I hope that, like me, you—dear reader—will find these essays and reviews interesting and worthwhile confirmations of the continuing vitality of Woolf’s writings and of Woolf studies. Having spent much of my scholarly career reading and writing about Woolf, I find myself from time to time returning to Woolf’s warning about participating in the kind of scholarship which produces “the seventieth study of Keats and his use of Miltonic inversion” (A Room of One’s Own 118). Beginning in the 1970s, feminist scholars have turned Woolf from a minor modernist into a canonical one. A simple search of the MLA International Bibliography using “Woolf, Virginia” as the search term comes up with 6,337 hits (as of December 21, 2016). The same type of search using “Joyce, James” brings 11,837 hits, so it seems that we Woolfians have not overdone our author as much as the Joyceans! Nevertheless, one would “need to be a herd of elephants […] and a wilderness of spiders […] to cope with all [the Woolf-related items]” (AROO 34) pulled up by an MLA search. Woolf’s own words caution us to avoid using our intellectual energy and talents simply to repeat and maintain an elitist cultural hierarchy. To join the “procession of educated men” (Three Guineas passim) without replicating their ways has been my ambition since I quoted Three Guineas in my graduate school application essays. So are we saying something new and worthwhile when we indite, edit, and publish new studies of Virginia Woolf? The essays published in VWM 89 do, I believe, contribute worthwhile insights into our understanding of Woolf and our understanding of the value of literary study in the age of electronic communication, “big data,” STEM-focused education, globalization, and (dare I say it) the recent electoral successes around the world of populist demagogues like Trump. In this regard, I should mention Madelyn Detloff’s important new book The Value of Woolf (Cambridge UP, 2016); you can watch a video of Professor Detloff explaining the kernel of her book, that Woolf offers rich resources for exploring the big questions of how to live well and creatively in our troubled world, at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKBlV3Zcu2Q&feature=youtu.be>. In ways that affirm Detloff’s perspective on Woolf, the essays in this issue develop themes of identity, power, oppression, creativity, cultural difference, aesthetics, history, and the body and underscore Woolf’s theory and practice of the creative word.
Several of the essays in this issue explicitly discuss the value of writing and reading as creative activities in our daily lives. In “Where Are the Diarists Who Look Like Me?,” Angela Hooks writes of how her diary is “a place of healing, refuge, memory keeping, reaching, creating”; she finds both connection with and distance from Woolf and searches for her black foremothers in diary writing. Janine Utell focuses on how Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, used writing, reading, and mountaineering as manly consolations while mourning the deaths of his wives. Kaylee Baucom brings the discussion back to the United States and across class to discuss the value of teaching Woolf in community college classrooms. In “The Title of Virginia Woolf’s Between the Acts,” Joel Hawkes emphasizes the multiple meanings of the title and how it underlines the invitation—or perhaps even the demand—Woolf’s novel makes to/of the reader’s own creativity. These four essays touch on significant themes of identity, race, ethnicity, gender, and class in Woolf’s writing. Jessica S. Y. Yeung writes about class, cultural legacies, and the cultural work of Hyde Park Gate News and The Charleston Bulletin, the home “newspapers” that Woolf created with her siblings and her nephew respectively. Yeung suggests that through these private writing endeavors Woolf assimilated important lessons about aesthetics and “literary production, reproduction, and consumption” while growing up in her upper-middle-class household, and both repeated and revised those lessons in her middle age through her collaboration with her young nephew, Quentin Bell.

In turn, Molly Hoff shows us that we have more to learn about Woolf’s use of allusions to the Western cultural mainstream in which she came of age (in this case, allusions to Shakespeare and classical mythology in Mrs. Dalloway), while Victor Vargas points us beyond the Aegean to the south and east—to Africa and India—to understand Woolf’s ongoing development of an aesthetic that might free her creativity to move beyond the patriarchal and imperialist nature of Western culture. Mark Hussey takes us beyond the Aegean in another way in his “Report from the Third Korean Conference on Virginia Woolf.” He reports on exciting work being done by scholars in Korea, China, and Japan and on the vibrant atmosphere at the conference, a sign of the development of “planetary culture.”

Derek Ryan’s essay concerns the significance of a place closer to home for Woolf: Canterbury, where the 2018 Woolf conference will convene. His weaving together of references to Canterbury in Woolf’s letters, essays, diary, and fiction presents in microcosm Woolf’s ability to create meaning through connecting everyday details to larger philosophical, social, or cosmic patterns. In her turn, Emma Simone shows how Woolf uses the everyday in her essays and novels in order to challenge the way traditional historical discourse constructs social hierarchies and to model an historical discourse that centers disenfranchised social groups and disenfranchised aspects of human life.

Alexandra DeLuise’s essay on Katherine Mansfield’s short story “Bliss” and Woolf’s novel Between the Acts discusses the literary representation of two disenfranchised social groups—lesbians and gay men. DeLuise argues “these two stories are tales of frustrated confessions of homosexuality disrupted by the conventional social world, tales in which mirrors and windows both open up and close out homoerotic possibilities.” Finally, in her review of the Royal Ballet’s Woolf Works, Elisa Kay Sparks shows us how choreographer Wayne McGregor and the dancers of the Royal Ballet interpret Mrs. Dalloway, Orlando, and The Waves through physical and sensory means: bodily movement, light, costumes, sets, and music. Bringing that aspect of the human often disenfranchised in Western culture—the body—to the fore, Woolf Works, Sparks argues, “teaches us new ways to read [Woolf] in motion and in time.”

Diana L. Swanson
Northern Illinois University

Work Cited
Thursday, 5 January, 12:00 noon–1:15 p.m., 410, Philadelphia Marriott

41. Trespassing on Boundaries with Women’s Archives

A special session
Presiding: J. Ashley Foster, Haverford Coll.; Margaret Galvan, New York Univ.
Speakers: Michele Hardesty, Hampshhire Coll.; Elizabeth Kata, STICHWORT; Eric Keenanagh, Univ. at Albany, State Univ. of New York; Karen L. Levenback, Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land; Rijuta Mehta, Connecticut Coll.; Krista Quesenberry, Penn State Univ., University Park

Session Description: Panelists discuss how women’s archives in the long twentieth century challenge boundaries—between physical and digital, public and private, past and present, researcher and subject, scholar and activist. (Karen Levenback will speak about the history of the IWVS.)

Thursday, 5 January, 5:15–6:30 p.m., 105B, Pennsylvania Convention Center

117. The Brontës beyond the Victorian Era: Intimacy, Distance, and the Boundaries of Modernism

A special session
Presiding: Shawna Ross, Texas A&M Univ., College Station
2. “The Brontës in Interwar Fiction: Bridging the Modernist and the Middlebrow,” Amber Pouliot, Univ. of Evansville

For abstracts, visit www.shawnaross.com/modernistbrontes.363. Textual Woolf

Saturday, 7 January, 12:00 noon–1:15 p.m., 102B, Pennsylvania Convention Center

518. Literary History for the Anthropocene

A special session
Presiding: Ted Howell, Temple Univ., Philadelphia
2. “Nature’s Queer Tricks: Historicizing the Anthropocene with Virginia Woolf,” Peter Adkins, Univ. of Kent
3. “Geographic Modernism’s Temporal Dodges,” Rebecca A. Walsh, North Carolina State Univ.

For abstracts, visit www.tedhowell.net/mla-2017-literary-history-for-the-anthropocene/ after 1 Dec.

Saturday, 7 January, 1:45–3:00 p.m., 112A, Pennsylvania Convention Center

572. Virginia Woolf Scholars Come to Their Senses

Program arranged by the International Virginia Woolf Society
Presiding: Pamela L. Caughie, Loyola Univ., Chicago
1. “‘The Thing Itself’ and the Politics of Aesthetic Emotion,” Jane M. Garrity, Univ. of Colorado, Boulder
3. “Sensory Bewitchment: Elevating the Lower Senses in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway,” Alyson DeMaadg, West Virginia Univ., Morgantown

For abstracts, write to pecaughi@luc.edu.

Sunday, 8 January, 8:30–9:45 a.m., 304, Philadelphia Marriott

680. Limits of the Diaphane: Modernism and the Boundaries of the Human

A special session
Presiding: Jonathan Najarian, Boston Univ.
1. “As None Perceived’: Omniscience and Perception in Joyce’s Ithaca,” Jonathan Najarian
3. “Bad Faith about Things,” Aaron Jaffe, Univ. of Louisville

For abstracts, write to joncjen@bu.edu after 1 Dec.

IVWS DINNER!

FRIDAY, JANUARY 6, AT 7:00 P.M., AT SALOON, 750 S. 7TH STREET.

(NOTE: ALL THOSE WHO PLAN TO ATTEND SHOULD HAVE ALREADY CONTACTED KRISTIN CZARNECKI TO RESERVE A SPACE.)

2017 marks the centenary of the founding of the Hogarth Press. The conference aims to celebrate Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press as a key intervention in modernist and women’s writing and to mark its importance to independent publishing and bookselling.

Call for Papers:
Virginia Woolf and the World of Books’ invites you to consider the past, present and future of Virginia Woolf’s works. Attendees are invited to submit papers relating to all aspects of the Woolfs, the world of books, and print cultures, including topics related to Leonard and Virginia Woolf and the Hogarth Press; the production, reception and distribution of Woolf’s works; editing, revision and translation; periodicals and book publishing; Woolf and her readers; global and planetary modernisms; Bloomsbury and its networks; Hogarth Press authors and illustrators; modernist publishing houses and publishers; Woolf and the Digital Humanities.

