agent of this fantasy realm.

**Dream Closets**

Orvil revisits the fantasy of being a prisoner in the following chapter. As he “sat in the snug bathroom…he imagined himself locked in there for ever” (54). He thrills himself with various “what ifs” and then suddenly transforms the imaginary prison into a dramatically different space:

His set of circumstances changed. He still had a room no larger than the bathroom, but he was rich and free now, if extremely recluse. The walls of his tiny hermitage were entirely encrusted with precious stones, enamel and painting. There would be diamonds, sapphires, rubies, emeralds, topazes, carbuncles, garnets, agates, onyxes, aquamarines, jades, quartzes, pearls, amethysts, zircons, chalcedony, carnelian, turquoise, malachite, amber. Whenever he learned a new name, he added it to his list. Set in these stones were the most beautiful Italian primitives and Russian ikons, together with medieval Limoges enamel plaques.
Orvil had learnt many interesting facts from the pages of the magazine *Apollo*, which he saw regularly at school when he went for his extra drawing-lessons; so he was able, from his memory of these, to furnish the most intricate details for his fantastically rich dream closet. (54, emphasis added)

In this fantasy of enclosure, the narration moves from the image of the dungeon to the jewel-encrusted dream closet seamlessly, demonstrating the proximity of pain and pleasure. Orvil enjoys transforming the confinement into a dream of lavish independence. In the first vision, he is imprisoned, stuck, impoverished; in the second, his is “rich…free…if extremely reclusive.” The boxed prison cell becomes a “tiny hermitage” decorated with elaborate and various jewels. This passage is reminiscent of the bejeweled yacht in *Maiden Voyage*—they are both enclosures that imaginatively insulate the inhabitant from the threats in the environment. In the language of Winnicott, these scenes signal a denial of dependence and a fantasy of self-sufficiency.

**The Chicken “Breast”**

In Chapter 7, Orvil grapples with the end of the holidays. “He tried to face the fact calmly, but the thought of going back to school was too horrible for him” (128). To return to school is to be exposed to ridicule and abuse, confined to a dormitory with other boys, with very little privacy. To soothe himself, Orvil “had brought out the Chinese agate chicken his mother had once given him, and as he walked along, he held it tight in his hand” (128). The small object from his mother is his transitional object, protecting him from his frightening thoughts and from the painful separation from his mother; in the absence of his mother to comfort him, he clings to this small item that she passed to him. “Gradually the chill left the milky stone. Abstractedly he rubbed it up and down on his
trousers, and polished it till its little round eye sparkled back at him wickedly; then he breathed on it and covered it with a diamond dew” (128). Orvil fondles the object as if attempt to extract some nourishment from it, and the phrase “milky stone” suggests the breast or nipple: “He popped it in his mouth and sucked it as if it had been a large sweet...He left it in his mouth and walked more and more rapidly. His thoughts were becoming uncontrollable. To stop their unbearable flow he told himself stories in pictures” (128).

Orvil attempts to calm his own anxiety by playing the mother to himself. He is infantilized, sucking on this chicken/breast, simultaneously telling himself “stories in pictures.” Here, the regressive and the progressive tendencies are simultaneous. Orvil appears as a kind of overgrown baby, but rather than telling himself childlike stories, he imagines a possible future: “He saw himself refusing to go back to school and disappearing completely. He was alone in a small London room with a gas-ring. He was working on something at a desk. It might have been a book, or a painting, or even a wool mat. It didn’t matter; it was real work, all alone, full of joy” (128). This is not the fantasy of a lavish, distant retreat; rather, it is a glimpse of a plausible future scenario in which he is independent, with a room of his own and creative work. He is envisioning his life as an artist.\footnote{It is notable, too, that he isn’t some universally celebrated genius, and he doesn’t relinquish his childlike pleasures. The passage continues: And afterwards—lazy times cooking on the gas-ring, scraping long ringlets of chocolate into the saucepan of hot milk, tossing the omelets into the air to turn them over....All around the room his family and the school authorities were prowling like wild beasts. They had long teeth and claws like the mad Nebuchadnezzar; but they were powerless; for the door had double Yale padlocks and four bolts, and the windows bullet-proof glass. (128-9) In spite of this cartoonish twist, the vision of a future happiness as an artist appears here, and this represents a progressive movement.} Orvil sees a future happiness in a small space—a studio and a home—“a
potential space” wherein he might continue the play of childhood as an artist. In a sense, the regressive behavior enables him to go forward. In Winnicott’s theory, the patient who suffers from traumatic impingements co-creates a reliable transitional space with the analyst, and therefore learns or remembers how to play. For Winnicott, the ability to play, to be alone, and to “unintegrate” constitutes a significant achievement. This passage suggests the ways in which Denton’s “regressive” behavior is not limited to some neurotic wish to return, but rather as an attempt to preserve the “True Self” in a hostile environment.

In *Maiden Voyage*, Maurice experiences his aesthetic epiphany, returns to Shanghai in an attempt to reclaim the past, and then realizes, finally, that he cannot go back; his losses are irretrievable, and he must return to England with a packing-trunk of treasures and no home to speak of. In the ironically titled *In Youth Is Pleasure*, Orvil is restless and miserable, searching for secret spaces and hideouts that will somehow contain him and give him the feeling of security and privacy. He escapes into the small spaces, but he also receives some solace by dreaming of a future space: “a small room, and work he loved to do.” In the concluding scene on the train to boarding school, he “was wondering how he was able to sit there and bear it. He thought of himself as twenty-five instead of fifteen. From the distance of ten years, he was looking back on himself, miserable in the railway carriage. He would be able to laugh then, to shake his head and treat it all lightly as nothing” (149). But then a sadistic older boy sits Orvil on his knee, ridicules him publicly, and holds him down and trims his eyelashes. “And as Orvil screamed he knew that he could not stop, that he had been working up this scream all his life. Through his madness spoke these very clear thoughts, ‘Now they’ll never
touch you again. You can be mad for the rest of your life, and they’ll leave you alone.” (152). Eventually Orvil’s brother intervenes, and Orvil realizes, miserably, that “it was still necessary to behave in the ordinary way” (152). For the time being, Orvil must continue to seek shelter in private enclosures while using the mask of the False Self in public. Beneath the surface, he refuses to conform.

IV. Leaving the Daydream Room: A Voice Through a Cloud

Approximately two years elapse between the episodes recollected in the first two novels and the day of the bicycle accident that opens A Voice Through a Cloud. Following his return from China (the conclusion of Maiden Voyage) in February 1933, Welch had enrolled at Goldsmith School of Art in the suburbs of South London. (42) He found a room to rent, he met several friends, and as biographer Metheun-Campbell notes, “it would appear that he was happier than at any time since his mother’s death eight years earlier. He had left Repton with the ambition of training as an artist and this was precisely the course he was following” (57). The accident tragically altered this trajectory. At the precise moment when Welch begins to establish the foundations of his future happiness—his own room, an artistic apprenticeship, and social connections— he is struck and nearly killed. “I heard a voice through a great cloud of agony and sickness” (11). Following this titular scene, he regains consciousness in a nightmare realm, injured and incapacitated. At this point, the obstacles between Denton and his independence, privacy, and “real work he loved to do” seem insurmountable.

A Voice Through a Cloud is a narrative of illness to recovery, but it also charts the persistence of Welch’s dual and interconnected calling to create a home and become an
artist. The small spaces take on a somewhat different resonance in his third novel because, for much of it, “Maurice” (Welch uses his first name in his third novel) can no longer wander and explore. Rather, he finds himself enclosed in a ward in the company of other patients—a new kind of hell for the young man who longs for privacy. Immobilized by his injuries, at the mercy of doctors, and largely neglected by his family (save financial costs), Maurice withdraws into the realms of fantasy. Initially, his ability to escape the horrific conditions of the ward into “daydream rooms” is a tool of self-preservation, but as time passes, his withdrawal becomes increasingly dangerous as these imagined enclosures lead him away from his past, present, or future “realities.” Ultimately, Maurice must reject the allure of insular enclosures—both the escapist daydreams as well as the shielded life of the invalid. In order to answer the inner calling that persists throughout all three autobiographical novels, he must leave these “daydream rooms” and resume his search for “a nest, a haven, a calm place” where he can fulfill his artistic vocation.

**Lifting the Lids on a Series of Boxes**

Forced to witness a variety of horrors in the ward, Denton turns to a blank drawing book that a friend had brought him. “Sometimes I tried to draw other patients; but usually I did things out of my head: bent tubes with tulips and daisies growing out of them; butter-balls on a dish; a strangely shaped vessel, like an alchemist’s retort…” (47). He also “mixed some lines of writing” with his drawings, and this dual activity of writing and drawing provides some comfort. As Maurice’s confinement continues, his capacity for vivid daydreams increases. “My mind would wander from my drawing or my writing
and I would see things in a reverie” (47). In one particular daydream, the city transforms into a miniature series of boxes that he can open and look into:

As I lay there, I wondered about the life in the huge city round me. I would think of the people under the roofs of the little houses surrounding the high hospital ward. In imagination I lifted the mauve slate lids (similar to rummaging through an antique shop) and saw them there, in their bedclothes, ironing, or washing, or making love on the beds. I saw them bending over frying-pans; brushing the hair away from their eyes as the spiritualistic blue vapour hovering above the spitting fat. I saw them beating their children with slippers, and, afterwards, kissing and coddling them voluptuously… (47-48)

Welch notes the similarity between one of his favorite pastimes—exploring antique shops—and this fantasy of lifting roofs and peering into domiciles. Forced into the enclosed space of the ward, he imaginatively transforms the city into a miniature world that he can explore. He interprets this activity as an “escape to pleasure” spurred by his physical incapacitation. Whether it is a chosen enclosure or a kind of prison, one can escape these limitations into reverie, and the spatial constraints trigger this expansion. Welch even compares himself to Alice, another vivid example of the nearness of smallness and vastness: “I had strayed into a nightmare land where I had no part or place. Like Alice I had burrowed down a rabbit-hole to find myself in a world of twisted sight, sound, taste and touch” (50).

An Empty Shell

In addition to the physical pain he endures, Maurice experiences the psychological distress associated with immobility. In Chapter Five, when he is moved
from one hospital to another, he recalls the “strange, disembodied, unearthly feeling” sweep over him. “I was light; I was nothing. Why did they bother to move an empty shell?” (49). His anxiety is compounded by the fact that people in the ward had mistakenly called him ‘Ted’: “I was not Ted. I was no one” (49). As he is transported on the stretcher, “I could think only of myself as a loaf of bread being lifted out of the back of the baker’s van on a wire tray” (51). An empty shell, a loaf of bread: Welch feels as if he has been reduced to an object, inconsequential and immobile, and the absence of physical agency, Maurice regresses to a child-like state:

I plucked at the bed-rails above my head and sang some Shakespearean songs under my breath…I twisted words about to make incongruous, ridiculous sentences…I remembered making noises this way as a child of five or six. That time came back to me vividly; scenes formed and melted like great wax pears. For a moment I lived in them again… (52-53)

In spite of his distress, Welch’s mnemonic capacities become activated and highly attuned. He does not simply see these scenes; rather, he “live[d] in them again” with a notable specificity of detail: “I wore my red-striped socks; I felt my nurse’s comb tearing through my matted hair” (53). While these child scenes offer some consolation, they also suggest an extreme regression.

**The Daydream Room**

In regressive reverie, Welch revisits childhood in memory; in progressive reverie, Welch imagines a possible future space of privacy, independence, and creative agency; in escapist reverie, Welch fantasizes about an imaginary realm that is disconnected from reality. While all of these daydreams could be seen as flights from present circumstances,
the escapist is the most problematic, and in the extreme it constitutes a form of neurotic withdrawal. In Chapter Seven, Welch describes a “daydream room” that is similar to the “dream closet” of *In Youth Is Pleasure* and the floating jewel-box in *Maiden Voyage*. But now, rather than being an occasional, fleeting fantasy, Welch describes it as a “dreaming fit” (71). This daydream is no longer something that he can turn on and off at will; rather, in his condition as an invalid, these escapist reveries begin to exert a certain power over him.

Often it would begin while he was being washed by one of the nurses in the early morning: “I would lie on my back, cross my arms, and float away to an old brick house set in damp green fields in the depths of the country. Usually I found myself in a narrow, lofty room paneled from floor to ceiling in pine” (61). He describes the architecture and ornamentation of the room in minute detail, as if he were actively designing the daydream. Welch offers insight into the original inspiration for this daydream room:

I realize now that this room was reconstructed from my memories of the old paneled rooms in the Victoria and Albert Museum. As a child I had delighted to look in at the windows of these rooms; they were a sort of giant dolls’ house to me. I could imagine people from the past lurking the cupboards and dark places, waiting to come out until the museum should be closed and the peering eyes gone.

(61)

This room is “reconstructed” from a childhood memory that used to give him pleasure, and the following chapter contains a vivid tour of this fantasy world. He describes the furniture, the food he would eat (down to the “curls of fresh butter sprinkled with dewdrops and resting on ice”) — and he lingers over these details in a hallucinatory state.
An eeriness sets in as the daydream persists: “The scene in the room was candle-lit and fire-lit, but outside it was always day” (63). Although he can escape the chaos and din of the ward into this imaginative realm, he also perceives the danger:

While I sunk into these never-ending, constantly repeating daydreams, I felt almost entirely cut off from the life in the ward…I was utterly content to lie there and dream, to burrow backwards forever. I sometimes felt that I had never been so happy or so satisfied with my life, and I knew dimly that this feeling was dangerous, for it made me turn away from every ‘reality’ with dislike, or alarm. I wanted to make no effort. I only wanted to be left alone. (63)

In some instances, the daydreams of childhood memories have a salutary effect insofar as they connect Maurice to past pleasures that may be revisited or recovered; they seem to confirm that the world is a livable place, and sometimes one goes back in order to go forward. But these escapist daydreams tempt him to “borrow backwards forever” into an imaginary realm that is disconnected from reality.

These escapist daydreams of enclosure do not resemble Winnicottian transitional spaces or holding environments; rather than promoting the kind of play that takes place in the presence of another, they signal a wish to return to a solipsistic cocoon cut off from “every ‘reality’” which corresponds to the infantile illusion of omniscience before the inner and outer worlds are bridged. Notably, the imaginary agency the daydream room offers is nearly total: “For I realized, even then, that everything in my daydreams had been invented for my pleasure…Everything was made in my image, and I was a sort of small god, keeping carefully within his own territory” (64). Welch’s crucial insight—“I realized, even then”—signals a sign of health. The challenge for Maurice is to turn away
from these escapist reveries toward reality, and to form relations with others and to surrender his fantasy of self-sufficiency. The child in the small space becomes a small god who can control the miniature world he has found or created, but the existence of this little microcosm depends upon keeping within the territory. It is fragile and easily lost, but it can also be revisited or recreated. The enlargement and expansion that occurs within this space may be beneficial to the child’s development, in that it may reveal to the child his or her imaginative powers. The artistic child—the creative child who will grow into an artist—must learn to translate the imaginative powers discovered within the “magic circle” of the childhood enclosure and bring them into a transitional space. For Winnicott, this is the capacity to play, the capacity to be alone in the presence of others, and the capacity to enjoy (and perhaps contribute to) the cultural heritage.

The Little Box Containing a Ring

Chapter Twelve describes a turning point in Welch’s recovery. While contemplating a flower that had been put in the middle of the room, Maurice experiences a “fierce renewal of pleasure. For a moment my whole body was concentrated on the flower” (101). Similar to the packing of the trunk in Maiden Voyage, his focused attention to an object outside of himself elicits a sensation of concentration within himself. Furthermore, the flower reminds him of life outside of the hospital, and it lifts his thoughts from his own predicament: “that vibrating scarlet ball set me thinking of everything beautiful away from the ward” (101). Shortly thereafter, another object from the outside world diverts his attention from his present miseries: a “little box which had arrived only that morning from China. A friend had sent me an old Mongolian ring—delicate, minute rosettes fixed to a heavy circlet of silver-gilt” (102). It is fitting that a
precious object of value packed within a small box would trigger a transformation. The moment he puts the ring on his finger, he begins dreaming of vast spaces: “I thought of ten thousand miles of ink-blue ocean, huge waves the three-cornered shape of wedges of cheese” (103). This daydream does not absorb him fully into a fantasy realm; rather, his eyes begin to open to the world outside of him. “And when I lifted up my head and saw out of the top panes of the lofty window the sun shining over the jerkily moving trees in the square, the rich feeling of that morning swept back and swallowed me up in happiness” (103) Both inner and outer vision are activated.

From the little box emerges the small ring, and suddenly Maurice’s world expands: “I turned the ring on my finger and doted on it, knowing it to be a symbol of all the things I loved most outside my prison life… I felt like a god or emperor, some being resting on enormous power” (103). While he is smiling transcendently with the ring on his finger, another man in the ward approaches, and for perhaps the first time in his recovery, he willingly suspends his private reverie in order to talk to another person. “His attention warmed me. I began to tell him my story. It seemed grim and sad and interesting. I felt carried away, as if I had invented it. For the first time I saw the episode as a whole, and I tried to read some shape or meaning into it” (103-4). Although Maurice does not stay in this mood for long, this passage marks a significant shift. Maurice begins to perceive the “shape or meaning” within his narrative, which signals the dawning of the autobiographical impulse that characterizes his body of work. The artist achieves a state of solitude and privacy, but the small space ultimately expands to include others: listeners, readers, collaborators. For Welch, the act of looking back and telling his story opens up a path toward his future life, and he makes an art of it as a serial autobiographer.
In this scene, Maurice relinquishes his fantasy of self-sufficiency and connects with others. In a sense, he is transforming the insular enclosure into a transitional space. This moment of connection with a sympathetic listener demonstrates that he has stepped out of the daydream room and into the ward, and the next phase of his journey is to leave the ward for the world.

**Playing Houses Under the Nursery Table**

Maurice continues to dip into despair over his condition, but through the interventions of Dr. Farley—the doctor who appears in the middle of the novel—he begins to imagine a possible future. “It was as if all the problems and difficulties of this new sick life had been halved, because I had found a doctor who appeared to be human” (132). Dr. Farley recognizes Maurice’s artistic talent, and he encourages him to plan for his future. In spite of much resistance, the creative vocation awakens. But Denton continues to oscillate between feelings of despair and possibility, and when Dr. Farley recognizes his “growing wretchedness” (188), he prescribes friendship. Dr. Farley arranges a meeting with a potential friend and Maurice obliges. At first, the meeting goes well: “I enjoyed the snug confinement of his bedroom; it reminded me of playing ‘houses’ under the nursery table. I sat on the end of the bed, he in an arm-chair, and we both almost touches the bookcase with our knees” (191). When this promising encounter falters and Maurice returns to his “nursing home,” his mournfulness returns with a vengeance: “The pleasant afternoon as lost its glow, was dissolving into a set of humdrum actions. There was no place for me there, or in any family. My life must shape itself alone” (192, emphasis added). Maurice fixes to the assertion that he has “no place” and clings to his misery, yet this is precisely the belief that Denton must abandon in order
to create a home of his own. Especially in his physical state, no home would be possible alone; he must acknowledge and accept his dependence on others.

Welch’s memory of “playing houses under the nursery table” recalls the scene in “A Sketch of the Past” in which Virginia and Nessa play together under the table of the night nursery. As Winnicott writes, one must develop the capacity to play alone in the presence of others. This is the significant paradox: under good-enough circumstances, the mother recedes as the protective “shell” and the child begins to distinguish between—and negotiate—the internal and external environment. For Winnicott, this “in-between” is the “therapeutic area” as well as the area of play, where the True Self finds expression. For Winnicott, “the capacity to use the transitional space represented the ultimate in human development and signified the ability to ‘live creatively’ and ‘feel real’” (Abram 4). Given this configuration, Maurice is doomed to unhappiness as long as he escapes into his solitary daydream room. His journey is similar as it has been in the previous two novels: neither to comply with the social imperative to fit himself into his environment as best he can—the headmaster’s advice—nor to lose himself in a fantasy of recapturing mother, childhood, or home. Instead, he must hold to his desire and pursue his aesthetic calling, and locate, through great effort and in the face of enormous suffering, his “true place in the world.”

**A Little Place of My Own**

In the final chapters of the novel, Maurice begins, awkwardly but bravely, to find a home. When Dr. Farley announces that he will move his practice, he asks: “Well, couldn’t I find a cottage or a flat near your new practice…To get out of that nursing home and have a little place of my own would be a great step forward for me” (209). Dr.
Farley agrees to the arrangement, but of course Maurice requires assistance in his condition. He asks “Miss Hellier,” his previous landlady from his time at art school to leave her present post and set up house with him. She agrees and they begin house-hunting. During one of their searches, Maurice enters an antique shop and finds “a little oval enamel box extremely badly broken. A large chip out of the lid broke the engraved inscription in half, showing the purple-brown copper underneath. Just because it was so broken it called out to me” (235). In his passage, Maurice’s love of small things and small spaces is joined. The antique box resonates on multiple levels: it is a gesture of friendship, it is symbolic of his own broken condition, and it is a metaphor for the small space he and Miss Hellier are searching for:

When I had the little box in my hands and was enjoying the refinements of its curve, its delicate eighteenth-century hinge and thumb-piece, I was a little nonplussed by the warmth of its inscription. The flowing script spelt out this couplet: *Accept this trifle from a friend, Whose love for thee will never end.* The triangular chip obliterated most of *never* and part of *for thee*. Somehow this tempered the lavishness of the sentiment and made me less shy at the thought of giving the box to Miss Hellier. (235)

The way in which the inscription is transformed by undercutting the sentimentality is also fitting for someone as wary of social relations as Welch. He finally decides to purchase it, finding “the dilapidation of the box…poignant. I had to rescue it from its degradation on the five-shilling tray” (235) Again, the box is a metaphor for Maurice, who must entrust himself to the care of another. He gives it to Miss Hellier, and she happily accepts: “That
morning neither of us had known what we were going to do; now we both had a plan to work out together” (235).

In the final pages of the novel, Maurice and Miss Hellier continue to search for their house. “If I walked very slowly, if I had to sit down on a public bench, her presence was a barricade between me and the world. We could even joke about my state, even feel snug in some mysterious way” (246). *A Voice Through a Cloud* ends abruptly before the two find their new home, but this passage demonstrates that Maurice has relinquished his dream of self-sufficiency. The fantasy of the tiny, remote hermitage will never materialize, and Maurice engages in the more difficult, practical matter of finding and building a small space where he can do his work.

**VI. My Own Little Private Box: Beyond the Künstlerroman**

The reader of Welch’s “serial Künstlerroman” does not witness the fruition of his artistic development. In the final pages of *Voice*, Maurice is still irritable and resistant, still hunting for a house with Miss Hellier. This sudden breaking off—the manuscript was unfinished at Welch’s bedside when he died—suspends the narrative in an indeterminate state: no scene of arrival, no authorial voice remarking on his eventual success. One consolation for the reader is the book itself: evidence of the artist-autobiographer’s eventual achievement. Many editions of Welch’s books contain frontispieces, title page illustrations, and decorative chapter headings designed by the author, which telegraph his dual-calling as writer and visual artist. These elements signal the eventual fulfillment of this aesthetic vocation, but what about “the room of his own”? By turning from *A Voice Through a Cloud* to a biography or Welch’s own posthumously published journals, one
can chart the artist’s continued development, and though he never fully recovers from the injuries that ultimately take his life, Denton Welch did succeed in his quest for a “small room, and work he loved to do” (*In Youth Is Pleasure* 14).

Throughout the novels, Welch repeatedly imagines his future independence in a state of reclusive solitude. Whether he fantasizes about tiny hermitages or small London rooms, he sees himself alone within the protective walls of his spatial enclosure. But as Winnicott points out, we live our lives in relation to others, and independence can be gained only through acknowledgement of dependence (*Winnicott* 7). One of Winnicott’s most important essays, “On the Capacity to Be Alone,” takes this paradox as its premise: “it is the experience of being alone while someone else is present” (qtd. in Abram 32). Maurice begins to surrender his fantasy of self-sufficiency in the second half of *Voice*, and given his condition as an invalid, he has little choice. Dr. Farley is the most influential “other” in his convalescence; with compassion and encouragement, he challenges Maurice to relax his defenses against others, and he helps establish a sufficient holding environment so that Maurice can recover his trust that the world was a “safe-enough” place. The gift of the cracked box to “Miss Hellier” (Evie Sinclair) is another poignant symbol of this shift. In reality, Welch and Sinclair found a flat together in 1936, and they shared a series of residences for the remaining twelve years of his life. All of these homes were indeed “small spaces” filled with his collections of antiques and found objects, including those belonging to his mother that he recovered from his father’s flat in Shanghai. This domestic arrangement was not without its challenges, but it provided

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17 After Eric Oliver arrived on the scene, Welch and Sinclair spent a few periods apart, but she returned when his condition worsened.
Welch with the necessary space to live and make his work. Indeed, he had created a room of his own.

And what of love? Künstlerromane typically include descriptions of a formative romantic relationship, but this is mostly absent from Welch’s work. Given the time period in which he is writing and publishing, Welch is daring in his representation of homosexuality, as many have noted; still, when the protagonist of these novels imagines his future life, he does not seem to envision a primary romantic attachment. Nevertheless, one of the most profound experiences in the final years of Denton Welch’s life is his relationship with Eric Oliver. The two met in 1943, and an uneasy but persistent flirtation ensued. Many complications stood between them (not least among them Welch’s partial impotence as a result of his injuries), yet the developing intimacy between them tested his long-held fantasy of self-sufficiency. In order to sustain the relationship, he would have to learn to be “alone in the presence of another,” but his defenses against impingement were fierce. In one letter to a friend, Welch wrote: “I seem built to make human contacts go wrong” (qtd. in De-La-Noy 220). But the relationship between Welch and Oliver survived a period of turbulence, and as Metheun-Campbell writes:

From June 1944 the friendship between them became more stable, with Denton even acknowledging that it was having a constructive effect on his emotional development. No longer did he hanker after the romantic life of a recluse. “I’ve tried to live up to now shut up in my own little private box,’ he wrote [in a letter to Eric Oliver], ‘and it’s burst upon me that this is the wickedest, stupidest thing that anybody could try to do.” (152, emphasis added)
Traumatic impingements from the environment caused Welch to seek privacy and protection in a small space, but the point is not to remain hidden forever. I have argued that the spatial enclosure offers the child temporary refuge and protection, and that within this shelter, the child learns to experience what Winnicott terms the True Self. But the ultimate purpose is not to retreat forever in an insulated enclosure. This dilemma is partially resolved by the interventions of Dr. Farley (Dr. John Easton) as well as his autobiographical writing and publishing. Edith Sitwell and others discover his talent, and he finds considerable satisfaction in the cultivation and reception of his writing. Through his close bond with Oliver, Denton eventually achieves a new relational intimacy, and they move into together and make a home. It is a small space, as he always envisioned, but it is no longer a private box but a space shared with an intimate other. In the following journal entry from 1945, three years before his death, Welch touches upon a very similar theme to the one that Winnicott would present in a paper twelve years later at the British Psycho-Analytical Society in 1957. What Winnicott refers to as “the capacity to be alone in the presence of another,” Welch describes as “an utterly different quality of solitude”:

8 January, 5:20 PM. Grey half-light.

My life is a great unfoldment with many marvelous things about it. I would not have thought that I would be damaged and ill so soon (twenty) or that so comparatively late (twenty-eight and a half) I should find someone with whom I

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18 Welch and Oliver did make a home at “Middle Orchard” in the village of Crouch, yet Welch really wanted to purchase his own place. Middle Orchard was given to him to live in from friends, and still held onto this dream of his “own” place. Until the end of his life, he continues to dream of a small space that is all his own. In 1945, he wrote: “There really seems some chance now that I may be able to build a tiny house, and I keep seeing in my mind exactly what I want.” As De-La-Noy notes: “Nothing, alas, came of this plan, and the dream house was to remain a dream for ever” (256).
could live in almost complete peace. All of life before that had seemed quite necessarily a solitary affair—and so it still is, but with an utterly different quality of solitude.

In my heart are hung two extraordinary pictures: one is called “Accident and Illness” and the other, exactly opposite, titled forward as if to meet it, is called “Love and Friendship.”

V. The Purest Pleasure I Had Known: “The Packing-case House and the Thief”

Two years before his death, Welch wrote a short story set in the garden of his childhood home in Shanghai. Originally published in the periodical Junior in 1947, and reprinted for the first time in the appendix of Metheun-Campbell’s 2004 biography, “The Packing-Case House and the Thief” opens with the description of a remembered small space:

When I was ten years old, my mother had a little house made for me out of a large packing-case. The packing-case had held an old lacquer chest for fifty years and was very well made and strong, and the carpenter who converted it was clever. He cut a small door and window, then thatched the roof with straw. Inside he made a miniature dresser, corner cupboard and window seat. That was all he did. The painting and decoration were left to me, as I had asked for them to be. (203)

This provides an illuminating glimpse of the artist-autobiographer at age ten, in the last stage of childhood, one year before the death of his beloved mother. She is attentive to his wishes, as he indicates in the opening sentence: “my mother had a little house made for me.” The boy makes a bid for his mother’s attention: “When I came in from it in the evening, I would say to my mother, ‘I haven’t dared to begin papering yet.’” Her initial silence suggests a reserve, yet she gives in: “At last she said, ‘We’ll do it together.’”
(203). Mother and son collaborate on the interior decoration of this desired enclosure, beginning with the wallpaper: “Being the smallest, I stood inside the house, while my mother, half in, half out the door, cut the paper carefully, and passed it to me, telling me to use as little paste as possible” (203). This is a quintessential Winnicottian transitional space: child and mother at play, the child centered in his creative activity while enjoying the sensation of “going on being” in the presence of the mother who is “half in, half out.” The fact that the packing-case house is unfinished is also significant. The child must have the illusion of creating the transitional object—part of its function is to give the individual a feeling of creative control over his environment. After reading about Welch’s anguished adolescence, it would be difficult to imagine a happier picture than this one: Denton at home, in the presence of his mother and with her full attention, designing a small space to suit his every wish.