Submissions for 20 min papers and/or 3-speaker panel proposals are due February 1st 2017 to vwoolf2017@gmail.com.
Panel proposals should include all 3 abstracts and individual speakers’ details and bios.
Individual abstracts should be between 200-250 words. Please include a cover note with brief biography, affiliation, and contact details including email.

Organizing Committee:
Dr Nicola Wilson (Reading); Dr Bethany Layne (Reading); Dr Maddi Davies (Reading); Dr Claire Battershill (Simon Fraser University); Dr Alice Staveley (Stanford); Dr Helen Southworth (Oregon); Dr Elizabeth Willson Gordon (King’s College, Edmonton); Dr Vara Neverov (Southern Connecticut State University).

Please direct any queries to vwoolf2017@gmail.com.

Virginia Woolf, Europe and Peace
Woolf College, University of Kent, Canterbury
Date: June 21-24, 2018
The 28th International Conference on Virginia Woolf
Organising Committee:
Derek Ryan,
Ariane Mildenberg,
Peter Adkins,
Patricia Novillo-Corvalán

THE IVWS & VWS ARCHIVE INFORMATION
The archive of the VWS and the IVWS has a secure and permanent home at E. J. Pratt Library, Victoria University, University of Toronto.
Below is the finding aid for the IVWS archival materials:
http://library.vicu.utoronto.ca/special/F51ivwoolfocietyfonds.htm
http://library.utoronto.ca/collections/special_collections/f51_intl_v_woolf_society/

As a lexical point of interest, professional archivists use the term “archival” to describe records that have been appraised as having enduring value or the storage facility where they are preserved. For example, when we call a record “archival,” we generally refer to where it is housed, depending on context, the term may be used to refer to the valuation (“enduring value”) of such a record.

With regard to such items as correspondence, memorabilia and photographs, contact the current Archival Liaison, Karen Levenback, either at klevenback@att.net or by surface mail: Karen Levenback, Archival Liaison/IVWS Archive, 304 Philadelphia Avenue, Takoma Park, MD 20912.

Be sure to consult Paula Maggio’s Blogging Woolf for up-to-date information about all things Woolfian including information about upcoming Woolf conferences and recent publications from Cecil Woolf Publishers.
bloggingwoolf.wordpress.com
How to Join

The International Virginia Woolf Society

To join, update membership or donate to the International Virginia Woolf Society, you can use the PayPal feature available online at the IVWS website at http://sites.utoronto.ca/IVWS/how-to-joindonate.html

(you can also download the membership form from the IVWS website and mail to the surface address provided).

Regular 12-month membership:
$35

Student or part-time employed 12-month membership:
$15

Regular five year membership:
$130

Retiree five year membership:
$60

Members of the Society receive a free subscription to the Virginia Woolf Miscellany, updates from the IVWS Newsletter and have access online to an annual Bibliography of Woolf Scholarship and an updated list of members in three free issues annually of the newsletter. The electronic IVWS distribution list provides early notification of special events, including information about the Annual Conferences on Woolf and MLA calls for papers as well as access to electronic balloting, and electronic versions of newsletters.

Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain Membership

Membership of the Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain entitles you to three free issues annually of the Virginia Woolf Bulletin, and the opportunity to attend member-only events such as:

Birthday Lecture*—AGM with guest speaker—Summer Study Day*

Reading Group meetings

(*There is a charge for events marked with an asterisk.)

Subscriptions for the year ending 31 December 2017 are £18 UK, £23 Europe and £26 outside of Europe;

Five-year memberships (five years for the price of four) beginning in 2017 are £72 UK, £92 Europe and £104 outside Europe.

We are always delighted to welcome new members. If you wish to join the VWSGB and pay in pounds sterling (whether by cheque or via PayPal), please write to or email Stuart N. Clarke <Stuart.N.Clarke@btinternet.com> for a membership form:

Membership Secretary
Fairhaven,
Charnleys Lane, Banks,
SOUTHPORT PR9 8HJ,
UK

For members paying in US dollars, please request a membership form by writing to or emailing Professor Lolly Ockerstrom <ojscaroose@gmail.com>

Park University,
8700 NW River Park Drive,
English Department, Box 39
Parkville, MO 64152,
USA

If you are interested in details of student, five-year or life membership, please write (as above) or email the Membership Secretary, Stuart N. Clarke <Stuart.N.Clarke@btinternet.com>

Société d’Études Woolfiennes

The Société d’Études Woolfiennes (SEW) is a French society which promotes the study of Virginia Woolf, the Bloomsbury Group and Modernism. It was founded in 1996 to develop Woolf studies in France and to create further links between French specialists and their counterparts abroad. It welcomes academics and students in the field of English and Comparative Literature who share a strong interest in the different aspects of Virginia Woolf’s work (the canonical as well as the lesser known works).

Over the years, the SEW has aimed to create a rich working atmosphere that is both warm and generous to all involved, intellectually vibrant and challenging. We are keen to maintain this complementary association of academic poise and spontaneous enthusiasm, so that members, potential members and passing guests all feel welcome and valued.

The dedication of its founding members and more recent participants has enabled the SEW to make its mark in French academic circles, convening high quality international conferences every two years and publishing a selection of the proceedings in peer-reviewed journals, as well as organising more informal annual gatherings and workshops.

Since the foundation of the SEW in 1996, international conferences have focused on:

• “Métamorphose et récit dans l’œuvre de Woolf” (1997)
• “Metamorphosis and narrative in Woolf’s works”
• “Things in Woolf’s works” (1999)
• “Le pur et l’impur” (2001)
• “The pure and the impure”
• “Conversation in Woolf’s works” (2003)
• “Woolf lectrice / Woolf critique” (2006 / 2008)
• “Woolf as a reader / Woolf as a critic”
• “Contemporary Woolf” (2010)
• “Woolf among the Philosophers” (2012)
• “Outlanding Woolf” (2013)
• “Translating Woolf” (2015)
• “Quel roman! Photography and Modernism’s Novel Genealogies, Virginia Woolf to Roland Barthes” (2016)

Information concerning past and forthcoming conferences and publications is available on our website: http://etudes-woolfiennes.org.

We would be very pleased to welcome new members. If you wish to join the SEW, please fill in the membership form available on our website (“adhérer”) or send an email to claire.davison@uni-paris3.fr and marie.laniel@gmail.com, indicating your profession, address and research interests.

The annual subscription is 25€ (15£ for students).

Cheques made out to SEW should be sent to:
Nicolas Boileau
12 Traverse du Ríc
13100 Aix-en-Provence
FRANCE

If you wish to join the SEW’s mailing list, please send an email to marie.laniel@gmail.com.

For its 20th birthday the Société des Études Woolfiennes (SEW) held a two-day symposium at Toulouse University:

Virginia Woolf and Images: Becoming Photographic – Toulouse, 30 juin-1er juillet 2016

To download the full Call for Papers click here: CFP Becoming Photographic.

Organisation: Adèle CASSIGNEUL (Bordeaux 2 University/CAS EA 801) with Christine REYNIER (Montpellier 3 University)

Contact: <becomingphotographic@outlook.com>
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The Virginia Woolf Miscellany is an independent publication, which has been sponsored by Southern Connecticut State University since 2003. Founded in 1973 by J. J. Wilson, the publication was hosted by Sonoma State University for 30 years. The publication has always received financial support from the International Virginia Woolf Society. Issues from Spring 2003 (issue 63) to the present are available in a PDF format at \texttt{https://virginiawoolfmiscellany.wordpress.com/}. A number of earlier issues from Fall 1973, Issue 1 to Fall 2002, Issue 61 are also available on this site. For access to an issue that has not yet been posted, please contact Vara Neverow at \texttt{neverovv@southernct.edu}.

The IVWS was founded in 1973 as the Virginia Woolf Society. The society has a direct relationship with the Modern Language Association and has for many years had the privilege of organizing two sessions at the annual MLA Convention. As of 2010, MLA has transitioned to a new format in which the IVWS will continue to have one guaranteed session.

The IVWS website \texttt{http://sites.utronto.ca/IVWS} is hosted by the University of Toronto. The website was founded by Melfa Cuddy-Keane, Past President of the International Virginia Woolf Society, who continues to oversee the site.

The VWoolf Listserv is hosted by the University of Ohio. The current list administrator is Elisa Kay Sparks. Anne Fernald oversaw the list for many years. The founder of the list is Morris Beja. To join the list, you need to send a message to the following address: \texttt{listproc@lists.acs.ohio-state.edu}. In the body of the email, you must write: subscribe VWOLF Your first name Your last name. You will receive a welcome message with further information about the list. To unsubscribe, please send a message *from the exact account that you originally subscribed with* to the same address: \texttt{listproc@lists.acs.ohio-state.edu}. In the body of the email, write: unsubscribe VWOLF.

Materials from most of the sources mentioned above are included in the IVWS/VVWS archive at the E. J. Pratt Library, Victoria University, University of Toronto even though they are entities separate from the Society itself. Individuals who have materials that may be of archival significance should contact Karen Levenback at \texttt{kllevenback@att.net}.

The Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf is an independent entity. It was envisioned by Mark Hussey and launched in 1991 at Pace University. The conference is overseen by a Steering Committee consisting of all previous conference organizers. Permission to host a Woolf conference is authorized by Mark Hussey, who chairs the Steering Committee. Those interested in hosting the conference should contact Mark Hussey at \texttt{mhussey@pace.edu}.

Each annual conference is organized by one or more individuals associated with the host institution. The host institution finances the event and uses the registration fees of attendees to offset the costs of the event. The Annual Conference has no formal association with the International Virginia Woolf Society or the Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain or any other Woolf society.

The Selected Papers from the Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf 2001-2013 (excluding 2004) were published by Clemson University Press (formerly Clemson University Digital Press) under the auspices of Wayne Chapman. Liverpool University Press now oversees the publication of the essays from the conference that are selected. The editors of the volumes vary from year to year. The electronic version of the Selected Works published by Clemson are available in downloadable PDF format online at \texttt{http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/cudp_woolf/}. Selected Works from the 2002 and 2004 Woolf conferences are available to view at the Woolf Center at Southern Connecticut State University: \texttt{http://woolf-center.southernct.edu/}.

The Selected Papers from the Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf 1991-2000, launched by Mark Hussey in conjunction with the conference, were published by Pace University Press under his auspices. While early volumes of the papers are out of print, a number of the more recent ones are still available from the press at \texttt{http://www.pace.edu/press/}.

The International Virginia Woolf Society announces the Third Annual Angelica Garnett Undergraduate Essay Prize

The International Virginia Woolf Society is pleased to host the third annual undergraduate essay contest in honor of Virginia Woolf and in memory of Angelica Garnett, writer, artist, and daughter of Woolf’s sister, Vanessa Bell.

For this competition, essays can be on any topic pertaining to the writings of Virginia Woolf. Essays should be between 2,000 and 2,500 words in length, including notes and works cited, with an original title of the entrant’s choosing. Essays will be judged by the officers of the International Virginia Woolf Society: Kristin Czarnacki, President; Ann Martin, Vice-President; Alice Keane, Secretary-Treasurer; and Drew Shannon, Historian-Bibliographer. The winner will receive $200 and have the essay published in the subsequent issue of the \textit{Virginia Woolf Miscellany}.

Please send essays in the latest version of Word. All entries must be received by June 5th, 2017. To receive an entry form, please contact Kristin Czarnacki at \texttt{kristin_czarnecki@georgetowncollege.edu}.

Paper by the Winner of the 2016 Angelica Garnett Undergraduate Essay Prize

Allen Fulghum

Undergraduate, New York University (Graduated May 2016)

Professor Patrick Deer, Associate Professor of English

ENGL-UA 20th Century British Literature: Understanding Modern War Culture

Submitted 9 March 2016

Feeling the Glory, Feeling the Lack: Virginia Woolf, Terrence Malick and the Soldier’s Sublime

Some of the most striking moments in twentieth-century war narratives come during the collision of extreme beauty and extreme terror: in the midst of combat soldiers find beauty in nature, or conversely discover that scenes of beauty are marred by the ineffable presence of warfare or war trauma. Whether at one extreme or the other, these moments suggest that war experience provides access to a higher consciousness, an extraordinary perspective akin to the Romantic conception of the sublime—“a presence that disturbs [one] with the joy / Of elevated thoughts,” as Wordsworth puts it (96-97). Two texts in particular, Virginia Woolf’s 1925 novel \textit{Mrs. Dalloway} and Terrence Malick’s 1998 film \textit{The Thin Red Line}, are notable for their attempts to explicate this relationship between war and the sublime; these texts can be read as two conversant voices in a larger cultural debate about war experience, the soldier’s psychology, and the divide between those with combat experience and those without.

Woolf’s shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith has become one of the enduring cultural images of the First World War veteran. In this sense he is part of the same legacy as the soldier-poets of the First World War canon such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, both of whom were treated for shell-shock or neurasthenia at Craiglockhart War Hospital. Elaine Showalter has raised the possibility that Woolf, who became acquainted with Sassoon after the war, drew not only on her own experiences with mental illness and psychiatry but on Sassoon’s life and experiences with mental illness and psychiatry but on Sassoon’s life and
work to develop Septimus’s character (Showalter 192). Similarly to the soldier-poets, who prided themselves on having a poet’s understanding of the war, Septimus’s artistic sensibility is as crucial to his character as his war experience. The depth and intensity of his psychology is first fully demonstrated in the Regent’s Park scene, in which natural beauty threatens to give way to insanity: Septimus reflects that if it were not for the presence of his wife, “the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling with all their leaves aight […] would have sent him mad” (Woolf 26). Septimus is the only character who is attuned to the beauty in Regent’s Park; when Woolf’s narration shifts into Rezia’s perspective, it becomes clear that she sees the park merely as “a few ugly flowers stuck in pots” (27). As Septimus’s visions of beauty blur into visions of terror, Woolf suggests that the wildness of his imagination is intrinsically linked to his war experience. Septimus, seeing that “white things were assembling behind the railings opposite,” believes that the war dead, including his officer Evans, are returning en masse (28). With this scene Woolf seems to imply that the traumatic experiences of soldiers during the First World War opened them up to a wider range of vision, whether beautiful or terrible. These intense psychological experiences, however, appear to be barred to civilians, whether they are sensitive like Rezia or oblivious like Septimus’s doctors.

The conflict between the veteran and the civilian perspectives in Mrs Dalloway is starkest and most destructive in the scenes featuring Dr. Holmes and Dr. Bradshaw. Septimus is intent on attempting to translate his psychological world, including his war experience, into literature and art; he urges Rezia to write down what he says, “about war; about Shakespeare; about great discoveries,” claiming that, “he knew the truth! He knew everything!” (Woolf 154). This emphasis on the veteran’s capacity to see truth calls to mind Wilfred Owen’s famous Preface to his intended book of poems, in which he declares that, “all a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful”—the “true Poets” being, presumably, those who understood “the Pity of war” as well as he did (Owen). Yet while Owen retained his poetic ambition even after his institutionalization at Craiglockhart War Hospital, the threat of psychiatric treatment functions as a sort of censorship for Septimus. He is aware that his writings will appear to his doctors as evidence of madness and is terrified at the thought that “the brute with the red nostrils was snuffing into every secret place” (Woolf 162). Though he is willing to share his insights with Rezia, Septimus feels that his doctors are incapable of understanding his “truth,” and indeed will attempt to suppress it; rather than keep copies of his work in hopes of publication, as Owen did, Septimus instructs Rezia to burn what he has written, including his “messages from the dead” (162). In the end Septimus sees no choice but to deny Dr. Holmes his self, his body and mind. Yet he wavers, for a moment, on the threshold between the beauty of living and the awfulness of death: “He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot” (164). This merging of the pursuit of beauty to the pursuit of death brings to mind the final image of the 1930 film adaptation of All Quiet on the Western Front, in which Paul Baumer is shot by a sniper as he reaches out into No Man’s Land, trying to catch a butterfly. The terrible paradox of the soldier is that while his war experience enables him to feel beauty more keenly than ever before, it also may lead him to pain, and eventually death.

Terrence Malick’s 1998 film The Thin Red Line, though depicting American troops during the Second World War, recalls Mrs. Dalloway in its exploration of the links between war, horror, beauty, and the sublime. Perhaps intentionally, it also echoes the closing image of the All Quiet on the Western Front film: a young soldier, pausing in the midst of a suicidal mission, reaches out in awe to stroke a fern that curls inwards upon being touched (Malick 0:52:10). This seemingly digestive moment encapsulates Malick’s vision of a war which contains as much beauty as it does terror; it suggests, in fact, that what the unschooled think of terror is really beauty itself. Late in the film, as the men rest in the wilderness before once again approaching death in combat, one of the soldiers muses in a voice-over that “one man looks at a dying bird and thinks there’s nothing but unanswered pain. […] Another man sees that same bird, feels the glory, feels something smiling through it” (2:23:15). The dying bird can be read as the dying soldier: death in battle may seem pitiful and undignified to some, but one who sees the truth sees that there is glory in all things, even pain and death. Like the soldier-poets of the First World War canon, Malick draws on the philosophies and aesthetic preoccupations of Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, who wrote of “a motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things” (Wordsworth 102-104).

Because nearly all of the characters in The Thin Red Line are combatants, there is less emphasis on the conflict between civilian and soldier/veteran perspectives than there is in Mrs. Dalloway. Indeed, the characters who fail to “feel the glory” are themselves combatants; Private Witt and Sergeant Welsh, in particular, are positioned as the enlightened and the unenlightened respectively. Because The Thin Red Line is a war film, however, one cannot deny its implication that the knowledge that comes from war experience cannot necessarily be shared with civilians. One of the only female characters in the film, a soldier’s wife who is seen only in flashbacks and fantasies, is a Rezia-like figure who cares deeply for her husband but nonetheless finds herself unable to bridge the psychological gap between them; after receiving a series of tormented letters from her husband over the course of the film, she sends him a “Dear John” letter in return (Malick 2:12:40). Although the enlightened Witt dies before the end of the war, this subplot hints that if he had lived to see peace he might have found himself in conflict with uncomprehending civilians just as Septimus Smith did.