Indeed, Welch’s description of the activity, though characteristically matter-of-fact, slips intermittently into the rhapsodic: “For a moment I was spellbound, because the moon had suddenly come out, and real moonlight was falling through the real, opening window on to the real dresser. The thought that this little house was mine gave me the purest pleasure that I had known” (204).¹⁹ Welch’s repetition of “real”—italicized first and repeated twice without italics—suggests that the intensity of the initial revelation relaxes into profound contentment. Also, his emphasis on possession—“this little house was mine”—demonstrates the child’s need to experience his own agency: he can create, and he can have a certain degree of control over his world. Within sufficiently nurturing

¹⁹ This echoes Woolf’s description of the nursery bed at St. Ives in the opening paragraphs of “A Sketch of the Past”: “It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and finding, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy that I can conceive” (65).
conditions—an environment without excessive impingements—the small space can be a blissful place.

Once the packing-case house has been perfected, mother and son celebrate their accomplishment with a ceremonial tea:

With the tea things on a tray, I walked back to the house, where I found my mother just hanging up the curtains. The yellow stripes, the pink and green sprigs on the walls, the cream paint, the grey rug, the books and my collections of objects—could anything be more satisfying? We gazed at the delightful thing we had completed. Then I insisted on shutting the door and having tea inside the tiny house. (204)

Denton relishes the artful completion of his own small space in the presence of his mother. All is well: the packing-case house is within the protection of the domestic sphere, and the child feels safe to enclose himself in a world of his own. When the individual suffers from impingements in the environment, the small space serves as a necessary refuge: we hide ourselves in order to become unhidden to ourselves. The story of the packing-case house is revealing because it depicts Denton shortly before the loss of mother and home, thus contextualizing his subsequent attempts to orient himself in the absence of a sufficient holding environment, and to begin to imagine some future space wherein he would “feel real” again.

Shortly after Denton perfects his little house, spending “nearly all my spare time in or near it,” a thief breaks into the family home and makes off with a collection of family heirlooms. When the burglary is discovered the following morning, Denton runs outside to check on his own tiny house. Finding it damaged and smeared with dirt, he is
devastated: “Without picking anything up, I sat down on the window seat and waited...My own mind had gone dead” (207). With the help of his little dog, he finds some items that had been stashed or dropped in the bushes, and the thrill of announcing his discovery to the family animates him. In the final lines of the story, Denton has an epiphany:

I thought again of how my house had been spoilt for no reason, and although I still had great bitterness, I felt, too, a strange new satisfaction. I was pleased that my house had not escaped, was almost proud that is had been damaged. It made it even more real to me, deeper and more interesting. (208)

In spite of the fact that his private enclosure had been “spoilt for no reason,” the boy is “almost proud” of the experience. His bitterness persists, but the damage makes his little house “more real....deeper and more interesting.”

“The Packing-Case House and the Thief” was written in late 1946, and in April of the same year, Welch wrote the following in his journal: “I bleed inside; and when it comes out of me, almost fascinating in its disgustingness, I feel full of snarling that I am spoilt...And if a silly woman in a car ten years ago had driven straight instead of crooked, I should not be whining till I’m stiff all through” (Journals 263) The notion of being “spoilt for no reason” applies to both the tiny house and to the author himself, and the senselessness of the damage is lessened—or partially compensated—by the depth of experience. Virginia Woolf’s also links traumatic shocks to the artistic vocation, calling them “moments of being.” These “blows,” these impingements, break of “seal” of our vessels—our protective enclosures—and with this trauma, a certain perceptible order is

20 In the same journal entry, Welch writes: “How tedious the little details seem, written down, yet it is always this littleness that seems to have, banked up behind it, great walls of fight and resistance” (Journals 263).
revealed: our interconnectedness, the small threads that weave our stories together. For Welch, the child in the doorway of the damaged but surviving packing-case house is also the serial autobiographer in his room; the bitterness is not gone, but the abiding interest in recounting the story, in imaginatively tracing and telling its details, persists. The story concludes with this final line: “I sat in the doorway…thinking of all that my house had seen” (208). One can see the artist-autobiographer sitting in his small house, thinking and writing about everything he has seen. To be damaged is also to have experienced something, to have a story to tell.

For Denton Welch, telling his story leads him out of a “private box” and into the kind of solitude that Winnicott identifies: the capacity to be alone in the presence of an other. The autobiographical impulse implies this desire for a reader and therefore constitutes a wish to be joined in the small space. Paradoxically, the autobiographer must become solitary in his small space in order to reach the reader. The enclosure is not a box, after all; it is a threshold that opens onto vastness. Like a book.
Fig. 1. Denton Welch with his dolls’ house in 1946. (Metheun-Campbell 44)

Fig. 2 The Denton Welch Dolls’ House, Victoria & Albert Museum of Childhood Collection.
Chapter III: Lyric Self-Portraits of the Artist: Childhood Spaces of Frank O’Hara, Anne Sexton, and Robert Duncan

It is a joy to be hidden, and disaster not to be found.
– D. W. Winnicott, “Communicating and Not Communicating”

Virginia Woolf began “A Sketch of the Past” in 1939 and worked on it intermittently until her death in 1941. Denton Welch’s brief career spanned from the early 1940s to his death in 1948. In this chapter, I turn from the prose works of these two British writers to consider three American poets of the postwar period. Frank O’Hara’s “Autobiographia Literaria,” Anne Sexton’s “Those Times...,” and Robert Duncan’s “Childhood Retreat” are similar to the autobiographical self-portraits of Woolf and Welch in that these poets trace their artistic development back to childhood spaces, yet these life narratives are compressed into lyric poems. In “Sketch,” Woolf searches for modes and forms that will free her of the constraints of traditional autobiography. She writes: “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” (Moments 75). Woolf’s innovation permits a greater fluidity between past and present in her prose; rather than forcing her narrative into a linear, chronological order, she can oscillate freely between the I-Now and I-Then. Furthermore, she emphasizes the discontinuity between the past and present selves: they are “the two people,” not one. The poems by O’Hara, Sexton and Duncan involve a similar juxtaposition between the “I Now” and “I Then”, and each poet highlights the contrast between the child and the artist with surprisingly different effects—and affects. Whether the child is figured in a corner, a
cabinet, or a retreat in the treetops, the adult speakers marvel at the distance they have travelled, and the spaces in which they frame the “I-Then” offer illuminating glimpses of their respective poetics. The poem itself is a kind of enclosed space in which the child and the grown speaker are brought into relation; its formal concision attenuates spatial and temporal distances such that the I-Now and I-Then figuratively encounter one another in the poem. In a sense, the lyric poem is analogous to the childhood small space insofar as both can be seen as a miniature world or microcosm, spatially enclosed and charged with meaning. The child, like the poet, experiences an empowering agency within the space: she becomes a dreamer, and she is the subject of her own dream. The enclosure triggers the imagination, spatial constraints transform or vanish, and the small opens onto the vast.

I. From Corner to Center: Frank O’Hara and the Poetics of Play

As a talker, a curator, a New Yorker, and a poet, Frank O’Hara is something of a legend. His portrait was painted by many of the artists he befriended, and countless poems have been written to celebrate his influence—even his stride: “I remember Frank O’Hara’s walk,” writes Joe Brainard in I Remember. “Light and sassy. With a slight bounce and a slight twist. It was a beautiful walk. Confident. ‘I don’t care’ and sometimes ‘I know you are looking’” (Brainard 17). Frank O’Hara was certainly looking, and many of his poems document the sights and sounds of New York in the fifties and sixties. In “A Step Away from Them,” O’Hara transports his reader to the middle of Manhattan, in the middle of the twentieth century, at mid-day:

On to Times Square, where the sign
blows smoke over my head, and higher
the waterfall pours lightly. A
Negro stands in a doorway with a
toothpick, languorously agitating.
A blonde chorus girl clicks: he
smiles and rubs his chin. Everything
suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of
a Thursday. (*Collected* 257)

Clearly, O’Hara had a knack for placing himself in the center of the action. As David
Lehman asserts in *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*:

“Frank O’Hara was a star, the natural center of attention in a room” (167).

According to O’Hara’s lyric self-portrait, he wasn’t always in the middle of the
action. In “Autobiographia Literaria,” O’Hara plays with the contrast between the
elementary school misfit and the triumphant poet. Biographer Brad Gooch notes that this
is “the first of his poems about childhood and the vocation of poetry” (24):

When I was a child
I played by myself in a
corner of the schoolyard
all alone.

I hated dolls and I
hated games, animals were
not friendly and birds
flew away.

If anyone was looking
for me I hid behind a
tree and cried out “I am
an orphan.”

And here I am, the
center of all beauty!
writing these poems!
Imagine! (11)

O’Hara compresses this “literary autobiography” into four quick quatrains. The wit of
this poem, in part, is in the radical elision that undercuts the title, which, as Gooch notes,
is a “spoof of Coleridge’s book-length Biographia Literaria” (24) O’Hara sketches an image of the child in past tense, and each stanza is a single sentence with little description. O’Hara seems to be parodying the self-pitying narratives of childhood—the redundancy of “by myself” and “all alone” signals this tongue-in-cheek overstatement. In stanza two, we learn that this child is not some pitiful victim. He is neither a sissy (“I hated dolls”) nor a wannabe (“I / hated games”); on the contrary, his social isolation appears to be a choice, and lest we imagine him to be some kind of Saint Francis of Assisi, O’Hara sweeps aside these associations: “animals were / not friendly and birds / flew away.” Stanza three reinforces the sense that this child chooses his solitude, and the enjambment mimics the boy’s withdrawal, each line break enacting a further degree of remove.

The twist lies in the fourth and final stanza with the abrupt shift into present tense. This divides the poem into a dyadic structure: there I was (stanzas 1-3) and here I am (stanza 4). The sudden emergence of the present tense also constitutes a turn toward the reader; O’Hara uses apostrophe with an implied second person address: “And here I am, the / center of all beauty! / writing these poems! / [you] Imagine!” This final line is both an expression of amazement and a command to the reader. He toys with the trope of the misfit child in the first three stanzas, and the reader plays along; then the past recedes as the speaker grabs the reader by the sleeve. The distances, both temporal and spatial, collapse with the speaker’s sudden announcement—“And here I am”—and this shift creates an illusion of presence. The three consecutive exclamation points and the present progressive—“writing these poems!”—arrest the reader’s attention, and we seem to join him in the act of composition. These exclamations are so sudden and so emphatic that
they distract from the speaker’s hyperbole: the center of all beauty? Perhaps the fourth stanza is as ironic as the previous three, and O’Hara is mocking the egotism of the poet as much as he plays with the cliché of a poet’s tortured childhood. Given the title, O’Hara may be satirizing the genre of literary autobiography, with its implicit fictions of transformation and transcendence: the unhappy, alienated child growing into the triumphant, self-congratulatory artist. Yet O’Hara’s “Autobiographia Literaria,” however playful, still conveys the excitement of the young poet discovering his vocation. John Yau notes a similar combination of bathos and pathos: “O’Hara details a poignant, yet self-mocking vision of a lonely childhood” (12). The poignancy is not lost in the ironic pose.

What is the relative significance between corner and center, and how does a playground contrast with the imaginary, textual realm of “these poems”? To begin, the schoolyard is a site of group activity, a communal space where constellations of children play simultaneously. Generally, it is an open yet contained expanse of grass or asphalt, designed to be empty of nooks or hiding place: a kind of panopticon surveilled by parental or administrative authority. Play is permissible but policed, and solitary activity is implicitly discouraged. The schoolyard enforces the imperative to socialize, to interact, to join the game. For the child who doesn’t fit in, or the child who doesn’t wish to, the schoolyard can be a site of anxiety, even terror. Where to sit, and with whom? How to blend in or become invisible? The child who seeks solitude in a place designed to discourage it searches along the perimeter: in a corner. If the center of the schoolyard is the site of engagement and participation, the corner may signal a refusal or a retreat—a place one goes to get away with something, or merely to get away. Where does one go
from there? For the imaginative child who feels “cornered” in his environment, he escapes within: into himself, into books, into the imagination. The center of all beauty has little to do with the center of the schoolyard—this is not the dream of a social misfit being heroically lifted onto the shoulders of his former persecutors. Rather, the traversal of corner to center is about the escape from a physical, social space in which the speaker feels alienated into an interior, imaginative realm within which the author, the one “writing these poems,” feels ecstatically centered in his own subjectivity.

O’Hara’s triumph is not about a successful integration into “grown up” society. In the traditional Bildungsroman, the protagonist navigates various obstacles to integrate into society as an adult. He becomes the center of a home, a family, or a community as provider, father, patriarch. The subject of twentieth century Künstlerromane—like Joyce’s Stephen Daedalus—confronts and refuses the imperatives of family, religion, and nation. He must “fly by those nets” in order to pursue an aesthetic vocation. In City Poet, Gooch mentions James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man was one of O’Hara’s favorite books. “He identified with Joyce as the Irish-Catholic renegade who had deserted his Jesuit training to become a writer, who had decided not to pursue the religion of Mary Mother of Jesus but rather to pursue the religion of High Art” (48). Gooch also notes that O’Hara’s favorite passage in Portrait was the scene in which Stephen Daedalus watches a girl wading at the beach and realizes his vocation. “Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable” (170) The fourth stanza of O’Hara’s “Autobiographia Literaria,” with its three consecutive exclamation points, echoes Joyce’s epiphany. Poetry, it would seem,
becomes a vehicle for this peripheral misfit to liberate himself from the corner and play in “the center of all beauty.” In O’Hara poem, the child behaves more like an irritable adult, while the grown poet displays a childlike glee.

Erik Martiny pursues the literary origins of O’Hara’s child-like pose in his article, “‘There I could never be a boy’: Frank O’Hara and the Cult of the Child.” Martiny argues that O’Hara “derived his persona of the man of letters as enfant terrible in great part from Romanticism” (24). He describes Romanticism’s Janus-faced quality, citing the split between its grand “prophetic visage” and its celebration of the “humble, the small, and the childlike.” Focusing on this second aspect, Martiny points out that it is itself double-sided: “split down the middle, one half in tears, the other radiant” (23). One is the child who elicits our pity, the lost orphan, and the other is the Wordsworthian Child of Joy. According to Martiny, O’Hara embodies a Romantic child figure that is a particular variation of these alternatives: “the figure of the wayward child.” This child persists in his independence and does not “return to the maternal fold” like Wordsworth’s children, who “tend to be dutifully submissive and are seen to shore up the values of the nuclear family in a rather sentimental way” (24). Similar to the child in Blake’s “Little Vagabond” or Keats’ “A Song About Myself,” this figure is more independent and mischievous, and Martiny contends that the figures in these Romantic poems “anticipate and enable [O’Hara’s] celebration of the writer himself as wayward child and homo ludens” (24). O’Hara is a poet who refuses to grow up, and who sees the poem as a site of permission and play. Joe LeSueur, O’Hara’s longtime roommate and sometime boyfriend, comments on this characteristic in his book, Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O’Hara:
…there was an element of play in all of his creative endeavors, collaborative or otherwise; and yes, I’m that aware that the same can be said of the efforts of all true artists, though in Frank’s case the play element was so pervasive, so predominant, that it ruled out the possibility of his ever becoming a professional writer (that is, professional in the sense of making a living from one’s writing).