A comparison between Septimus and Witt also brings to the fore the fact that Septimus, unlike Witt, seemed to experience neither shellshock nor a higher consciousness until after the war’s end. When Evans is killed, Septimus is amazed at his own apathy; he “congratulated himself on feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. It was sublime” (Woolf 96). Strong feeling is sublime, but so is a lack of feeling, especially that lack that is created by trauma. Bradshaw describes the delay and resurgence of Septimus’s feeling as “the deferred effects of shell-shock,” but Bradshaw’s demonstrated inability to aid Septimus indicates that his diagnosis is off the mark (201). Private Train’s soliloquy at the close of The Thin Red Line, beyond serving as an elaboration of Witt’s philosophy, offers insight into the duality of intense experience that is so integral to Septimus’s character. Train decides that a lack—perhaps of human connection, of beauty—can and should be experienced as deeply as fulfillment: “If I never meet you in this life,” he tells an unknown subject, “let me feel the lack” (Malick 2:39:03). He questions whether “darkness and light, strife and love” are not simply “the features of the same face”; whether, as Wordsworth contends in Tintern Abbey, one spirit lies behind seemingly disparate things (2:42:00). If confronted with a case such as Septimus’s, Train might conclude that the lack of feeling and the presence of feeling are simply two different expressions of the same psychic wound, each equally valid and each to be experienced in their own time. Dr. Holmes brushes Septimus’s experiences away by declaring that he is “in a funk,” a careless dismissal which haunts Septimus up to the moment of his suicide (Woolf 102, 164). What Holmes fails to see is that there is meaning in Septimus’s reaction to his trauma, whether it comes in the form of numbness or feeling, an attunement to beauty or a renewal of pain; one must be allowed to “feel the lack,” and the misery, and the pleasure.

Yet do these texts really hold that civilians are barred unequivocally from the sublimity that soldiers and veterans experience? There is a strong argument to be made for the existence of a gap between the civilian and military perspectives in both of these texts—in Mrs. Dalloway one might look to Septimus’s interactions with Rezia and his doctors, and in The Thin Red Line, the fraught relationship between the soldier and his wife—but one can look beyond these moments to find a message of communication and comprehension, perhaps even an ultimate unification. Private Train’s belief that “darkness and light, strife and love” are parts of a whole can
be extended in the service of uniting civilians and the military; perhaps they are all, in Septimus’s words, “only human beings?” (Malick 2:42:00; Woolf 164). The Thin Red Line advances its theme of unity not only through words but through images: as Train delivers the closing monologue, we are shown masses of soldiers on a troop ship that is carrying them away from Guadalcanal, then a series of scenes from the island they have left behind, including the indigenous islanders, colorful parrots, and a single green shoot sprouting from a clump of soil in shallow water (Malick 2:41:00-2:43:25). The first lines of the film, also spoken in voice-over by Private Train, ask, “Why does nature vie with itself? The land contend with the sea?” (0:01:45). The film’s conclusion suggests that although nature may be troubled by internal discord, just as any one person may be, it is nonetheless a unified whole, a single thing; the soldiers are the islanders are the parrots are the solitary shoot.

What unifies the disparate, often oppositional voices and philosophies in Mrs. Dalloway is Clarissa Dalloway herself. Though she is subject to ordinary snobbery and pettiness, Clarissa also possesses an extraordinary empathy, a higher consciousness of her own that rivals that of Septimus: “Always her body went through it, when she was told, first, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt” (Woolf 202). When she is told of Septimus’s suicide, she experiences it herself, and furthermore allows the reader to experience it vicariously: “Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness” (202). This twining of Clarissa and Septimus’s experiences occurs both within the world of the novel, as Clarissa feels what Septimus has felt, and within the text itself, as the overlying consciousness of the text encompasses the various characters whose perspectives are presented. Simply allowing Clarissa and Septimus’s narratives to overlap each other during Clarissa’s vision of Septimus’s suicide is enough to bridge the supposed discursive divide between soldiers and civilians, between those who know the truth and those who do not. When Peter Walsh faces Clarissa at the close of the novel, he asks himself a series of questions that resonate with those posed by Private Train at the close of The Thin Red Line: “What is this terror? what is this ecstasy?” (213). The answer, of course, is that these seemingly contradictory feelings of pain and pleasure both reside within Clarissa, who at this moment stands in for the world, for the text itself, possessing infinite qualities yet uniting them all in the same face. Just as the soldiers and the islanders and the parrots of The Thin Red Line are all elements of a sublime nature, Clarissa and Septimus and Rezia and the doctors are brought together in Mrs. Dalloway to form a narrative that passes across boundaries of circumstance, experience and knowledge.

**Allen Fulghum**  
**Undergraduate, New York University (Graduated May 2016)**

**Works Cited**


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**In Memoriam**  
**David Bradshaw**  
**1955-2016**

**Remembrance by Paula Maggio**  
[https://bloggingwoolf.wordpress.com/2016/09/19/in-memoriam-to-david-bradshaw/]

David Bradshaw, professor of English literature at Worcester College at Oxford University and a plenary speaker at the 26th Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf held June 16-19 at Leeds Trinity University, died Sept. 13. He had been ill with cancer.

At the conference, Mr. Bradshaw gave a talk titled “‘The Very Centre of the Very Centre’: Herbert Fisher, Oxbridge and ‘That Great Patriarchal Machine’.” In his talk, he quoted Woolf as saying that her contact with Fisher “brought back my parents more than anyone else I knew.”

Vara Neverow, editor of the Virginia Woolf Miscellany, invited those who knew Mr. Bradshaw to share their memories of him for that publication. “The publication of such recollections would be much valued by others, whether they knew David himself or knew only his scholarship,” she wrote in a message to the VWoolf Listserv.

Tributes to Mr. Bradshaw, who has been called “one of the great recent scholars of modernism,” prevailed on the list after news of his death was announced. Here are just a few:

I miss him already

– Bonnie Scott

Just joining in the chorus of sorry over this sad news. I had heard he was ill but, I regret to say that I cherished the luxury of denial. I’m just so very very sad. He was such a funny, warm, silly, vital, brilliant, generous person. It was always a joy to see him and I learned so much from him. To this day, whenever I give a paper I remember his admonishment to himself once—“don’t get distracted, David,”—which he uttered aloud to great effect years ago. Sharing his digressive streak, I loved that so much. And, of course, almost every note of his Dalloway appears, with credit, in my edition. I owe him so much. What a terrible loss.

– Anne Fernald

His plenary at Leeds was special. I have often and continue to teach from his considerable body of work. This is a terribly sad loss. My heart goes out to his family and many friends.

– Jean Mills

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**David Bradshaw giving his plenary talk at the 26th Annual Virginia Woolf conference at Leeds Trinity University.**
His colleagues in the Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh project also posted their tributes on the Waugh and Words blog on the University of Leicester website <http://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/waughandwords/2016/09/15/professor-david-bradshaw-1955-2016/> as did Worcester College at Oxford University where he taught <https://www.english.ox.ac.uk/article/professor-david-bradshaw>.

Mr. Bradshaw specialized in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature and had written many articles on literature, politics and ideas in the period 1880-1945, especially in relation to the work of Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley and W. B. Yeats, according to the Worcester College website.

His current projects included an edition of Woolf’s Jacob’s Room (CUP) with Stuart N. Clarke and a monograph “in train” that he said “will examine the ways in which Woolf, Waugh and Huxley challenged the culture of their time through their provocative engagement with the obscene.”

His books related to Woolf include:

- (Ed.) The Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). I also contributed the chapter on ‘Howards End’ (see below).


His articles related to Woolf include:


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Honoring Jane Marcus

Jane Marcus Feminist University

The Graduate Center
City University of New York
365 Fifth Avenue

September 09, 2016: 9:00 AM-8:00 PM

https://www.gc.cuny.edu/All-GC-Events/Calendar/Detail?id=36967
(also includes the conference program)

Jane Marcus Feminist University was a day-long celebration of the life and scholarship of Jane Marcus. Distinguished Professor of English at City College and the Graduate Center, CUNY, Jane Marcus was a radical scholar, mentor, and activist. Her seminal work established Virginia Woolf as a major canonical writer. Her scholarship laid the groundwork for feminist studies to become a mode of inquiry within the academy. Because of her advocacy and radicalism as a teacher, numerous individuals were able to gain rights and access to professional opportunities—particularly within academia—that had traditionally been unavailable to people of color, women, and members of the working class.

Jane Marcus Feminist University featured a round table discussion on feminist pedagogy; breakout workshops on her scholarship; readings from her work and primary influences; and a plenary on her legacy. This unconventional conference honored Jane’s intellectual bravery and her lasting impact on the lives of many students.

Below are other links regarding the event and an obituary.

http://www.centerforthehumanities.org/programming/jane-marcus-feminist-university
Conor Tomás Reed’s obituary of Jane Marcus appeared on indypendent.org
https://indypendent.org/2015/06/09/remembering-jane-marcus-cuny-prof-was-tenaciously-brilliant-scholar-activist

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**Calls for Papers for Special Topics in Future Issues of the Virginia Woolf Miscellany**

**CFP: Virginia Woolf Miscellany**

**Issue #92, Fall 2017**

**Special Topic:** Virginia Woolf and Indigenous Literatures

**Submissions Due:** 31 March 2017 (date extended)

**Editor:** Kristin Czarnecki

This issue of VWM seeks essays that consider Woolf’s oeuvre in dialogue with Native American, First Nations, Australian, and New Zealanders authors, among others. What kind of dialogic emerges when placing Woolf’s writings alongside those of indigenous writers? How might indigenous literatures enhance interpretations of Woolf’s modernist, feminist, and pacifist poetics? How might such comparisons affect or inform understandings of subjectivity in women’s lives and literatures, and the interconnections between narrative innovation and socio-political activism? Does Woolf’s ecological vision align with those of indigenous writers responding to threats of global destruction and mass extinctions? Could such comparative and intersectional work chip away at the boundaries still often imposed upon literary studies—the “West” versus the “Rest”? Other approaches are welcome. Please send submissions of no more than 2500 words, including notes and works cited, in the latest version of Word by 31 March 2017 to: Kristin Czarnecki <kristin_czarnecki@georgetowncollege.edu>

**CFP: Virginia Woolf Miscellany**

**Issue #93, Spring/Summer 2018**

**Special Topic:** Virginia Woolf and Biofiction

**Submissions Due:** 15 July 2017

**Guest Editors:** Todd Avery and Michael Lackey

Biofiction, literature that names its protagonist after an actual historical figure, has become a dominant literary form in recent years. Margaret Atwood, J.M. Coetzee, Joyce Carol Oates, Colum McCann, Colm Tóibín, Peter Carey, and Hilary Mantel are just a few luminaries who have authored spectacular biographical novels and won major awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, the Man Booker Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Pen/Faulkner Award, and the National Book Award. With regard to the rise and legitimization of biofiction, Michael Cunningham’s The Hours is a crucial text not just because it won the Pulitzer Prize in fiction but also because it features Virginia Woolf as a character. Since the publication of The Hours in 1998, there have been numerous biographical novels about Woolf, including Gillian Freeman’s But Nobody Lives in Bloomsbury (2006), Susan Sellers’ Vanessa and Virginia (2009), Priya Parmar’s Vanessa and her Sister (2015), Norah Vincent’s Adeline (2015), and Maggie Gee’s Virginia Woolf in Manhattan (2015). While there have been multiple novels about other historical figures, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson, Nat Turner, Eliza Lynch, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry James, and Katherine Mansfield, it appears that Woolf has inspired the most and some of the best biographical novels.