(172)

So perhaps “Autobiographia Literaria” can be seen as an *ars poetica* of sorts. For O'Hara, poetry is liberated from rules and compulsory exercises; there is no authority to answer to, no surveillance, and no intrusions. The poem is a free space where play becomes possible, and wherein the self becomes the center of the universe, surrounded by beauty. The aesthetic realm answers the wish of the wayward child in that it becomes a playground of his own design; the artist is free to be as exuberant, as ecstatic, and as perverse as he wishes.

Though Martiny focuses on O’Hara’s work, he repeatedly extends his argument to contrast Frank O’Hara, as representative of the New York School, with the Confessional poets.

If one were to evaluate the impact of the Romantic cult of the child on the mid-twentieth century lyric in American poetry, it would appear that the ambivalent images it projects were internalized by at least two rival aesthetic tendencies. The New York School of poets, with its emphasis on the ludic, adopted the Romantic naughty rascal approach, while the ‘Confessional’ poets, with their propensity to convey existential anguish, can be said to have co-opted the Romantic metaphor.
of the lost and uncomprehending orphan to express their sense of psychic peril.

These divisions, if too neatly drawn, provide a useful framework for my investigations into the small spaces that appear in these poems of childhood. The child in O’Hara’s “Autobiographia Literaria” calls himself an orphan to ward off intruders, but the gesture is more comic than tragic. He prefers to play by himself, but he is still playing. The child in O’Hara’s poem has agency and a sense of his own subjectivity. He is “wayward,” as in “disposed to go counter to the wishes or advice of others, or to what is reasonable; wrongheaded, intractable, self-willed; froward, perverse. Of children: Disobedient, refractory” (“Wayward”). Indeed, this boy fits Martiny’s “naughty rascal” description. In Anne Sexton’s “Those Times…”, a very different child appears. Both poems figure unhappy children who grow into empowered artists, but while O’Hara’s depicts his child self as the “naughty rascal,” the girl in Sexton’s poem resembles Martiny’s description of the “lost and uncomprehending” victim.

III. From Closet to Stage: Anne Sexton and the “Paradox of Privacy”

O’Hara and Sexton were close contemporaries. Francis Russell O’Hara was born in Baltimore in 1926, but his parents returned to Massachusetts eighteen months later to raise their son in Grafton. Anne Gray Harvey was born in 1928 in Newton, Massachusetts, the youngest of three daughters, and she was raised in Wellesley. These two poets, who would make major contributions to twentieth century American poetry, grew up just two years—and twenty-five miles—apart. Whereas the child in O’Hara’s

21 O’Hara’s parents married in Grafton, Massachusetts, then abruptly left for Maryland to cover up the conception of their first son out of wedlock.
poem exiles himself to a corner of the schoolyard, the girl in Sexton’s “Those Times…” is exiled within the family home. In the opening stanza, she establishes the central image of herself as a young girl imprisoned in her bedroom:

   At six
   I lived in a graveyard full of dolls,
   avoiding myself,
   my body, the suspect
   in its grotesque house.
   I was locked in my room all day behind a gate,
   a prison cell.
   I was the exile
   who sat all day in a knot. (118)

Dolls appear in this anguished opening stanza, as in O’Hara’s poem, and in both instances they are depicted in a negative light. O’Hara’s hatred of dolls seems to signal a willful rejection or contempt, whereas for Sexton the “graveyard of dolls” implies that they offer her no consolation or comfort. Dolls serve as tools of gender instruction or as transitional objects, but here they are identified as emphatically “other.” Even the speaker’s body is somehow alien: “myself” and “my body” are experienced as separate, and both are better avoided. Sexton recalls being confined to her bedroom “behind a gate,” which turns this space—ideally, a refuge for a child—into “a prison cell.” The child self is denied the ability to move about freely, and she is made to feel as if she is “the exile.” The center is elsewhere, and the child is relinquished to the periphery.

In the following stanza, Sexton mentions “the little childhood cruelties,” which includes “being the unwanted, the mistake” as well as “the nightly humiliations when Mother undressed me.” Thus far in the poem, the child is victim—bewildered, abused, and without agency. Sexton continues to describe the “well made” dolls in her room, their
“pink skin and the serious China-blue eyes.” She is attracted to their perfection, but she feels inferior by comparison:

They came from a mysterious country
without the pang of birth,
born quietly and well.
When I wanted to visit,
the closet is where I rehearsed my life,
all day among shoes,
away from the glare of the bulb in the ceiling,
away from the bed and the heavy table
and the same terrible rose repeating on the walls. (119)

The dolls trigger the girl’s imagination and she fantasizes about their origins in “a mysterious country.” When she wants to explore this imaginative realm, the closet becomes her portal, and she retreats from the bedroom to this further within. In this smaller space, the agency shifts from passive to active: “the closet is where I rehearsed my life.” She does not choose to be locked inside her room, but she does choose to burrow deeper into the darker enclosure. The closet offers a refuge from the terrors of the bedroom, which Sexton transforms into an “unheimlich” or uncanny space of sinister surveillance (“the glare of the bulb in the ceiling”) and anxiety (“the same terrible rose repeating on the walls”). Though close in proximity, the closet functions as an escape—a way to get away. Similar to the space under the table in Woolf’s night nursery, the smallness and the darkness within this enclosure awaken the child’s imaginative capacity.

What does it mean to rehearse one’s life? Sexton elaborates in the fourth stanza. Here, in the closet—and in the center of the poem—the child is no longer a prisoner but an active subject. Though she is hiding in the closet, she is growing and planning and dreaming:

\[ I \text{ grew into it like a root} \]
\[ \text{and yet I planned such plans of flight,} \]
believing I would take my body into the sky, 
dragging it with me like a large bed. 
And although I was unskilled 
I was sure to get there or at least 
to move up like an elevator. 
With such dreams, 
storing their energy like a bull, 
I planned my growth and my womanhood 
as one choreographs a dance. (120, emphasis added)

The same girl who sat “like a knot” in the prison of her bedroom now grows “like a root” in the dark of the closet, and she experiences a surge of potential power. These dreams possess an “energy” which the girl stores “like a bull”; they enable the child to imagine an increase in size and strength as she fantasizes about her eventual escape and ascendance. Also, within the closet, the child begins to intuit her creative vocation. Enclosed in the dark space, she goes inward and discovers an expansion of her imaginative power: the future becomes imaginable as something one might control or design.

In the following three stanzas, Sexton revisits these terrors and builds towards her most disturbing disclosure. The child attempts to protect the most vital and central part of her self through stealth: “I sat all day / stuffing my heart into a shoe box, / avoiding the precious window / as if it were an ugly eye / through which the birds coughed” (120). The shoe box is yet another image of enclosure, a place to hide and store something for safe keeping. The description of the window as “an ugly eye” is sinister, as it heightens the child’s anxiety of being watched and judged. At this point in the poem, the mother emerges as the villain. Sexton mentions the “the nightly examinations when Mother undressed me” in stanza two, but now she goes into painful detail:

and in this way I waited out the day 
until my mother,
the large one,
came to force me to undress.
I lay there silently,
hoarding my small dignity.
I did not ask about the gate or the closet.
I did not question the bedtime ritual
where, on the cold bathroom tiles,
I was spread out daily
and examined for flaws. (120-121)

This revelation further indicts the mother for the double crime of neglecting her child by locking her into the bedroom and inspecting her body without explanation. Sexton’s mother emerges as a monstrous character, shadowy and seemingly devoid of sympathy: she is “the large one.” The bright, cold bathroom in which the girl is “forced to undress” contrasts with the enclosed space of the closet, where she is surrounded by shoes and clothes. In the closet, the child has agency; in the bathroom, she is treated like an object that is “examined for flaws.”

The six-year old couldn’t have predicted her future, but the poet, in retrospect, traces the origin of her gift back to the this childhood experience. Sexton concludes “Those Times…” with the following epiphany:

I did not know that my life, in the end,
would run over my mother’s like a truck
and all that would remain
from the year I was six
was a small hole in my heart, a deaf spot,
so that I might hear
the unsaid more clearly. (121)

There is much to make of these lines: the way the poem is a form of retribution against her mother, and the violence Sexton commits to her mother’s memory; the fact that Sexton’s mother entertained her own dreams of becoming a poet, and how the daughter, who had been told she was not intelligent enough to be writer, had surpassed her mother
beyond all expectations; the connection between the girl in the closet storing energy “like a bull” and now, in the final stanza, her life is “like a truck”; how both metaphors speak to the trampling of her mother, and how the poem is a “stampede” of language that witnesses, testifies, and condemns. But what is more germane to my argument is the way the child self (“the year I was six”) and the grown poet (“so that I might hear”) are juxtaposed in these final lines. The I-Then attempts to protect her heart by “stuffing [it] into a shoe box,” but the I-Now inherits a hole nonetheless—an absence, that is, paradoxically, the source of her poetic gift. As a result of this childhood experience, the hole in her heart is also, curiously, an ear, and through this “deaf spot,” Sexton learns to hear “the unsaid.” (Like Woolf, the artistic gift arises from the childhood trauma.) The heart emerges from the shoe box with a hole that can hear, and the girl emerges from the closet with the gift of the poet. For Sexton the poet, the closet is the space where she discovers, and develops, a liberating subjectivity. Anne Harvey Gray was born of her mother, but Anne Sexton, the poet, may have been born in that closet.

Martiny describes Frank O’Hara’s work by offering repeated comparisons to the “rival aesthetic tendencies” of the Confessional poets. (25) I am drawn to his distinction between the wayward child of the New York School and the orphan of the Confessional poets because it resonates with the childhood spatial settings considered thus far: the willful boy in “Autobiographia Literaria” who retreats to the corner of the schoolyard and the exiled girl who seeks refuge in the closet. While I agree with many of Martiny’s insights, his criticisms of Confessional poetry are overstated. For instance, his declaration that “a true Confessional has to keep confessing the same neurotic set of ‘sins’” is a broad
generalization, and later, while praising O’Hara’s “refusal to brood” over the childhood past, he makes the following remarks on the “Confessionals’ view of time”:

All hope for them seems irrevocably nipped in the bud of childhood. The passing of time offers nothing but a circular regression to an unsatisfactory state of disempowerment. Time is as arrested as their stunted child personae.
Confessionals are incapable of seizing the day because the day is simply not there to be seized. (31-32)

Yet, from the title to the final line, Sexton’s poem refutes Martiny’s reductive notion. The morbidity of Sexton’s disclosures initially distracts from the fact that it is essentially a hopeful poem. In fact, “Those Times…” is a testament to the child’s resilience in the face of traumatic experience and the capacity of the artist to transform this wound (“a small hole in my heart, a deaf spot”) into the source of her poetic gift (“so that I might hear / the unsaid more clearly”). The attention Sexton pays to her child self is far from a “circular regression to an unsatisfactory state of disempowerment”: on the contrary, she revisits the “I-Then” in the closet and discovers that she was dreaming and planning all along. This “Confessional” poem demonstrates that “the passing of time” can offer personal transformation and empowerment, and that a child who appears “stunted” actually may be storing the energy of her dreams “like a bull.”

There is another crucial point that Martiny misses in his dismissal of “The Confessionals.” Following the previous quotation, he continues:

Ultimately, the most liberating aspect of O’Hara’s poetry is, perhaps, his use of spatial setting. O’Hara’s speakers are urbanized, but Romantic outdoor children nonetheless. His street-child contrasts sharply with the chamber-child depicted in
poems by Bishop and Lowell. For, despite the occasional lyrical streak of child-inspired humour, Lowell characteristically presents the child in a rather negative light, secluded in enclosed spaces… Bishop’s child is either shut in a room… or enclosed… (31-32)." 

I was struck by Martiny’s consideration of spatial setting in the penultimate paragraph of his essay, and the connection he makes between the Romantic child archetypes and the contrasting spatial settings. His error lies in the implication that O’Hara’s use of open spaces is liberating while the enclosed spaces in the Confessional poems have the opposite effect. Martiny assumes that Confessional poets are hopelessly fixated on past sins or wounds, endlessly trapped in a circular regression, and he fails to consider the way in which the Confessional poets’ representations of enclosed childhood spaces can have a liberatory effect. As survivors of childhood trauma understand, the act of freeing a frightened, hiding child is often a retrospective, retroactive undertaking, and one that begins with a candid recollection or “confession” of what occurred. Indeed, there is something heroic about the child in the small space. The child may inspire pity, but she is not pathetic. She endured these conditions, and she found her way. Furthermore, the candor of the Confessional poets and their willingness to transgress certain aspects of literary propriety contributed to a larger cultural shift in the way we think about privacy. By telling family secrets, these poets puncture the seal of silence surrounding the home.

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22 Martiny specifically mentions Lowell and Bishop in this context, but his designation of a “chamber-child” as one who is “secluded in enclosed spaces” certainly suits Sexton’s self-description in “Those Times…”

23 Nelson demonstrates the ways in which the confessional poets fueled a larger cultural redefinition of privacy that contributed, she argues, to a broader cultural willingness to address previously taboo subjects in public discourse.
In *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, Deborah Nelson argues that “confessional poets such as Plath and Sexton figure the possibility of new forms of privacy that reside in a multiplication of confession. Moving beyond the fantasy of a spatial privacy—the container that must be sealed tightly at all costs—suggests a new and paradoxical model of privacy in the era of generalized exposure” (xviii). By situating these poets within the postwar policy of “containment,” Nelson shows how traditional notions of privacy served the interests of patriarchy at the expense of others, such as women, children, and homosexuals. The confessional poets lift the veil on the nuclear family, and by transgressing the taboos of what was considered acceptable or appropriate to reveal, they contributed to a larger cultural willingness to speak up and out about such topics as domestic abuse, alcoholism, mental illness, incest, sexuality. Nelson explains:

women confessional poets wrote at the crossroads of the politicization, silencing, and surveillance of domestic life. As they well understood, in order to enter the public sphere women writers had to violate privacy and confront the myths of the private home as a source of liberty and even, ironically, of privacy itself. Writing from within the home about the home, these poets not only changed literary decorum, they also transformed a central political metaphor, legitimizing the discussion of what went on inside the home and making that discussion a reasonable concern of public discourse. In keeping with the 1960s’ radical questioning of American at-home authority and ideology, women poets such as Plath, Rich, and Sexton provided evidence that the threat was no longer just “out there,” it was also “in here,” and its very containment was making the home unfit for its political purpose. (77)
In a sense, Sexton continues and extends Woolf’s desire to innovate life writing to address the interior and sexual lives of women. As noted by Woolf’s biographer Hermione Lee, “the inhibitions and censorships of women’s life-writing is [sic] one of her most urgent subjects…She wants to find new forms for ‘women’s as yet unnarrated lives’” (13).

O’Hara travels from the corner to the center in his self-portrait, and Sexton traverses an impressive distance in “Those Times…” Within the space of the poem, the terrified girl in the closet becomes the poem’s fearless speaker who stored the energy of her youthful dreams “like a bull” and whose life “would run over [her] mother’s like a truck.” Considering her biography, Sexton’s achievement is even more astonishing. The same woman who, recalling her childhood to her psychiatrist said, “I was a nothing, crouching in the closet” (qtd. in Middlebrook 8) became one of American’s most famous living poets in the span of ten years.