This is ironic, because while Woolf is known for bending and blending genres, she was never able to imagine her way to the biographical novel—she certainly came close in Orlando, which is not a biographical novel because she does not name the protagonist Vita, and Flush, which fits the definition of a classical historical novel rather than a biographical novel. However, Woolf’s theoretical approach to imaginative biography (voiced especially in her essays “The New Biography” [1927] and “The Art of Biography” [1939], prompted by Harold Nicolson’s and Lytton Strachey’s contemporary biographical productions), encouraged writers to push the Victorian limits of the genre and explore new (“odd”) possibilities. Her discussions on the new directions and liberties that biography took at the beginning of the twentieth century has certainly paved the way for the current postmodernist literary genre of biofiction.

The Virginia Woolf Miscellany seeks submissions about Woolf, Bloomsbury, and biofiction. Questions to consider include: To what degree has Woolf’s work inspired aesthetic developments that led to the rise and legitimization of contemporary biofiction? What in Woolf’s life makes her particularly suited as a protagonist of biofiction? How does contemporary biofiction give us new access to Woolf, her family and friends, and Bloomsbury? How do contemporary biofictions challenge and reimagine traditional ways of thinking about Woolf’s life and works? How is Woolf’s work and life used in biofiction to advance ways of thinking that even Woolf could not have imagined? Is it ethical to use Woolf’s life in a contemporary novel? Can an author simply make things up about an actual historical figure such as Woolf? And is it ethical for an author to alter facts about a person’s life in order to communicate what is considered a more important “truth”? These are just a few questions the rise of biofictions about Woolf raise. Please feel free to generate and answer your own set of questions.

Submissions should be no longer than 2500 words. Send inquiries and submissions to Michael Lackey <lacke010@morris.umn.edu> or Todd Avery <todd_avery@uml.edu> by 15 July 2017.

**CFP: Virginia Woolf Miscellany**

**Issue #94, Fall 2018**

**Special Topic:** Almost a Century: Reading Jacob’s Room

**Submissions Due:** 1 March 2018

**Guest Editor:** Alexandra DeLuise

This issue of the Virginia Woolf Miscellany invites contributions focused on aspects of Jacob’s Room. Suggested topics include, but are not limited to: modernism and the structural form of the novel; the critical reception of the novel; Woolf’s elusive narrator; themes of loss and absence; the use of gaps or omission to say what cannot be written in print; nature and the outdoors; the portrayal of Greece in this and other works by the Bloomsbury Group; sexuality (explicit or otherwise); and commentary on the Great War. Papers which consider Jacob’s Room in comparison to other novels by Woolf or her contemporaries are especially welcome. Please send enquiries and submissions no longer than 2500 words by 31 August 2017 to: Alexandra DeLuise at a.deluise@aol.com.

If you are interested in proposing a special topic for a future issue of the Virginia Woolf Miscellany please contact Vara Neverow at neverowv1@southernct.edu.
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of women who looked like me? Where were the stories of their joys and sorrows, hopes and dreams, nightmares and awakenings as wives, sisters, mothers, writers, and spiritual beings? How had they dealt with spirituality, prayers, God, and men? What had they learned and grieved about slavery, freedom, lynching, equality, and the church? And what about black men? Had they kept journals? Penned their hopes and dreams on paper? How had they made sense of their lives, God, and women?

On my hunt for the black diarist, I discovered that black women wrote fiction despite their lack of space, place, money, or time. They wrote themselves into history in spite of being poor. They wrote in times when the black American could be beaten, lynched, or sold if caught writing and reading. They even kept diaries and journals. These findings opened my eyes to why I had not witnessed women in my own family pen their thoughts in journals, notebooks, and diaries. I came to understand how private/public dissonance shaped their identity as writers and how race and gender influenced their writing space in society. After all, prominent Enlightenment thinkers—such as Kant, Hume, and Hegel— theorized that to write is to show “visible sign of reason” (Gates 8, emphasis original) and that reason and writing did not exist among black people because they were “lower in mental capacities than all other races” (Kant qtd. in Davis and Gates xxviii). As literary scholar and critic Henry Louis Gates claims, “Without writing, no repeatable sign of the workings of reason, of mind could exist. Without memory or mind, no history […]” Without history, no ‘humanity’” (11; emphasis original).

And Ida B. Wells, journalist and activist of the nineteenth century, understood the importance of chronicling the existence of black humanity. On ruled paper with crowded sentences scripted in black and violet inks housed in a dark green, embossed pocket diary, as described by Miriam Willis-DeCosta in The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells, Wells scribes that she is writing herself into history and recording history for the younger generation, a history of the horrors of lynching. As did Woolf, Wells not only honed her art of writing but also expressed deep concerns for her finances and her goals in her diary. She wrote, “I earnestly pray that the Board will pay for two months when they next meet” (34). They did and she continued writing.

If Wells had not kept a diary, there would have been no trace of well-known black women’s daily lives. Wells chronicled honest accounts of black women’s struggles. At twenty-four, in 1886, Wells writes about an unfulfilling job, struggling to make ends meet as she tries to keep up with black bourgeoisie in Memphis and desperately trying to find a satisfying relationship with a man while also writing about not wanting to get married. Her diary reveals her private self. Financially, Wells took care of herself and remained independent in a time when women were to be attached to a man, especially the black woman. In Wells’s day, the black woman was neither expected to have passion for writing and work nor supported for her writing or work. Committed to her career writing more than teaching, Wells used her literary pen to fight injustice as a one-woman crusade against lynching, while author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston used her pen to narrate the tales of mistreatment of black women in short stories and novels.

Hurston wrote and published fiction, highly acclaimed and criticized women’s fiction, with no money of her own and eventually died alone and impoverished. In 1926, Hurston published the short story “Sweat,” a story about marriage. A tale of Delia Jones, a washerwoman in Florida, married to a man named Sykes, who abuses her both mentally and physically. He’s having an affair with another woman and spending Delia’s hard-earned money on his mistress. One day, Sykes brings a rattlesnake into the house in an effort to further abuse his wife. Ironically the snake kills Sykes. At the story’s end, Delia does not attempt to help her dying husband. The narrator says, “Orlando with its doctors was too far. She could scarcely reach the Chinaberry tree, where she waited in the growing heat while inside she knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish the eye which must know by now what she knew.”
Collaboration and Cultural Production in
Hyde Park Gate News and The Charleston Bulletin

This paper argues that home manuscript magazines embody Virginia Woolf’s cultural capital and taste through collaborative literary production in an upper-middle-class household. I employ Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas of dispositions, social positions, and cultural production in shaping artists’ development of aesthetics in order to study the literary production, reproduction, and consumption of the Hyde Park Gate News (1891-92; 1894-95) and The Charleston Bulletin (1923-27). The power dynamics among parents and children, siblings, acquaintances, and friends are revealed through the in-jokes, the journal entries, the correspondence columns, the letters, the serialized character sketches, and the biographical satires in the two magazines. The dismissal of economic values, the desire for pleasure, and the eagerness to please parents and friends are characteristic of Bourdieu’s notion of “restricted production” (Johnson 15), which takes place not because of economic utility but for the enjoyment of artistic creation. The Hyde Park Gate News demonstrates Woolf’s adaptation of her late-Victorian upper-middle-class upbringing, education, and experience to journalistic production and literary entertainment for the amusement of her siblings and the satisfaction of her parents. The Charleston Bulletin meanwhile evinces her reception of influence from the inner circle of the Bloomsbury Group and her interest in biographical experiment and comedy. Woolf’s family magazines written in collaboration with her siblings and her nephew restore her human side. They help to reconstruct a picture of her childhood and family life that is ebullient and gregarious, fulfilling biographer Hermione Lee’s wish to see more of Woolf’s “gleeful comedy, her hooting laughter, her allure, and her excited responses to people and gossip” (“Virginia Woolf’s Nose” 39). Reading Hyde Park Gate News and Charleston Bulletin offers us a glimpse of the literary collaboration that would inform Woolf’s literary experiments and her empathy with women’s search for voice.