IV. The Boy in the Branches: Robert Duncan’s Visionary Child

While Frank O’Hara is a central figure of the New York School and Anne Sexton is one of the definitive poets of the Confessional movement, Robert Duncan has close ties to both Black Mountain poetry and the San Francisco Renaissance. In his poem titled “Childhood Retreat,” Duncan takes us out of the home and beyond the crowded schoolyard—up into the branches of a tree. As in “Autobiographia Literaria” and “Those Times…,” this poem positions the I-Now and I-Then in relation, but Duncan inverts a pattern in O’Hara’s and Sexton’s poems; instead of the growth of an ill-fitting or exiled child into the empowered position of the poet, Duncan elevates his child self to a position
that is “above” the recollecting adult. Here, the boy has words of wisdom to impart to the man. If O’Hara is the wayward, naughty rascal, and Sexton the lost and uncomprehending victim, then Duncan represents a third alternative: like the youth in Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” he is the fearless, radiant child, still in possession of the “visionary gleam.”

The title, “Childhood Retreat,” announces the poem’s subject, and the opening lines follow with a description of the spatial setting:

It’s in the perilous boughs of the tree
out of blue sky the wind
sings loudest surrounding me. (49)

The influence of a Romantic lyric tradition is immediately evident: the image of a child in the treetops listening to the wind, the high-flown diction (“perilous boughs”), the internal assonance (“boughs” / “out” / “loudest”), and the end rhyme in the first and third lines of this opening tercet. More specifically, the personification of wind and the notion of becoming its instrument are reminiscent of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (“Make me thy lyre”). The space in the second line, however, sets this poem apart from its predecessors and suggests its connection to the Black Mountain “composition by field.” As Charles Olson explains in his formative essay “Projective Verse,” a poem is shaped by the rhythms of the speaker’s breath. The spaces are a way to score the poem. (Olson 16) This dual influence—the Romantic, lyrical content and the experimental, “open form”—is felt throughout the poem as the lines stretch from the left margin and the tercets dissolve toward the conclusion.
In the second stanza, Duncan describes the precariousness of the boy’s perch. This “small space” is not about the child seeking a space of safety, as in other scenes of childhood enclosure; rather, there are risks in pursuing this particular privacy.

And solitude, a wild solitude
’s revealed, fearfully, high I’d climb
into the shaking uncertainties.

Fear does not deter him—it beckons him further. Notably, this “wild solitude” is not achieved or found; it is “revealed.” Therefore, it is less a condition of being alone or apart from others than an inner state that can be attained under these conditions. The third and fourth stanzas describe his reasons:

d Dancen parses the boy’s impulse into “parts.” This list of explanations is straightforward in the third stanza, but it becomes more ambiguous in the fourth. For example, what is the purpose of the comma in the line “to find my own, my secret”? This mid-line caesura has several effects. First, this insertion of the comma places emphasis on the boy’s desire for a private, personal space. It is about finding “my own” place, a place of individual agency. Second, the comma interrupts the syntax of the utterance. It would make more grammatical sense to complete the fourth “part” with the following omission: “part // to find my own—my secret / hiding sense and place.” But the comma and the mid-line caesura suggest an antecedent—my own what? The boy climbs the tree to experience the actual aerial view it affords—“that / widening of the world”—but he also seeks the interior expansion that it triggers; the “widening” of his inner world. This relates to one
of the central paradoxes of the childhood enclosure: the child’s perception of the space as vast, and the connection between the spatial limits and the activation of a spacious interiority. Duncan further complicates this speech act by adding the more curious concept of a “hiding sense.” “My secret hiding place” is familiar, but what is “my secret hiding / sense”? Here, Duncan connects the physical location with a feeling; it is not just about the place, but also about the sensation of seeking, finding, and dwelling within it. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why artists recall these formative spaces so vividly and why they connect them with the discovery of their creative vocation. There, then I discovered a potential within myself, and here I am now, pursuing my aesthetic calling.

The privileging of process was a central aspect of Duncan’s poetics. In excerpts from a notebook in Donald Allen’s The New American Poetry: 1945-1960, Duncan speaks of a poetics that permits and even welcomes such oddities. He describes his longing “to return to the open composition in which the accidents and imperfections of speech might awake intimations of human being” (401), and he reminds us that there is “a natural mystery in poetry. We do not understand all that we render up to understanding” (407). Duncan writes: “I study what I write as I study out any mystery. A poem, mine or another’s, is an occult document, a body awaiting vivisection, analysis, X-rays” (400). The unusual placement of this comma as well as other “accidents” that occur in the act of speaking or writing give rise to multiple readings and resonances, and Duncan invites the reader’s participation in exploring meaning.

Whether accidental or deliberate, Duncan’s use of verb tense in “Childhood Retreat” creates a self-portrait in which the I-Now and the I-Then are simultaneously present. The title sets up the poem’s retrospective turn, but then Duncan opens with the
contraction “It’s.” Not “it was,” but “it is.” The first stanza continues in the present: “the wind / sings loudest surrounding me.” In this way, the image of the climbing child is endowed with a certain presence, as if the boy is the poem’s speaker. In the second stanza, the tense flickers from present to past. First, Duncan inserts a line break and severs the contraction “solitude’s”. The tense technically remains in the present (“solitude is revealed”) but then shifts within the same line to indicate a repeated past action: “I’d climb.” The third and fourth stanzas continue in this past reflection as the speaker interprets the boy’s motives for climbing. In the concluding stanzas, however, something happens that doesn’t occur in O’Hara or Sexton’s poems; the I-Now and I-Then not only appear in the same poem, but they encounter one another:

…where from afar
all voices and scenes come back
the barking of a dog, autumnal burnings,
far calls, close calls — the boy I was
calls out to me
here the man where I am “Look!
I’ve been where you
most fear to be.”

The act of remembering yields this visceral return of sensory experience (“voices and scenes come back”), and suddenly temporal distances collapse. “The boy I was”—past tense—“calls out to me”—present tense. (This shift occurs across the line break—an example of the prestidigitation of the lyric poem with its concision and enjambment.) Not only does past connect to present, but spatial distances also close: there, the childhood space in memory, becomes present: “here the man I am.” The poem is the realm in which the boy and the man meet. The I-Then directly addresses the I-Now in the poem’s final,
climactic lines, and his sudden apostrophe cuts across time: “Look!” the boy shouts as if from his retreat in the treetop. This declaration of presence is similar to O’Hara’s exclamatory “here I am” in the final stanza of “Autobiographia Literaria,” but instead of the adult speaker addressing the reader, here the child addresses the grown poet. This is a crucial difference: the I-Then directly addresses the I-Now, and he issues a reminder: “I’ve been where you // most fear to be.” These words are neither shaming or boasting; rather, the boy seems to be teaching the grown artist to be less fearful, to maintain a “wild solitude” and to venture out “into the shaking uncertainties.”

If O’Hara adopts the archetype of the wayward rascal, and Sexton the lost and uncomprehending victim, then Duncan embodies the fearless visionary. Whereas O’Hara and Sexton emphasize the distances they have travelled across time and express astonishment at the discontinuity between the I-Then and the I-Now, Duncan depicts a startling continuity. The return to the childhood retreat is less about the present self speaking of or for the past, but instead, the past speaks to the present. Duncan’s inversion elevates the child while humbling the adult self, and the boy counsels the grown artist as a father might counsel a son. Thus, the conclusion of “Childhood Retreat” resonates with Wordsworth’s paradox: “The Child is father of the Man.” (138)24 The boy and the man trade places in the final lines and the boy resumes the role of the poem’s “speaker.” With O’Hara and Sexton, the I-Now displays its achievement in the concluding stanzas, but here, the I-Then is the one who flaunts his skill and fearlessness. With this final utterance, the boy offers encouragement to the poet, who is reminded of where he comes from and emboldened by where he’s been.

24 Wordsworth uses tense to bring past, present, and future together in this poem and to express a continuity of self across time: “So it was when my life began; / So it is now I am a man; / So be it when I shall grow old.”
Many of the “small spaces” in these autobiographical works are located within the family home: under the table, within the closet, in a nest of bed sheets or inside a fort of furniture. Often, the small spaces can be seen as the child’s creation of a home within the home, a snug space that offers a degree of privacy difficult to attain in childhood, and the feeling of safety within these physical limits gives rise to solitary reverie. A tree house is an example of a small space that is constructed by or with the assistance of adults and may be designed for this purpose: to give children a retreat—a place to play and dream at a certain distance. But the perch within the “perilous boughs” that Duncan describes is an unusual example of a childhood enclosure because of its paradoxical nature: it is simultaneously open and enclosed, visible and invisible, unstable and snug. The child who retreats into the branches of a tree may be sufficiently camouflaged by the leaves as to be hidden to people on the ground, yet he can see out at the world below and beyond. The experience of this aerial view is thrilling for the child, who is accustomed to looking up to adults, both literally and figuratively, and at the same time, a temporary comfort can be achieved if the body situates itself the right nook or notch. In the branches, the child can become a god or a bird, depending on his desire. He can survey his kingdom and fantasize over his subjects, or he can clear his mind of thoughts and become attuned to the weather and to the wind. He can dream of flight and far-off distances, or he can build an imaginary nest. The tree-climbing child can become tree-like. As he ascends, hands clasp and feet steady themselves on branch after branch; arms and legs communicate with the limbs of the tree, mimicking and countering their stiffness or flexibility to find a tentative equilibrium. He leans a hip on the trunk and the trunk absorbs his weight. Whatever his fantasy, this transformation has its limits: eventually he must come down.
But the “wild solitude” is worth the effort and the risks, both of which contribute to—rather than diminish—the child’s pleasure. The poet plays both god and bird: he designs the small world of the poem, becomes its creator, and he sings. The poem is his song.

In an earlier draft of the poem, “Childhood Retreat” was slightly different. Instead of “perilous boughs” in the opening line, Duncan had written “perilous branches.” One possible reason for the substitution might involve the internal assonance of “boughs” with “out” and “loudest”; having this long vowel repeated in each line of the opening stanza heightens the musical quality. The other difference in the second stanza, where Duncan had written “I’d climb / into the shaking uncertainties of song” before subsequently shortening the line by eliminating “of song.” The “shaking uncertainties” correspond to the branches of the tree; thus, the “shaking uncertainties of song” represents a further degree of abstraction. (Ezra Pound advises against such abstractions in his influential essay, “A Few Don’ts”: “Don’t use such an expression as “dim lands of peace.” It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer’s not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol.”) What does this edit achieve? Duncan’s omission disguises—but does not obscure—the comparison between the boy as a climber of trees and the poet as a composer of verse. In other words, the boy’s tree is the man’s poetry. Without it, the metaphor is more implicit than explicit, emerging as an after-effect of the final lines: “I’ve been where you // most fear to be.”

Been where? Of course, this is not a poem about a man with vertigo. The boy refers to the “wild solitude” within the “shaking uncertainties,” and he “calls out” to the man to remind him of his origins. Looking at the poem on the page, the lines extend branch-like into the margin. The retreat in the treetops is meant to serve as a lesson; the boy—the I-
Then—urges the I-Now to venture into his solitude, his place—to boldly explore the shaking uncertainties of his song.

V. A Poem is a Small, Vast Space

The spatial settings in these three lyric self-portraits offer glimpses into the lives of these poets, and they also illuminate the persistence of the Romantic cult of childhood in several competing aesthetics in American poetry during the postwar period. The New York School poets reject the seriousness of the “academic” or “cooked” poetry celebrated by the New Criticism; they refuse the cultural imperatives to grow up, conform, conjugate, and move to the suburbs. Instead, they pursue a more urban, Bohemian, queer life in the city—a lifestyle that could be criticized as “perpetually adolescent” by the establishment. It is fitting, then, that the archetypal child who appears in O’Hara’s poems resembles the wayward, naughty rascal of the Romantics. The Confessional poets, if formally more conservative or mainstream, commit their own crimes against decorum. They pull back the veil on the nuclear family home, exposing the crimes of the Mother and Father and daring to give voice to a variety of taboo subjects. The children in these poems, as Martiny observes, more closely resemble the lost and uncomprehending orphan of the Romantics, and they are commonly figured in the enclosed spaces within the family home. Robert Duncan, less easily classifiable than O’Hara and Sexton, is associated with both the Black Mountain School and the San Francisco Renaissance. The child who appears in his poems is neither a wayward rascal nor a tormented chamber-child; rather, he is a fearless climber of trees, a boy who ventures out into ‘the shaking uncertainties.”
In previous chapters, I have suggested a comparison between the child dreaming within a small space and the adult artist working in a studio. The child finds or fashions a small space of her own in which to dream, and having discovered this capacity for creative play, she may pursue an aesthetic vocation into adulthood. For the artist who receives this calling, one challenge is to find the means, the privacy, and the space in which to do his or her creative work. These are the necessary conditions, as Virginia Woolf argues in “A Room of One’s Own,” if one is to fulfill her calling as an artist. Reading the biographies of O’Hara, Sexton, and Duncan, one could make a case about the ways in which these poets pursue, and find, rooms of their own. But in closing, I venture a different analogy between the childhood small space and the lyric poem.

The solitary child at play within the small space behaves like the poet. The enclosure, like the lyric poem, is a miniature world, spatially compressed and charged with meaning, which triggers the imagination and provokes a sensation of expansion. In the small space, the child begins to experience her own agency, and within these spatial limits, she has imaginative control. The poet has similar dominion over the lyric poem; each syllable, each line break, each image is subject to her design. The small space may be a refuge, a hide-out, or a retreat, and yet within this solitude, the child taps her interior resources and becomes the dreamer, the subject of her own dream. The writing of a poem is a solitary activity, the result of the poet’s concentration and reverie. The child goes into a corner, a closet, or a retreat in the trees, and as dreaming begins, the spatial limits expand or vanish.

According to Helen Vendler, the lyric poem allows us access to the innermost chamber of the poet’s mind. The paradox of this intimacy is that the lyric poem, however
intimate, is not a diary—it is intended as “a script for performance by the reader” (xl).
The fact of its being a poem implies an implicit invitation to be read—and for the reader to form an identification with the poem’s speaker. The reader of the lyric is rarely guided by an expository narrator; rather, he must enter into the skin of the poem’s speaker and navigate the poem’s strangeness and ambiguity. The representation of the child in the small space could be seen as an invasion of the child’s privacy, but it also may constitute a response to the child’s wish to be “joined” in the small space by a nurturing presence friend, sibling, or parent. The hiding child often harbors an inner wish to be found—on her own terms, and in the space of her own creation—wherein she fits and over which she has control. The poet who composes the lyric similarly wishes to be encountered by an ideal, sympathetic reader, and the poet who figures her younger self within a lyric poem retrospectively shelters that child.

In her essay “A Poem Is Being Written,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick begins with an unusual dedication:

This essay was written late: twenty-seven years late, to the extent that it represents a claim for respectful attention to the intellectual and artistic life of a nine-year-old girl child, Eve Kosofsky…She is allowed to speak, or I to speak of her, only here in the space of professional success and of hyperconscious virtuosity, conscious not least of the unusually narrow stylistic demands that hedge about any language that treat’s one’s own past. (Tendencies 177)

Sedgwick thus establishes the relation between the I-Now and the I-Then from the beginning, which both divides the self and triangulates the reader in a web of connection. The equivocation surrounding the identity of the speaker—“She is allowed to speak, or I
to speak of her”—suggests the ambiguous nature of the enterprise: in conjuring the child self, the autobiographer may open herself to a certain ventriloquism. Of course, the two can only be separated as an act of the imagination, and yet this is precisely what interests me about autobiographies of childhood: the way in which representation may constitute a reparative act toward the child which is given meaning by the imaginary (yet also real) presence of the reader. O’Hara celebrates the child’s triumphant traversal from corner to center, Sexton pulls the gate from the door and lifts the girl out of the closet, and Duncan returns to the boy in the branches and receives his blessing. The lyric self-portrait, like other modes of autobiography, is both intimate and social: the I-Now turns to the I-Then, while also turning toward a reader as listener or witness. The poem may be a belated embrace.
Conclusion: The Small Space in Time and Place

The two world wars of the century had definitely reduced the scale in which human heroism could be invoked credibly in art, but psychoanalysis, which focused on the origins of adult behavior, could evoke memories of a time when adults loomed very large. The psychoanalytic point of view, paradoxically, legitimized the return, in art, of exorbitant passions and a sense of destiny.

– Diane Middlebrook, Anne Sexton

Why does the figure of childhood enclosure appear within these particular historical and cultural contexts? How to account for the emergence of “small spaces” in mid-twentieth century British and American self-portraits of the artist? Rousseau is generally acknowledged as the first autobiographer to make childhood a subject, and in the early passages of The Confessions, he begins to describe “places and people and moments in all their detail,” such as “a swallow flying in at the window, a fly alighting on my hand while I am saying my lesson” and even “the whole arrangement of the room in which we lived…” (31) Then, as if anticipating the reader’s impatience, Rousseau interrupts his reminiscence:

I am well aware that the reader does not require this information, but I, on the other hand, feel impelled to give it to him. Why should I not relate all the little incidents of that happy time, that still give me a flutter of pleasure to recall—six or seven of them at least. Or let us strike a bargain. I will be off five and be content with one, just one, so long as I am allowed to take as long as I like in telling it, in order to prolong my pleasure. (31)

This is similar to the passage in Speak, Memory when Nabokov parenthetically winks at the reader before describing his childhood scenes. “It was the primordial cave (and not what Freudian mystics might suppose) that lay behind the games I played when I was
four” (22-23). But unlike Rousseau, Nabokov doesn’t feel compelled to justify the inclusion of these details; rather, his authorial intrusion is meant to forestall a particular interpretation and suggest another one. The differing ways in which these autobiographers perceive the reader’s appetite for childhood experiences is telling: Rousseau is “well aware that the reader does not require this information” but he can’t (doesn’t want to) resist, whereas Nabokov assumes the reader will consider his anecdotes to be revealing in some way. I don’t wish to simplify the historical and cultural differences between Rousseau’s imagined audience in 18th Century France at Nabokov’s 20th century readership, but it is reasonable to suggest that the man mentioned in Nabokov’s parenthesis is partially responsible for this shift. Indeed, by the time Speak, Memory was first published in 1951, Freud had made a considerable impact on how we view childhood and the significance of early memories.

The growing influence of psychoanalytic theory in the twentieth century likely contributed to the emergence of the small space in autobiographical Künstlerromane. Not only did Freud argue that the origins of the creative writer could be traced to formative childhood experiences in such essays as “The Creative Writer and Daydreaming” (1907) and “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood” (1910), but his psychoanalytic theory promoted the notion that the adult psyche has its origins in early life, thereby valorizing and authorizing the exploration of childhood memories.25 The development of autobiography as a genre from Rousseau onwards parallels the growing centrality of the self in literary representation, and the notion that childhood is one of the “places” we look to when searching for the origins becomes increasingly commonplace after Freud. If the

25 In a letter to Jung in 1909, Freud wrote “Biography, too, must become ours” and added that “the riddle of Leonardo’s character has become transparent to me. That, then, would be the first step in biography” (The Uncanny xxx).
description of these memories seemed an authorial indulgence to Rousseau (yet one he felt “impelled to give”), to Nabokov it is a common trope of autobiography.

* * *

In her recent graphic memoir titled, *Are You My Mother?*, Alison Bechdel muses on the spatial and temporal proximity of two important figures who are embedded into her autobiographical narrative: Virginia Woolf and D.W. Winnicott. (Freud is also referenced repeatedly.) There is no reason to believe that Woolf and Winnicott had ever met, but Bechdel constructs a series of panels—including an aerial map of Tavistock Square—in which she envisions their potentially intersecting paths (see fig. 3). Inspired by Bechdel’s example, I refer to a series of dates and place in the lives of Freud, Woolf, Welch, and Winnicott. The purposes of this timeline are various: to document some of the actual and textual intersections of Woolf and Freud, to consider the simultaneous and related activities of Winnicott and Welch, to demonstrate the ways in which the war, and more specifically, the air-raids, effected all of them, and finally, to explore some possible connections between these environmental conditions and the resonant image of the child in the small space.

- In January 1939, Virginia and Leonard Woolf visit Sigmund Freud in Hampstead. Freud, in his eighties and dying of cancer, had been forced to leave Vienna. The Nazis had burned his books, destroyed the Psychoanalytical Society’s headquarters, and arrested, briefly, his daughter Anna. With the assistance of the Princess George of Greece, Freud and his family escaped and moved to London in the fall of 1938. At the time of their first and only meeting, Virginia Woolf had never read Freud’s work. She was familiar with his more well-known theories,
Fig. 3. Bechdel imagines the intersecting paths of Virginia Woolf and D. W. Winnicott in 1924 London (24).
especially through conversations within the Bloomsbury Group, but she had considered them to be reductive. Of Freudian theory, she had written: “the new key is a patent key that opens every door. It simplifies rather than complicates, detracts rather than enriches” (qtd. in Briggs).

- On April 18, 1939, a few months after her meeting with Freud, Woolf began “A Sketch of the Past.” As Julia Briggs notes, when Woolf “searched for her earliest memories and considered their significance for her and their contribution to her fiction, she could not avoid recognizing that this was territory that Freud had made his own.” Freud died shortly thereafter in August 1939, and Woolf finally began reading his work in December. By the summer of 1940, Woolf’s opinion of Freud’s work had shifted. He “had become a trusted friend.”

- In 1940, D.W. Winnicott was appointed psychiatric consultant to the Government Evacuation Scheme, a project to transport London children to temporary accommodations in the country of Oxford during the German air raids. The threat of bombings was a constant, pressing anxiety, and even with the evacuation program, approximately 8000 children were killed in Great Britain during the course of the war. In addition to this post, Winnicott was invited to broadcast a series of talks for BBC radio aimed at mothers who were at home with babies and young children.

- On May 13th, 1940, Woolf wrote about the air raids in her diary: “we go on. It’s the vastness, and the smallness, that makes his possible.” She and Leonard had taken refuge from the air raids at Monk’s House, their country cottage at Rodmell.

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26 According to Phillips, “Winnicott had emphasized in his work before the war the significance for the child’s development of the particular environment…[S]etting up hostels was…’an opportunity for experiment in the provision of substitute homes.’ And there were comparisons to be made, he found, between the evacuated child in the hostel and the child or adult in the analytic situation” (Winnicott 63-64).
• Roughly thirty miles away, Denton Welch was working on his own autobiography, “I Can Remember,” which he intended to be his first book-length work. He had moved into The Hop Garden, a small home eight miles north of Tonbridge (a modern architectural construction that he called “a concrete box”).

• In August 1940, Woolf writes “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” for an American symposium on current matters concerning women.

• On August 15th, 1940, a undetonated bomb that had fallen in Welch’s yard during a previous air raid exploded eight yards from his house, leaving “a very considerable crater” (Metheun-Campbell 100). The damages to his home were not severe, but his writing was interrupted and he was forced to relocate while repairs were made. “Coincidentally or not,” his biographer notes, “it was only after Denton had experienced first-hand something of the violence of war that his real career as a writer began” (100).

• On the night of September 16th or 17th, 1940, the first of Virginia and Leonard Woolf’s two London residences was damaged when German bombers dropped over two hundred tons of explosives over the city.

• One month later, on October 15th, their second residence at Tavistock Square was destroyed during air raids. The Woolfs traveled to London to assess damages to their homes and to see what could be salvaged.

• On October 20th, 1940, Woolf wrote the following entry in her diary:

“The most—what?—impressive, no, that’s not it—sight in London, on Friday was the queue, mostly children with suitcases, outside Warren st. tube. This was about 11:30. We thought they were evacuees, waiting for a bus. But there they were, in a much longer line, with women, men, more bags & blankets, sitting still at 3. Lining up for the shelter in the air raids—which came of course…So to Tavistock sq…I could see a piece of my studio wall standing; otherwise rubble where I
wrote so many books. Open air where we sat so many nights, gave so many parties...A wind blowing through. I began to hunt out diaries. What cd we salvage in this littler car?” (Writer’s Diary 342-343).

The small space can be a snug world enclosed within the protection of the domestic sphere, but threatening conditions, the enclosure is a refuge—a place where a child may escape the impingements of a hostile environment and explore a private, interior realm. War is perhaps the greatest impingement, because it tumbles us out of protective shelters and threatens all homes. Is it possible that the war, and the air raids in particular, make the image of the child in the small space more resonant at this moment in the twentieth century? Might the child hiding in a spatial enclosure be analogous to a civilian hiding in a bunker or shelter? Or perhaps the image of the child daydreaming in a snug space is a kind of refuge in a century devastated by war. The threat of death regularly transforms people into autobiographers; they want to “get it down” while they can. Moreover, against the backdrop of war—with its privations and exiles—the autobiographer may be drawn to childhood as the child is drawn to the small space. Childhood itself is an imaginary space that restores the dimensions of the self. By returning to an earlier time, uncomplicated by impinging realities, the artist-autobiographer experiences an expansion of the self, and these dimensions may be more hospitable to the production and continuations of their work.

Artists make compositions and find forms. They frame experience and draw the world in. In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf zeros in on the mundane details of a day, and these seemingly insignificant actions—preparing for a party—are imbued with significance. Woolf reveals the way the mundane can be connected with the “larger pattern,” and the
artist is the one who perceives this order. She describes this process in “A Sketch of the Past.”

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. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right, making a character come together. From this 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; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. (72, emphasis added)

This may be the reason Woolf warmed up to Freud as she read him more deeply. He had demonstrated that fleeting memories, associations, and language possess a larger significance. Freud put the severed parts together, too. Perhaps he wasn’t as reductive as Woolf initially had believed, or maybe she sensed a kinship in his ability to perceive a pattern behind the chaos.27 28 Woolf’s resistance to Freudian theory was not without interest and curiosity, and once she actually read his work, within months, she was

27 Freud had revealed the child to be much more complex than people had considered before, and to be worthy of our attention. Freud also argued that the origins of “poetic creativity” could be found in childhood, thought many artists—Nabokov and Woolf among them—initially resisted his theories because they threatened to simplify, explain, or reduce the artistic gift from the Romantic conceptions of “genius” to a riddle that might be solved with clues from childhood experiences. Moreover, as Julia Briggs explains with reference to Virginia Woolf, there was a fear that if the psychoanalyst could somehow “solve the mystery” of the artist, or resolve some inner tension that gave rise to the creative work, that the artist’s power might be diffused or diminished.

28 Hugh Haughton writes, in his introduction to a collection of Freud’s essays, “When a Romantic writer aligned art to dream or fantasy, the effect was to increase the potentially transcendental authority of the artist. Freud, less gratifyingly, relates art to the gratification of ‘baser’ erotic and competitive drives, masturbatory fantasies and infantile sexuality” (The Uncanny, xxii)
reading Freud to “center” herself (qtd in Briggs) and to “enlarge the circumference” (Writer’s Diary 309). This language is revealing in terms of my poetics of small spaces. The enclosure centers the child in a world of her own creation, and through the activation of the imaginative capacity, the spatial constraints open, widen, or vanish. Freudian theory, like the small space, can enlarge the circumference and make the self expand. “So intense are my feelings…yet the circumference (the war) seems to make a hoop around them.” The war is the constraining circumference, a hoop around personal feelings, which threatens to render these feelings meaningless. Woolf continues: “No, I can’t get the odd incongruity of feeling intensely and at the same time knowing that there’s no importance in the feeling. Or this there…more importance than ever?” So another response is to assert the importance of the daily, the small, the personal, the private: it can be seen as a meaningful and necessary refuge.

In August 1940, three months after this diary entry was written, Woolf composed “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” for an American symposium on matters concerning women. She begins by bringing the reader into her house as bombers fly overhead: “The Germans were over this house last night and the night before that. Here they are again. It is a queer experience, lying in the dark and listening to the zoom of a hornet which at any moment may sting you to death” (Death of the Moth 243). She concludes the opening paragraph with the rhetorical invitation to the reader—“Let us think what we can do to create the only efficient air-raid shelter…” Of course, there is no such thing as an efficient air-raid shelter, and the real question raised in this essay is how “Englishwomen,” who lack the right to bear arms and who have no say in politics, can contribute to the creation of a world in which air-raid shelters are no longer necessary.
Woolf’s answer is, “we can fight with the mind.” The struggle she articulates is how to “make ideas” in the midst of violence and propaganda and discord. She quotes Lady Astor from the *Times*—“Women of ability…are held down because of a subconscious Hitlerism in the hearts of men”—and replies thusly: “We are both prisoners tonight—he boxed up in his machine with a gun handy; we lying in the dark with a gas mask handy… But if he stops to think he may be killed; and we too. So let us think for him. Let us try to drag up into consciousness the subconscious Hitlerism that holds us down. It is the desire for aggression; the desire to dominate and enslave” (245). Briggs, in her analysis of the essay, attributes these ideas to Woolf’s recent reading of Freud: “she describes the sense of entrapment that war imposes—the soldiers trapped in their planes, and their victims trapped on the ground—arguing that the only way to achieve freedom is to fight with the mind. The essay draws together Freud’s insights, but now instead of threatening creativity, they open a way out of the trap of war.”

In one particularly vivid passage, Woolf describes the act of the mind reviving from fear. She proposes that the only way out of our “prison” is through the mind, or more specifically, “the creative feelings.”

At any moment a bomb may fall on this very room. One, two, three, four, five, six…the seconds pass. The bomb did not fall…Directly that fear passes, the mind reaches out and instinctively revives itself by trying to create. Since the room is dark it can create only from memory. It reaches out to the memory of other Augusts—in Beyreuth, listening to Wagner; in Rome, walking over the Campagna; in London. Friends’ voices come back. Scraps of poetry return. Each of those thoughts, even in memory, was far more positive, reviving, healing and
creative than the dull dread made of fear and hate. Therefore if we are to compensate the young man for the loss of his glory and of his gun, we must give him access to the creative feelings. We must make happiness. We must free him from the machine. We must bring him out of his prison into the open air. (247-248)

This sounds remarkably similar to Winnicott, who argues elsewhere—some years later—that creativity is what allows human beings to enjoy their lives and participate in the cultural inheritance. For Winnicott, creativity is not limited to the artist; it is a universal quality that is the hallmark of a good life, and the ability to play is closely tied to creativity. Woolf seems to be answering the question raised in her diary entry several months earlier in the affirmative: yes, there is more importance than ever in the personal feelings. Perhaps the child in a small space fascinates the artist-autobiographer because this is where she learned how to enter vastness through acts of the imagination. Within the enclosure, she discovered the liberating power of “the creative feelings.” Autobiographers may be drawn to these scenes to remember what the child understood about escaping constrictive hoops and enlarging the circumference.