Bibliographic studies are experiencing a revival in Woolf studies, following the publication of the Hyde Park Gate News in 2005 and The Charleston Bulletin Supplements in 2013. Such collections of previously unpublished manuscripts have prompted scholars and critics to examine Woolf and her works from the angles of auto/biographical studies, ontology, children’s literature, and magazine and periodical studies. Christine Alexander examines juvenilia in family magazines as collaborative literary play and contends that the process of play is a way to construct identity for child writers (31). With a similar interest in self and identity, Gill Lowe employs Antonio Damasio’s theory of consciousness development to elucidate that Woolf consciously resists the formation of self, as seen in the Hyde Park Gate News (18).

Few Woolf scholars have discussed or deployed Hyde Park Gate News and The Charleston Bulletin prior to their publication in 2005 and in 2013 respectively. Hermione Lee’s biography of Woolf, first published in 1996, and the unpublished thesis of Lee’s DPhil student, Alix Bunyan, completed in 2001, are among the few studies that reference the juvenilia before their publication. Referencing Woolf’s childhood at 22 Hyde Park Gate, Lee sees that it is the “communal, collaborative family life” in which “Woolf’s appetite for performance, her vulnerability to criticism and her passionate need for solitude and independence” finds root (Woolf 113). In Lee’s 2006 review of the Hyde Park Gate News in The Guardian, “To the Gate House,” she asserts that “Virginia Woolf is a great writer of childhood. She makes up a language for children’s perceptions.” Such language of childhood is further explicated by Bunyan; she sees the precocious language used in the Hyde Park Gate News as a naturalized language (68) due to the late-Victorian parental reception of Charles Darwin’s developmentalist ideal for humans to fulfill their inner potential (54).

This essay continues the conversation regarding Woolf’s childhood, aesthetics, and juvenilia written for private readership. I adopt Bourdieu’s account of the emergence of artistic distinction and taste and apply his notion of habitus, or “system of dispositions” (Distinction 6). First, I argue that in her apprentice work, the Hyde Park Gate News, Woolf exhibits her “pure gaze,” or “eye,” as an early writer, which is “a product of history reproduced by education” (Distinction 3). Then I elaborate how Woolf’s literary practice was replicated in the home magazine with her nephew, Quentin Bell, in The Charleston Bulletin.

Hyde Park Gate News

Woolf’s childhood home, 22 Hyde Park Gate, was a place in which art was not only learned as knowledge but also encountered as experience, providing a crucial way to acquire one’s cultural capital “in a world of cultivated people, practices and objects” (Bourdieu, Distinction 75). Such early experience of “[g]reatness” (“A Sketch of the Past” 158)
characterizes Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus” as part of the upbringing that would eventually be incorporated into a work of art. This experience is shown in “An Easy Alphabet for Infants” in the Hyde Park Gate News (21 Nov 1892):

I for Hal Irving / a painstaking actor
J for Sam Johnson / your mind benefactor
K for John Keats / a poet of merits
L for Sir Lawson / Who puts down the spirits (10)

The Stephen children, Adrian, Virginia, Thoby and Vanessa, aged nine to twelve, collaborated and wrote the piece in anonymity and multiple authorship. They mimic “schoolbooks” aids to historical memorization with its rhymes” (Bunyan 174) and showcase their literacy to their parents. One discerns that, at an early age, they were familiar with Victorian authors and personages such as Carlyle, Maria Edgeworth, Samuel Johnson, and Macaulay (HPGN 10-11). They were clear that it required a certain effort to please their parents, whose standards were high (Lee, “To the Gate House”). This knowledge and experience of culture and education they received at an early age enabled them to encode their literary production, because “[c]onsumption is, […] a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code” (Bourdieu, Distinction 2). The readers who would consume the Hyde Park Gate News were the parents, especially Julia Stephen, the mother, or “the head of the house” as referred to by the children (86). Julia Stephen belonged to “a very communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate, late nineteenth century world” (Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past” 65). She not only taught her children “Latin, French, and History” (Vanessa Bell 60), but also wrote stories for them (Stephen 29).

The parents played a dual role in the collaborative production of the Hyde Park Gate News, because the parental readership prevailed over the children’s editorial direction and publication of the family magazine. Thus the parents were at the same time the direct consumers and the indirect producers. Without the readership and encouragement of Julia and Leslie Stephen, the children might not have sustained their effort of running the magazine, as suggested by its cessation weeks before Julia died on 5 May 1895. Julia’s laughter was always tried for (“A Sketch of the Past” 95) and was literally transcribed on April Fools’ Day in 1892:

The youngsters of the family of Stephen prepared an April Fool for their respectful younger parent Mrs Leslie Stephen […] [] [T]he slip of paper on which was printed in large letters “WE FOOLY WE FOOLY WE FOOLY BRER BUSSARD” […] [] At last a gleam of recognition seemed to break on her. The anxious infants awaited her burst of laughter. And at last it came “Ha ha ha he he” laughed she with all the good-natured vehemence of her nature. (HPGN 51)

The children took part of Brer Terrypin’s song from Joel Chandler Harris’s popular Uncle Remus stories (1880-1904), serialized in Punch in the 1890s, and made up their chant: “‘Ifoolee, Ifoolee, Ifoolee’ Buzzud; I Po Buzzard [sic] Ifoolee, Ifoolee, Ifoolee,” (Bunyan 180, n76-78). Knowing that their parents enjoyed the language and jokes of Harris (Leslie Stephen’s letter to Julia on 21 Jan 1887, Berg Collection, qtd. in Bunyan 180, n78), the children attempted to please them as the prime purpose of their writing. Writing composed with such motives is characteristic of Bourdieu’s idea of “restricted production,” in which a piece of artwork does not target “commercial success” but symbolic values in itself (“Flaubert and the French Literary Field” 169).

Sibling rivalry is often foregrounded in the Hyde Park Gate News, and the Stephen children consciously use the home magazine as a vehicle to communicate such rivalry to their parents. The youngest brother, Adrian, attempted to set up his own home magazines, “The Talland Gazette” and “The Corkscrew Gazzette [sic],” both solo efforts, and was quickly ridiculed by the correspondents of the News in the number of 21 Nov 1892:

Mr Adrian Stephen who as perhaps our readers remember produced a little newspaper (which however did not have a very long existence) at St Ives has now begun another similar journal. We hope that it will get the success it deserves. It will not be underrated by Mrs Stephen nor overrated by Mr Stephen. (HPGN 145)

It is noted that Adrian’s effort at running his own home magazine “did not have a very long existence” mainly due to the lack of collaborative contributors, unlike the Hyde Park Gate News. In the number on 19 Dec 1892, we understand from the correspondents of the News that Adrian was “suffering from over-work,” and it was uncertain if “his little weekly production will be able to appear” (163). A1ix Bunyan examines the critical importance of collaboration in late-Victorian juvenile home magazines and proposes a “formula” for the genre (167) as “collectively (and ‘anonymously’) authored,” presented as “professional,” and seeking “an adult audience” (167).

The collaboration among the correspondents of the Hyde Park Gate News not only resulted in a division of labor but also a variegated mix of contents. Among the slapstick serialized stories, the riddles, and the letters, there are also the ruthless portraits of the cultured visitors, as in “General Beadle’s Visit” on 9 May 1892:

General remarked on the heat and said that it almost too hot but that it was pleasant to perspire freely. He then said that he hoped that Mr Duckworth had the power of concentration. Mr Duckworth said that he had it largely but the General said that his brain was like a buzzing bee. (HPGN 60-61)

The parodic and sarcastic style of idiosyncratic portrait characterizes Woolf’s adult interest in “what she termed ‘bad’ books—memoirs and autobiographies, stories of ‘lives’” (Briggs 111). In a similar fashion, the girl Virginia Stephen deploys the style in her farcical serialized stories, “A Cockney’s Farming Experiences” and its sequel, “The Experiences of a Paterfamilias.” During her collaboration with her nephew, Woolf would revisit such sarcastic and parodic style in another context in the writing of The Charleston Bulletin.

The Charleston Bulletin

Resembling 22 Hyde Park Gate, where the aesthetics of its young writers were tied to the house and the socio-familial experience of art, Charleston was the place where such habitus, or aesthetic practice, was reoriented, reframed, and reproduced. The Charleston Bulletin is another example of “restricted production,” as it is a cultural production in the field of literature characterized by “disinterestedness” (Bourdieu, Distinction 56) and was produced as a home magazine for amusement within the Bloomsbury Group (Johnson 15). In Bourdieu’s terms, the production of a work like The Charleston Bulletin is an exhibition of “taste” due to the “pure” gaze of the young Quentin and the “freedom” of not catering to mass market consumption (Distinction 56). The making of The Charleston Bulletin also offers Woolf a chance to team up with her nephew, in turn realizing new possibilities of biographical experiments.

The Charleston Bulletin was written for entertainment out of the barrenness of Charleston. In other words, it is “an artistic effort” with an “end in itself” (Distinction 30). In his memoir about Charleston, Quentin Bell recounts the first impression of the place as “no buses, few motorcars and, of course, at Charleston [no] telephone [or] electricity” (87). Despite the geographical constraint, the place was characterized by the aspiration and struggle of the Bloomsbury artists (The Charleston Bulletin Supplements 13) to combine “art and living” (Benzel 61). Hence it is reasonable that life-writing and biographical satires become the subject matters of the Bulletin, such as in the sketch “Eminent Charlestonians” which obviously takes its cue from Lytton Strachey’s
Eminent Victorians. For instance, Woolf satirizes Vanessa Bell’s mixing up of proverbs, “Nessa to save time, which she said, is a stitch in nine” (39). Similarly, Vanessa is reported as saying at her wedding, “Sam the chauffer [sic] was a hypocritical sneering leering dastardly beast and lost his way like a needle in a camels eye [sic]” (28). These intimate and comic sketches not only entertain Woolf and Quentin, but also act as opportunities for Woolf to try out the integration of fact and fiction, the “granite” and “rainbow,” the “transmutation of personality” as she elaborates in her essay, “The New Biography” (95), published just as her collaboration with Quentin ended in 1927.