* * *

Less than two years after Virginia Woolf rummaged through the rubble at Tavistock Square in search of her diaries, another famous diarist wrote her first tentative entries inside the Secret Annexe in Amsterdam. Like Woolf, Anne Frank wondered whether her thoughts and feelings held any importance: “Writing in a diary is a really strange experience for someone like me. Not only because I’ve never written anything before, but also because it seems to me that later on neither I nor anyone else will be
interested in the musings of a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl” (6). Writing in her diary helped Frank to deal with the confines of her enclosure, and her private thoughts and memories ultimately transcend time and place to become one of the most enduring documents of World War II. In this autobiographical narrative, with all its dailiness and personal detail, readers can begin to fathom the incomprehensible tragedy of the Holocaust, and these “musings of a schoolgirl” turns out to be one of the most important books of the twentieth century.

“This vast formless shapes further circulate,” Woolf wrote on May 13th, 1940. “They aren’t substances: but they make everything else minute. Duncan saw an air battle over Charleston—a silver pencil and a puff of smoke…So my little moment of peace comes in a yawning hollow…So intense are my feelings…yet the circumference (the war) seems to make a hoop round them” (319). Less than three years later, on November 8th, 1943, Anne Frank wrote a remarkably similar passage in her diary:

I see the eight of us in the Annexe as if we were a patch of blue sky surrounded by menacing black clouds. The perfectly round spot on which we’re standing is still safe, but the clouds are moving in on us, and the ring between us and the approaching danger is being pulled tighter and tighter. We’re surrounded by darkness and danger…We look at the fighting down below and the peace and beauty up above. In the meantime, we’ve been cut off by the dark mass of clouds, so that we can go neither up nor down. It looms before us like an impenetrable wall, trying to crush us, but not yet able to. I can only cry out and implore, “Oh ring, ring, open wide and let us out! (144-145)
Both authors endeavor to describe the immense forces threatening to smother them, and both employ spatial metaphors to describe their disorientation. Woolf’s “formless shapes” are similar to Frank’s “menacing black clouds,” and Woolf’s “yawning hollow” is like Frank’s “perfectly round spot.” For Woolf, the war is a “circumference” which is also a constraining “hoop,” and for Frank, it is “ring…being pulled tighter and tighter.” Neither Virginia Woolf nor Anne Frank survived the war, but both of them left behind extraordinary literary works that go on, and that show us how to go on. *It’s the vastness, and the smallness, that makes this possible.*

When I began this poetics of small spaces, I did not expect that Nabokov’s rhapsodic descriptions of boyhood cave games would lead to Anne Frank writing in the Secret Annexe. For one thing, this is not a retrospective text in which the artist-autobiographer remembers a childhood self dreaming or playing in a small space. Rather, these are the “musings” of a young person confined within a spatial enclosure who dreams of becoming a writer in a future that appears increasingly uncertain. Within the Annexe, Frank had to confront the possibility of discovery and death, and yet she imagined her future as a successful author. Addressing her diary, she writes: “You’ve known for a long time that my greatest wish is to be a journalist, and later on, a famous writer. In any case, after the war I’d like to publish a book called *The Secret Annexe*” (294). Had Anne Frank survived the war, she might have traced the origins of her vocation back to that small space where she learned how to escape the confines of an enclosure through acts of imagination. It is a tragic example of a child dreaming in a small space, but it may be the most enduring one, and for good reason.
But perhaps the connection between Nabokov and Frank is not such a stretch after all. By the time that *Speak, Memory* was first published in 1951, Nabokov had lost his childhood home, his inheritance, and his country of origin. A beloved cousin had died in the Russian Revolution, his father had been assassinated in Berlin, and his mother, out of reach and in near poverty, had died in Prague. He had feared for the lives of his Jewish wife and son during the Nazi rise to power, and he had suffered through a series of exiles before making it to the United States. (Horgan 11-13) In his lecture titled “The Art of Literature and Common Sense,” delivered at Wellesley in 1941, Nabokov makes a case for “the irrational belief in the goodness of man” in spite of the abundance evidence to the contrary (*Lectures 373*). Anticipating the “bright pessimists” who will disagree with him, Nabokov writes:

> And they may add that it is one thing to beam *at one’s private universe in the snuggest nook of an unshelled and well-fed country* and quite another to try and keep sane among crashing buildings in the roaring and whining night…But within the emphatically and unshakably illogical world which I am advertising as a home for the spirit, war gods are unreal not because they are conveniently remote in physical space from the reality of a reading lamp and the solidity of a fountain pen, but because I cannot imagine (and that is saying a good deal) such circumstances as might impinge upon the lovely and lovable world which quietly persists, whereas I can very well imagine that my fellow dreamers, thousands of whom roam the earth, keep to these same irrational and divine standards during the darkest and most dazzling hours of physical danger, pain, dust, death. (373, emphasis added)
Nabokov mentions “small spaces” within this argument, and he makes a further distinction between the enclosure within a hospitable environment (“the snuggest nook of an unshelled and well-fed country”) and the necessary refuge (“among crashing buildings in the roaring and whining night”). In order to survive, and in pursuit of their personal happiness, both the child and the artist “keep to these same irrational and divine standards.” They create smaller worlds within the larger one. They frame a small corner of the world, and within this enclosure, they enter into the vast.
Epilogue: All About My Mother, or A Closer Reader

She had a sensibility that was every wide, eager and free…It ranged, too, very subtly and curiously, among almost unknown or unrecorded things; it lighted on small things and showed that perhaps they were not small after all.

—Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own

“Every theory is the fragment of an autobiography,” writes Paul Valéry. Richard Miller recasts this notion, asserting that “all intellectual projects are always, inevitably, autobiographies” (50). I am inclined to agree, and I am interested in the ways in which a project can take on a life of its own. How else to account for the series of serendipitous encounters—both personal and textual—that become visible in retrospect? I envision my own process as a treasure map with a circuitous yet surprisingly elegant dotted line, and certainly, there at the very beginning, is a boy named Matthew in a tent of sheets who thinks he can hear the planet spinning. In the Preface, I highlight two passages—the first from Nabokov’s Speak, Memory and the second from Woolf’s “Sketch”—that are foundational to this dissertation. Between these on a timeline, I would insert a third passage from Roland Barthes’s experimental autobiography, Barthes by Barthes. In the spring of 2008, Wayne Koestenbaum had assigned a presentation on this book in a graduate seminar, and I selected one of the fragments that pricked me. “A memory of childhood” is a rather anomalous piece in Barthes’s wide-ranging abecedarian; less theoretical than most, its direct representation of a childhood scene invites further interpretation:

When I was a child, we lived in a neighborhood called Marac; this neighborhood was full of houses being built, and the children played in the building sites; huge holes had been dug in the loamy soil for the foundations of houses, and one day
when we had been playing in one of these, all the children climbed out except me—I couldn’t make it. From the brink above, they teased me: lost! alone! spied on! excluded! (to be excluded it not to be outside, it is to be *alone in the hole*, imprisoned under the open sky: *precluded*); then I saw my mother running up; she pulled me out of there and took me far away from the children—against them. (121-122)

In my response, I attempted to demonstrate that this childhood scene (quoted here in full) is representative of Barthes’s critical methodology: “the children hurl ‘jeers of the doxa’ at the boy in the hole, the boy who will grow into the ‘man of paradox…constantly listening to what I am excluded from.’” With references to *A Lover’s Discourse*, *Camera Lucida*, and *The Pleasure of the Text*, I argued that Barthes “reenacts” this childhood scene “by lifting shamed discourses from their ‘holes,’ rescuing them from derision and restoring them with affirmation…” I trace a similar arc in this dissertation by linking the autobiographical “I-Now” to the child “I-Then” and arguing that the experience of a childhood space can be formative of the artistic vocation. But the hole Barthes describes in “A memory of childhood” is far from the small, dream-inducing space; rather, it is the inverse of the enclosure.

Barthes is surrounded by other children playing inside a huge, open space. The site is similar to a playground in this respect, but unlike the boy in Frank O’Hara’s “Autobiographia Literaria,” Barthes’ I-Then is one of the group—one of the “we.” That is, until he cannot manage to climb out of it, and then his physical incapacity singles him out for ridicule. There is nowhere to hide, no escape from the kids on the brink. “[T]o be excluded it not to be outside, it is to be *alone in the hole*, imprisoned under the open
sky…” The small space, by virtue of its protective constraints, allows the child to go inward and explore the imaginative realm without impingement. By contrast, this hole is a space of vulnerability—an “open prison” in his description—and the mother’s sudden appearance puts an end to his suffering. This is not merely a description of social failure; it is also a scene of maternal rescue. She lifts him out of the hole and back into her protective embrace—“against them.” Thus, this passage from *Barthes by Barthes*, first published in 1975, raises two distinct yet parallel considerations that I explore in this epilogue: the role of the mother in relation to the small space, and the persistent figure of the childhood enclosure in contemporary autobiography.

While writing my first chapter on Virginia Woolf in the summer of 2012, I summarized the theme of my dissertation to a friend. “This sounds like the coal-hole,” he said. “Have you read Jeanette Winterson’s new memoir?” I hadn’t, but I promptly picked it up. In the opening chapter of *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, Winterson gives her reasons for writing her first autobiographical novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, as fiction:

I was trying to get away from the received idea that women always write about ‘experience’—the compass of what they know—while men write wide and bold—the big canvas, the experiment with form. Henry James misunderstood Jane Austen’s comment that she wrote on four inches of ivory—i.e. tiny observant minutiae. Much the same was said of Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf. (3) I was struck by this reference to Woolf: not only was the same said of her, but Woolf thought about these issues and inequalities, and her own foray into autobiography was likely delayed for related reasons. Winterson touches on the paradoxical relation between
large and small in this passage as well, a theme she pursues throughout the memoir. A few pages later, she writes: “When we tell a story we exercise control, but in such a way as to leave a gap, an opening. It is a version, but never the final one” (8). This relates to the notion that the child’s play within the small space is analogous to the artist’s work in the studio—they both involve “exercise of control” over small worlds. Winterson hints at the reader’s role in the autobiographical narrative, the author’s desire for an intimate, if imagined, other: “And perhaps we hope that the silences will be heard by someone else, and the story can continue, can be retold” (8). All of these overlapping themes appear in the opening pages of the memoir, before the first scene of childhood enclosure.

In Chapter Two, Winterson describes her fraught relationship with her adoptive mother, whom she refers to as Mrs. Winterson. Here, the coal-hole is mentioned for the first time: “When I was locked outside, or the other favourite, locked in the coal-hole, I made up stories and forgot about the cold and the dark. I know these are ways of surviving, but maybe a refusal, any refusal, to be broken lets in enough light and air to keep believing in the world—the dream of escape” (21).29 The coal-hole is an extreme example of a “forced” enclosure that a child imaginatively transforms from a place of punishment into a portal. This space is even more miserable than Anne Sexton’s closet, but the child’s experience within these spaces is similar.30 Both authors identify the mother as the monstrous presence responsible for their imprisonment, and both learn to endure it by going inward. “The one good thing about being shut in the coal-hole,” Winterson writes, “is that it prompts reflection” (23). Again, the small space facilitates a

29 A coal-hole is an underground compartment or small cellar where coal was kept for domestic heating, especially in the UK. They become increasingly obsolete as a result of the Clean Air Act and the subsequent shift to oil and gas.
30 Later in the memoir, Winterson excerpts an Anne Sexton poem at length, one that she is “reciting in my head.” (202-203)
turn into an interior realm, and therein a capacity for imaginative figuration is discovered. The coal-hole is clearly a formative space for Winterson, one she explicitly associates with her development as a storyteller. In a 2009 article titled “Why I Became a Children’s Author” published in *The Guardian*, she mentions that the spent “too much time shut in the coal-hole…in there it is dark, dirty and depressing, and the only way out is to imagine for yourself another world, which is what I used to do when I was little.” Interviewed by *The Telegraph* following the memoir’s 2011 release, Winterson recalls, “I did not think being in the coal hole, although I hated it, was so terrible. This sounds ridiculous, but I was thinking, ‘It’s all right, I can go in my head’” (Gold). Going into the small space—whether it is found, fashioned, or one in which the child is forced—enables the exploration of an inner space. The external constriction triggers an inner expansion into the realm of the imagination.

Reading Winterson’s memoir helped me to underscore the assertions that I was making in my own writing. Most of the authors I discuss do not explicitly link the small space with the creative vocation; these enclosures “rise in the mind” of the autobiographer recollecting childhood, but they are rarely presented as clearly legible sites of artistic formation. More than fifty years later, Winterson figures the small space very differently. Has the “meaning” of these enclosures become more visible over time? Prior to her first mention of the coal-hole, Winterson reflects on the historical and cultural moment of her birth: “Child psychology hadn’t reached Accrington, and in spite of important work by Winnicott, Bowlby and Balint on attachment, and the trauma of early separation from the love object that is the mother, a screaming baby wasn’t a broken-hearted baby—she was a Devil baby” (20). Woolf mentions Freud in “A Sketch
of the Past,” and at the time of her writing, the autobiographical narrative as an autoanalytical mode was a new gesture. Over a half-century later, this appears to have changed. In fact, Winterson consistently interweaves psychoanalytic and literary references throughout her book. In one passage, she reflects on the difficulty of growing up, “which involves both expansion and shrinkage…I used to feel so hopeless that I was like Tom Thumb who has to hide under a chair so as not to be trodden on” (34). Sinbad and the genie are mentioned alongside Freud and Jung, and Winterson uses psychoanalytic language to describe the kind of anger that threatens to overwhelm everything. We can’t negotiate with that powerful yet enraged part of us until we teach it better manners—which means getting it back in the bottle to show who is really in charge. This isn’t repression, but it is about finding a container. In therapy, the therapist acts as a container for what we daren’t let out, because it is so scary, or what lets itself out every so often, and lays waste to our lives. (34-35, emphasis added)

Winterson’s mention of the therapeutic environment as a container is related to the Winnicottian holding environment that I discuss in the Welch chapter, and in several instances I argue that the childhood enclosure functions as “a container for the self.” Perhaps the increasing prevalence of psychoanalytic theories and practices—which I attribute to the emergence of the small space in the Conclusion—helps to account for the continued presence of the enclosure in autobiographical representation as well as its legibility as a site of creative formation. Moreover, though Winterson does not mention Gaston Bachelard by name, his influence is keenly felt: “Everyone has dreams of familiar doors and unknown rooms. Narnia is through a door in a wardrobe…Open the door into
the tiny Tardis, and inside is a vast and changing space” (61). This passage sounds like an excerpt from *The Poetics of Space*, and yet again, Winterson touches on the paradoxical relation of smallness and vastness. “The crossing in and out, the different worlds, the significant spaces are private coordinates that in my fiction I have tried to make paradigmatic” (61). So in this contemporary autobiography, the figure of the childhood enclosure is no longer an anomalous or enigmatic scene, but a significant and representative one.