Although the satirical tone and the interest in biographical sketches of The Charleston Bulletin are comparable to the Hyde Park Gate News, the targeted readers and effects were different. The Charleston Bulletin represents a more liberal aesthetics and a scurrilous tone without parental surveillance or the need to meet moral and educational expectations. For example, the contents of the Bulletin encompass Clive Bell and his baldness or “depilation of” scalp (42), Duncan Grant ruining Leslie Stephen’s “grey tweed suit” while he was “rescuing a child” (45), Vanessa’s cook, Trisy, whose porridge “stank” and “stuck” (49), and Clive Bell’s complaint about the “ainsime undertaking” of Roger Fry’s explosion of the old studio at Charleston Farmhouse (73) are selected episodes from everyday life at Charleston, demonstrating the value of satire through the eyes of a precocious journalist and the cooperation of a playful aunt. Echoing Thoby’s schoolboyish illustrations in the Hyde Park Gate News (18-19) and reminiscent of Leslie Stephen’s animal sketches in his children’s books (Stephen xiv), Quentin’s gleeful and succinct portraits in the Bulletin upscale the “ebullient” spirit of the Hyde Park Gate News. Quentin is remembered, not as a child, but as an “old and valued collaborator in fiction” in the preface of Orlando (6), in which the art of recording the transient present and the imaginative craft of fictionalizing are fantastical intertwined.

Neither Hyde Park Gate News nor The Charleston Bulletin are not merely apprentice or collaborative writings; they are literary production and reproduction which align with the social, historical, and class influences which Woolf experienced in her own childhood home and, perhaps, transmitted to Quentin. Hyde Park Gate News, in particular, demonstrates that even as an early writer and literary aspirant Woolf transmuted quotidian experience and social relations into literary works. The two apprentice texts show us the dispositions of their authors, the merits of collaborative endeavor, and the taste Woolf acquired from her early experience in her distinguished Victorian family, Without the chance to experiment as a child under the influence of her siblings and with the support of her parents, Woolf might not have begun The Charleston Bulletin with Quentin, and we might not have Orlando, published in the year right after the Bulletin ceased in 1927.

Jessica S. Y. Yeung
School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

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Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf in the Community College Classroom?

When I started my Master’s thesis on the place and purpose of Virginia Woolf in the community college classroom, I was surprised by the limited amount of scholarship available on teaching this author at this level. The scarcity of published discourse on Woolf in American two-year colleges is astonishing considering the continued interest in her life and work, the profusion of publications about education at this level, and the national expansion of these institutions both in size and importance. Now that I teach literature at a community college, I have a better understanding of the ways in which these institutions are marginalizing the majority of their faculty members and limiting the scholarly dialogue about literature in these schools. The limited dialogue on Woolf in community colleges reveals that students fear her for several reasons, but the lack of scholarship available on this topic suggests that instructors at these institutions fear her as well.

In his 1999 book, Honored but Invisible: An Inside Look at Teaching in Community Colleges, W. Norton Grubb, Professor of Education at UC—Berkeley, asserted that community colleges serve “the most diverse student bodies of any campus in America” and that instructors at these institutions face unique pedagogical challenges, especially in the English classroom where students’ abilities are as diverse as their backgrounds (3). In 2004, Beth Rigel Daugherty likened two-year college students to the “common readers” of Woolf’s Morley College in their desire to educate themselves, their socioeconomic situations, and their lack of confidence and experience with reading and writing about literature. As an English instructor at a Las Vegas, Nevada, community college that serves over 44,000 students each semester, I can attest that contemporary community college students continue to resemble Woolf’s Morley College students and that these institutions continue to serve dramatically diverse populations. The diverse student body and the growth of these institutions means that English professors at community colleges have the opportunity to expose more students to challenging literature than ever before. When we pair the growing workforce of community college instructors with the difficulty associated with teaching Woolf’s work, one would expect to find an abundance of diverse scholarship on teaching Woolf at this level; but we don’t. While many Woolfians have published immensely helpful ideas on teaching Woolf in the university setting, the discussion about teachers’ experiences with her work at community colleges is too limited. This lack of scholarly dialogue requires investigation. A closer look at two-year college reveals that some institutional practices, particularly the rise of adjunctification in higher education, induce anxiety and fear in instructors and discourage them from assigning challenging texts, the compromised working conditions that they endure cause me genuine frustration and made me feel tense and kind of nauseous.” Because the rewards of intellectual rigor are not instantly satisfying, some students vent their frustration in the evaluation process. For the non-adjunct professor, poor evaluations do not necessarily lead to the loss of one’s job but for adjuncts at community colleges, hiring and firing is based primarily on student evaluations. In a recent article, “The Adjunct Revolt: How Poor Professors Are Fighting Back,” Elizabeth Segrán reveals that “many adjuncts are afraid to challenge their students in class because poor student evaluations could cost them their jobs.” In 2001, Lois Gilmore noted that the challenge associated with teaching Woolf in the community college discouraged some instructors from assigning Woolf’s texts. Conversations I have had with my colleagues and a look at their syllabi confirm Gilmore’s observations. If teaching Woolf at the community college level can lead to negative evaluations and thus to losing one’s job, why wouldn’t adjuncts be afraid of Virginia Woolf? Even when adjuncts risk poor evaluations and do assign challenging texts, the compromised working conditions that they endure leave these faculty members without a room of their own to discuss their experiences teaching difficult literature.

The second way that community colleges work to silence adjuncts is by fostering a culture of isolation amongst these instructors. At many community colleges in America, adjuncts are not provided with office space, do not have access to break-rooms on campus, and are not provided with a place to gather with others to talk about teaching. Audrey Williams June’s recent article in The Chronicle of Higher Education notes the isolation of adjuncts as a barrier to student success and points out that adjuncts “don’t get the chance to network with peers about teaching and learning, and they’re shut out of campus discussions on how to improve student learning.” Adjuncts make up the majority of faculty at community colleges, yet they are the most marginalized group on campus. Without a room or community of their own to share teaching experiences, adjuncts work in isolation and are left without the opportunity to improve their professional abilities within a community of other teachers. Even when the adjunct does find the opportunity to converse with colleagues about teaching, the promotional practices at community colleges and the competitive atmosphere created by these practices discourage pedagogical honesty, effectively discouraging dialogue is the rise of adjunctification in the American higher education system. In April of 2014, a report released by the American Association of University Professors showed that adjuncts constitute over 75% percent of faculty in American higher education (Segran). Adjuncts make up the majority of faculty in America, yet they are the most ignored, censored teachers in American education. I aim to highlight four ways that community colleges create an environment of fear for adjuncts and thus have limited dialogue on and appearances of Woolf in these classrooms.

The first and most powerful way that community colleges induce fear in adjuncts and work to silence their experiences with Woolf is the emphasis these institutions place on end-of-term student evaluations. We all know that, when confronted with challenging concepts, many students become confused, frustrated, and displeased with the course, and we all know that Woolf’s works are notably challenging to read and teach because of her unconventional themes and plots, innovative structures, non-traditional narrative forms, historical and literary allusions, and avant-garde techniques. Requiring students to confront challenging literature and to engage critically with Woolf’s work is arduous and, because community college students often lack analytical reading and writing skills, understanding Woolf’s experimental writing is especially difficult for them. When I teach Woolf at this level and I ask students to respond to “Kew Gardens,” I receive feedback that reveals how confusing and dizzying Woolf’s work can be for them. Last semester students responded with comments like: “Kew Gardens was a total ball of confusion”; “This story was painful to read”; and “it’s too difficult to follow.” One student even expressed a physical response: “The unclear narration and the aimlessness of the humans in the story caused me genuine frustration and made me feel tense and kind of nauseous.” Because the rewards of intellectual rigor are not instantly satisfying, some students vent their frustration in the evaluation process. For the non-adjunct professor, poor evaluations do not necessarily lead to the loss of one’s job but for adjuncts at community colleges, hiring and firing is based primarily on student evaluations. In a recent article, “The Adjunct Revolt: How Poor Professors Are Fighting Back,” Elizabeth Segrán reveals that “many adjuncts are afraid to challenge their students in class because poor student evaluations could cost them their jobs.” In 2001, Lois Gilmore noted that the challenge associated with teaching Woolf in the community college discouraged some instructors from assigning Woolf’s texts. Conversations I have had with my colleagues and a look at their syllabi confirm Gilmore’s observations. If teaching Woolf at the community college level can lead to negative evaluations and thus to losing one’s job, why wouldn’t adjuncts be afraid of Virginia Woolf? Even when adjuncts risk poor evaluations and do assign challenging texts, the compromised working conditions that they endure leave these faculty members without a room of their own to discuss their experiences teaching difficult literature.
adjunct faculty members from sharing their real teaching experiences, especially with challenging authors like Woolf.