In the spring of 2013, Nancy K. Miller suggested that I read Alison Bechdel’s new graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother?* In fact, there are multiple correspondences between Winterson’s and Bechdel’s memoirs that are worth noting: published in 2011 and 2012 respectively, both focus primarily on the relationship with the mother, both titles are phrased as rhetorical questions that interpolate the reader within the mother-daughter relationship, both reference Woolf, Winnicott, and Freud, both are dense with allusion and intricately intertextual, both authors make explicit references to being readers of psychoanalytic literature as well as spending time in therapy, and perhaps most importantly, both figure childhood enclosures as formative spaces in the author’s artistic development. To analyze these connections in detail may be the work of a subsequent essay, but an analysis of Bechdel’s small spaces provides an illuminating comparison to Winterson’s coal-hole.

In a series of panels in Chapter 4, Bechdel depicts herself sitting opposite two different therapists—ten years apart. In the first, she remembers herself as a child “knocking on her [mother’s] plexiglass dome” (129). Her mom “would go off duty at night,” Bechdel explains, and it felt as if she was sealed off and enclosed. In the
subsequent panel, which figures a nearly identical scene with a new therapist a decade later, she revisits the metaphor again: “You could see her right there in her chair, reading and smoking. But you couldn’t talk to her. She was clocked out” (129). Bechdel recalls that she had developed her “own way of clocking out as a child, of getting away from the press of others’ needs. I would build myself an ‘office’” (130). The next panel depicts a young girl squeezed into a makeshift desk in a corner, sketching by lamplight:

I would barricade myself off in the back of a closet or a corner of the dining room and work there at my drawings. The sensation of being invisible, inviolable, was a kind of ecstasy. Winnicott talks about something he calls ‘going-on-being.’ (130) Bechdel includes an aerial view of the layout of the house, similar to an architect’s rendering, and shows the relative position of the mother reading in the living room and her child self drawing in her barricaded office in the dining room (see fig. 4). She paraphrases Winnicott in a text box: “All the infant wants—indeed, all anyone wants—is to go-on-being, without disruption. (130) In the chapter on Denton Welch, I intersperse my own analysis of his small spaces with references to Winnicott’s writing; here, Bechdel includes a similar interpretative “reading” of her own text. She even recreates an excerpt of Winnicott’s essay and “highlights” the relevant quotation for her reader. In this way, Bechdel theorizes her own small spaces, while simultaneously instructing her reader how to read them.

Following this transition into Winnicottian theory, Bechdel depicts the authorial I-Now sitting beside an open storage box, out of which she has lifted one of her childhood drawings. It depicts a bug inside a rainbow-shaped shelter with a bed, a lamp, and a little
Fig. 4. Bechdel remembers her childhood “offices” (130).
ladder. “In the perfect environment of my offices, one of the things I would draw was other perfect environments. Enclosed, impregnable spaces like this bug’s home under a mound of earth” (131). Bechdel recognizes “a Seussian influence,” and “indeed, a search for its source yields more than I’d expected” (131). On the full page spread that follows, she layers a series of texts: first, Dr. Seuss’s Sleep Book opened to the illustration that she had adapted and recreated in her own drawing, and she highlights the words “plexiglass dome” in red within the adjacent text.31 On the left edge of the book she overlays pages of correspondence between her mother and father, including a postmarked envelope dated 1958, and on the lower right, she inserts a block of highlighted text from Winnicott. Within the inserted text blocks, Bechdel leads the reader through the images while explaining that the Dr. Seuss illustration is “in fact…a picture of me in my office. Alone. Physically cut off from the outside world. But taking mental note of it” (131-132). I was amazed by the connections to the subject of my dissertation. Bechdel and Burgess, it seemed, were on the same page.

The sequence with Winnicott and Woolf continues as she recalls her childhood bedtime ritual. First Bechdel mentions the child’s “denial of dependence, a fantasy of self-sufficiency” and then she directly references “A Sketch of the Past.” “Virginia Woolf, in her unpublished memoir…recalls her memories of the nursery she shared with her brother” (135). Bechdel does not focus on the space under the nursery table, but she does include a highlighted excerpt in which young Virginia and her brother Adrian await their mother’s arrival for a final goodnight. This provides the segue to her own memory

31 The title of Bechdel’s memoir comes from a children’s book by P. D. Eastman published under Theodor Geisel’s (“Dr. Seuss”) “Beginner’s Book” imprint. Published in 1960, Are You My Mother? is about a hatchling bird that searches for his mother. He asks a kitten, a hen, a dog, a cow, a boat, and a plane, and in the end, a tractor transports the baby bird back to the nest the moment his mother returns with a worm.
when, at age seven, her mother announces that she is too old to be kissed. Devastated but stoic, the little I-Then turns out the light and lies under the covers, and the authorial I-Now writes: “Sleep is like death, but it’s also like being in the womb. Our warm bed surrounds us. We curl up, lapse into unconsciousness” (137). In the Preface, I point out two “competing” interpretations of the small space as suggested in Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*: the primordial cave and the womb. Rather than signifying a regressive desire for a return to the maternal body or the beginning of human history, I contend that the enclosure figures the child’s increasing separation from the mother: it is more a “transitional environment” connecting the play of childhood to the work of the grown artist. Reading this passage *Are You My Mother?*, I was struck by this reference to the womb. Bechdel inserts yet another rendering of the Seuss illustration, this time from a more panned-out perspective: “Another look at Dr. Seuss’s plexiglass dome, and it resembles nothing so much as a pregnant uterus” (138) In the adjacent panel, Bechdel draws a human fetus against a pink, pillowy background with the umbilical cord attached to the point where the veins meet. “The womb is an environment that adapts absolutely. Nothing impinges because there’s no outside or inside. No separation” (138). My initial concern—is she going to make this all about the womb?—diminished as I continued reading. Bechdel’s line of thinking actually runs closely parallel with my own, and this linked series of associations—her barricaded “offices” as a child, the pictures of small spaces that she drew within them, the Dr. Seuss illustration, the childhood bed, and the womb—prompted me to revisit the role of the mother. I maintain that childhood small spaces in childhood do not merely signify a longing for the maternal body, yet the mother’s influence should not be minimized. To put it another way, the spaces of
childhood enclosure are not simply “about” a lost union with the mother, but they are not not about this either. As the heartbroken girl in Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir demonstrates, the loss of the mother’s attention or affection can be traumatic, but on some level, it is inevitable; and return, as we know, is impossible. The journey that commences the moment we are born moves in another direction, and the more illuminating questions are the ones that Winnicott pursues in his work: how does the individual negotiate the transition from a state of dependence to independence, and how do we learn to keep inside and outside separate yet meaningfully interrelated?

Bechdel, like Winterson, takes a unflinching look at her complicated relationship with her mother. The plexiglass dome may have caused her sadness, but she also learns by example how to construct her own protective shelter in which to “go-on-being” and inside of which she would discover her own capacity for world-making. In the final pages of the memoir, the grown author is on the telephone with her mother, who has just finished reading a draft of the manuscript. Bechdel braces herself for criticism or anger—the book is both critical and publically revealing—but she is surprised to recognize a shift in tone: “But today she seems to want to say something positive” (285). Indeed, her mother tells her that it “coheres,” that “there are clear themes,” and that “it’s a metabook” (285). Bechdel draws her self-portrait with an uncharacteristic smile, her face illuminated with the dawning recognition of what has just transpired. Using a Winnicottian formulation, she writes: “At last, I have destroyed my mother, and she has survived my destruction” (285). Her mother does not give her the “I love you” that she longs for, but she does give her a happy ending to this “comic drama.” What Bechdel wants all along is to be “read” by her mother; she longs to “be the book” that her mother holds within the
plexiglass dome. The writing of a memoir *about her mother* is a way of becoming that book, and it is revealing that the resolution of this narrative arrives when the mother reads and responds favorably to the manuscript. In a sense, she smuggles herself into her mother’s plexiglass dome inside the pages of an elaborately constructed memoir *about her*—what better way to appeal to the attention of a narcissist than to write—and draw—a book that takes her as the subject?  

The final series of drawings figure a flashback from the authorial I-Now to the childhood I-Then. Like Denton Welch in the story of “The Packing-case House and The Thief,” Bechdel cites a memory of cooperative play with her mother as a singularly formative experience. She sits beside an open window, remembering the scene: her child self sprawled on her back across the floor of the kitchen, just out from under the table. Her mother orders her to get up, but the daughter replies, “I can’t! I’m crippled!” Instead of repeating the command, the mother slips into the spirit of play and kindly asks her if she needs leg braces. The next drawing places the viewer directly behind the mother’s head, looking down at the inquiring daughter (see fig. 5). In the text box, she writes: “I have always thought of the ‘crippled child’ game as the moment by mother taught me to write” (287). In a moving reversal, Bechdel acknowledges her indebtedness to her mother at the conclusion of the memoir. “What I remember is a feeling of inebriation,” Bechdel writes: “*The further I moved into this imaginary space, the more it opened up*” (287, 32).

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32 Bechdel’s book is an autobiographical self-portrait that is also an elaborate series of visual self-portraits. Many of the panels actually join the mother and daughter in a repeating series of boxes.  
33 Since Bechdel’s mother is an actor, Alison’s bid for her mother’s attention via an invitation to “act” is rather ingenious. She learns what her mother likes to do—disappear into a book at the end of the day and play roles in theater productions—and she grows up into a writer of books and casts her mother in a leading role. In Chapter 1, Bechdel writes, “Getting her [mother’s] undivided attention was a rare treat. It felt miraculous, actually, like persuading a hummingbird to perch on your finger” (13). A book, too, perches on the hand.
Fig. 5. Bechdel recalls the “crippled child game” in the conclusion of *Are You My Mother?* (287).
emphasis added). In this penultimate page, the table and chairs are gone, and the mother and daughter are illuminated in a field of black. The kitchen has vanished; mother and daughter are joined a boundary-less space. On the final, two-page spread, they are viewed from a perspective directly overhead—back into a small corner of the kitchen between the table and cabinets. Wide bands of black surround the rectangular composition, and in the speech bubble, the mother asks, “How’s that?” The child answers, “I think I can get up now.” A series of boxes contain the memoir’s final lines: “There was a certain thing I did not get from my mother. There is a lack, a gap, a void. But in its place, she has given me something else. Something, I would argue, that is far more valuable. She has given me the way out” (289-290). For better or for worse, the mother plays a central role in the formation of the artistic vocation. Whether she locks the child into a coal-hole, or models what it means to escape inside her own plexiglass dome, the mother’s influence is enormous. Still, what happens within the small space has more to do with the child’s separation from the mother and the discovery of her own creative agency than with some fantasy of return. The small space may be “womb-like,” but it is also where the artist is born.

What is the role of the reader in all of this? By turning to the titles and covers of these two memoirs, I conclude with a final consideration of the reader’s relation to the childhood enclosure (see fig. 6 & fig. 7). Winterson’s title is attributed to her mother in an important titular scene, but when we first hold the book, we see little Jeanette standing in a blue and pink bathing suit holding a beach ball. She is squinting for the camera with the title hovering in the sky over her head: Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?
On the back cover, there is a second image of Jeanette seated on the sand beside her father—and the reader wonders, where is the mother? The mother is the one taking the picture, of course, so we are viewing the authorial I-Then through her “lens.” The cover image and the title thus situate the reader in the position of the mother: we see that little girl and mentally utter the absurd question, occupying, however briefly, Mrs. Winterson’s perspective. Bechdel’s title and cover enact a similar positioning of the reader. On the flyleaf of the first edition, we see an antique vanity with a marble tabletop and various items of makeup haphazardly placed as if in use or just used. A mirror, mounted on a set of mahogany drawers, is silvered with reflective paper and the title is superimposed as if in the glass: *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*. If you hold the book in your hands in
the light, the mirror reflects the shadow of your face. Thus, the reader is situated in one of
the mother’s intimate spaces—the vanity table among her strewn perfume, blush, and
eyebrow curler—the place where she “puts on her face.” Do we put on her face? As with
Winterson’s cover, the reader momentarily occupies the mother’s position, and here the
title seems to ask: are you, Reader, my mother?

While attending the Association of Writing Programs conference in Boston in the
winter of 2013, I was part of a large audience for a reading and discussion with two
featured authors, Jeanette Winterson and Alison Bechdel. The moderator stepped to the
microphone to greet the standing-room only crowd and announced, to audible sighs, that
due to inclement weather, Alison Bechdel could not be there. (This is months before I
read Are You My Mother?, and I wasn’t aware at the time that either author would be
included in this dissertation.) Winterson took the stage in a white shirt and dark slacks,
and while walking the stage with a wireless microphone, she alternated between reading
passages aloud from the memoir and speaking directly to the audience. It felt more like a
TED talk than a literary reading. I remember Winterson reading the dialogue from the
titular scene—the one in which Jeanette, visiting Mrs. Winterson on break from college,
tells her that she is in love with a woman named Janey. Mrs. Winterson tells Jeanette that
she is going to burn in hell and asks, repeatedly, why? Jeanette replies by saying, “When
I am with her I am happy. Just happy.”

She nodded. She seemed to understand and I thought, really, for that second, that
she would change her mind, that we would talk, that we would be on the same
side of the glass wall. I waited.

“She said, ‘Why be happy when you could be normal?’” (114)
When Winterson uttered this line, the audience gasped, laughed, and harrumphed. It was an extraordinary moment, and what that collective sound transmitted was a palpable sense of solidarity on the part of this roomful of readers: vicarious indignation, compassion, recognition.

Autobiography constitutes a bid for a certain quality of the reader’s attention, unfiltered by “fiction.” The autobiographer figures “a desire to be read truthfully,” as Nancy K. Miller writes, and this implicit request stages a meeting in the symmetrical desire in the other constituted by readers. The assumption of such an encounter, which de Man calls “the autobiographical moment…in the process of reading,” of course presides over Lejeune's autobiographical pact as well, even though the timing of an “alignment” …between writer and reader cannot be accounted for as anything but a phantasmic occasion. (“Facts” 12)

What struck me about Winterson’s reading, I realize now, was that this autobiographical moment had materialized into a visceral, communal event. Our presence in the room, our undivided attention, and our audible reactions to Mrs. Winterson’s question reflected the autobiographer’s passionate reading, her comic timing, and her visibly gratified, inward-looking smile in response to our response. The text may situate us in the mother’s position, as if inviting us to play her role, and it may ask us to respond differently.

Whereas the actual mother might have been over there, unreachable or frightening or even deceased, the reader is invited to come closer—to enter into the most intimate and private enclosures. In a sense, the reader of childhood autobiography “mothers” the author. The sign reads “Keep out” but this doesn’t apply to us. We join Jeanette in the
dark and dirty coal-hole, or we stand with her on her side of the glass wall. We visit Alison in the barricaded office and study her precocious drawings, and we offer her our undivided attention. Winnicott writes: “It is a joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found.” Autobiographical representations of childhood enclosure figure an intimate encounter between the I-Now and the I-Then: the grown artist and the dreaming, hiding child. The reader is there, too, and this presence—real or imaginary—may increase the autobiographer’s pleasure, or retroactively avert disaster.
Works Cited