The third way community colleges work to silence conversations about Woolf is by creating an environment of fear in regard to sharing teaching difficulties. In her 2009 article, “The Messy Teaching Conversation,” Heidi Johnsen, a professor at LaGuardia Community College, describes an ongoing dialogue she and several of her colleagues participated in, a dialogue designed to function as a space for instructors to share classroom experiences, failures, difficulties, or “messy” moments, and reflect on their teaching practices. During this dialogue, many teachers communicated feeling “hesitant” to share a difficult, failed, or “messy” moment with their associates out of fear that their confession would damage their teaching reputation and prevent them from advancing within the department (Johnsen 126). One instructor said that admitting a past classroom “mess” can be a particularly risky confession to reveal in the community college because these schools “operate in an increasingly competitive atmosphere,” where “there’s often an expectation of perfection, especially when it comes to teaching” (Johnsen 126).

Unlike universities whose hiring and promotional practices are based on a combination of teaching, scholarship and service, two-year colleges throughout America have generally founded their hiring and promotional practices primarily on teaching performance, leaving little room for instructional errors or “messes.” The expectation of near perfect teaching and the threat of non-promotion discourage faculty from confessing difficult classroom moments and force instructors to frame these teaching difficulties as problems which have been solved and overcome, as opposed to regarding them as important issues which could benefit from further investigation. These promotional practices have induced fear that restrains the new generation of adjunct professors from discussing their successes and difficulties teaching Woolf. When investigating the lack of scholarship on Woolf at this level, however, the most obvious factor contributing to the deficit of dialogue is the harsh reality of the adjunct experience.

Why aren’t there more voices on teaching Woolf at these growing institutions that, as Jenkins states, “serve students who most need financial aid, who are least likely to complete a degree, who work the most hours, who need tutoring services the most, who have the least family support, and who have suffered most from poor secondary education”? Because adjunct instructors, who make up the majority of teachers in higher education, are treated as marginalized faculty and their compensation does not afford them the time or tools to produce scholarship. A study released in January by the U.S. House of Representatives reveals that the “majority” of adjuncts in America “live below the poverty line” (Segran). For adjuncts scrambling between multiple, short-term, poorly-paid teaching jobs, producing scholarship takes time they simply do not have. Debra Leigh Scott is an adjunct activist who insists that “we have lost an entire generation of scholarship” because of the poor treatment and marginalization of adjuncts. Scott believes that “adjunct contracts not only drive professors into poverty[,] it makes it next to impossible for them to do the kind of scholarship they have trained for” and are prepared to do. Scott says that the loss of such scholarship has ripple effects throughout society, since fewer scholars are contributing to national discussions on issues like the ethics of business and the value of the humanities (Segran). I suggest the adjunct experience has ripple effects in English classrooms across the country, where instructors are afraid to assign challenging literature and to talk about the subsequent difficulties.

So who is afraid of Virginia Woolf in the community college classroom? Adjuncts are, and these teachers make up the majority of faculty members in American higher education. The adjunct crisis is restricting the pedagogical conversations at community colleges that are becoming some of the largest and most “important institutions in the American landscape” (Grubb 3). The adjunct crisis is reflective of the corporatization of colleges in America, which discourages teachers from assigning challenging texts and instead encourages them to reduce intellectual rigor to help students pass classes to fulfill state-mandated student completion outcomes. The “corporate college” treats adjuncts as disposable, and I see this corporatization having an effect in the literature classroom where challenging and perspective-altering works by writers like Woolf and Shakespeare are being replaced with uncomplicated readings that fail to challenge students. By hiring and firing adjuncts based on student evaluations, providing them with no rooms of their own, emphasizing pedagogical perfection, and marginalizing these instructors financially and professionally, community colleges are creating an atmosphere of fear and working to eliminate challenging authors like Virginia Woolf from these growing institutions.

Community college students are Woolf’s “common readers,” and we need to read and teach more Woolf at this level, and we need to talk and publish more about Woolf in these classrooms. Assigning challenging and experimental works helps students develop their literary skills; Woolf’s texts reach out to common readers like two-year college students and encourage them to make their own meaning of her work. We need more dialogue on how to bring these students closer to an author who aligned herself with them and their intellectual, financial, and social struggles. We also need to question, as Virginia did, the educational institutions that preach intellectual freedom yet practice a different ethic. We must ask ourselves, as Woolf did in Three Guineas, where these educational systems and practices are leading us. Where in short is it leading us, this procession of marginalized, silenced, adjunct professors?

Kaylee Baucom
College of Southern Nevada

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Much of “Wordsworth’s Ethics” is in fact dedicated to reading the necessities of the turn to poetry, but it must be the right kind. Forms of consolation might lead to effeminacy. The power of grief has the potential to be unmanning and to seek out the wrong. Stephen writes of both with the same pen. In her study of the literature of mountaineering, Sue E. Coffman notes that Romantic-period writing about climbing stresses the arduousness of the task, the difficulty of climbing, the work of ascent in order to perform the work of looking inward (20). For later Victorian Alpinists, the labor of climbing was meant as a respite from the labor of industrial capitalism, especially intellectual labor, what Stephen called “penny-aling” (Maitland 198). For the many writers, journalists, intellectuals, and academics who climbed, this intellectual labor meant the endless production of words and writing. To overwork is a significant component of Victorian masculinity, aptly pointed out by both Antonia Ward and Herbert Sussman; to seek leisure in the rigorous activity of climbing and tramping is, as well, a concomitant part of that masculinity, “hero as man of letters,” to use Carlyle’s phrase from Lecture V of On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History. Once one has sought the physically and mentally rejuvenating experience of mountaineering, one can return to work and to the pleasures and demands of domestic life without fear of becoming enervated, feeble, effeminate. Wordsworth showed Leslie Stephen and his contemporaries that mental work could be manly, but only if balanced with physical vigor. In this way, too, we might see Leslie Stephen as an exemplary Victorian, manifesting what Ian Reid has discerned as the two threads of Victorian manliness, both emerging from understandings of Wordsworth in that era: strength of will, body and mind; and a sense of common humanity, sympathy, and loving-kindness towards one’s fellows (213).

Upon the sudden death of his first wife Minny in 1875, Stephen wrote two essays: “Wordsworth’s Ethics” (first published in the Cornhill Magazine in 1876 and then collected in Hours in a Library [1879]) and “The Alps in Winter” (also making its first appearance in the Cornhill Magazine, in 1877, and then republished with other mountaineering essays in the second edition of The Playground of Europe [1895]). Two letters to his American friend Charles Eliot Norton will show the interconnectedness of these combined endeavors at this point in Stephen’s life. First, to Norton on Wordsworth he writes on 5 March 1876, “Do you sympathize with me when I say that the only writer whom I have been able to read with pleasure through this nightmare is Wordsworth? […] He is so thoroughly manly and tender and honest. […] He seems to me to be the only consoler. […] Old W. W. is a genuine human being” (Selected 170). Stephen’s language suggests the notion that grief has the potential to be unmanning and to seek out the wrong forms of consolation might lead to effeminacy. The power of grief necessitates the turn to poetry, but it must be the right kind. Much of “Wordsworth’s Ethics” is in fact dedicated to reading the poet as a course of working through mourning. It reveals particularly gendered anxieties around grief. Stephen writes, “What Wordsworth sees with unequaled clearness [is that] sorrow too often tends to produce bitterness or effeminacy of character. […] The man who is occupied with his own interests makes grief an excuse for effeminate indulgence in self-pity. He becomes weaker and more fretful” (Hours 170). We have in this passage the most explicit statement of the critique in search of manly consolation, and finding it not only in the poetry of Wordsworth but in the fortifying way that that poetry teaches the man to exist in sympathy with others outside himself: “the man who has learnt habitually to think of himself as part of a greater whole,” who pursues “honest work,” is the true man (Hours 170), even in the face of grief.

This valorizing of manliness appears in Stephen’s discourse related to the Alps, as well, as they too provide the “tender, melancholy, inspiring glories” that the grieving man requires (qtd. in Maitland 297). Writing to Norton again on 4 February 1877 in the second letter of interest, Stephen says, “I was pleased […] to find myself far stronger than I expected. I had one day’s walk of twelve hours, wading up and down steep slopes covered knee-deep with fresh snow. The labour was really severe; but I did my work like a man. […] In sober earnest, my sense of strength gave me great courage” (qtd. in Maitland 297; my italics). Parallel works of consolation are accomplished here, as Stephen feels not the despair of grief but the strength and courage that comes of achieving a manly task. This discourse emerges throughout the Alpine writing, and is not confined solely to “The Alps in Winter”; Stephen is not afraid to admit he “scrambles desperately” and “fumbles vaguely” (Playground 119). He embraces the “hours of labour” and “strenuous muscular exertion” as part of his field of sensation as well as an affirmation of manhood (Playground 364). He does not attempt to make climbing look easy in his writing; rather he embraces the difficulty in order to prove himself as a man. He also shares his experience in order to create community with his fellows.

In the greatness and nobility of Wordsworth’s poetry as well as the encounter with the Alps, for Stephen, physical health and moral health are intertwined. The maintenance of this state of health means that managing grief as a man is essential, lest one devolve into a debauched state of morbidity. Stephen enters into the discourse around health vs. degeneracy, manliness vs. effeminacy, in his considerations of poetry and of climbing, and finds the rigors of Wordsworth’s verse and of alpinism each to be suited to achieving true manliness: “The highest poetry expresses […] the healthiest nature […] Since morality means obedience to those rules which are most essential to the spiritual health, vicious feeling indicates some morbid tendency, and is so far destructive of the poetical faculty” (Hours 133). Further: “A true man ought not to sit down and weep with an exhausted debauche. […] He has to work as long as he has strength; to work in spite of, even by strength of, sorrow, disappointment, wounded vanity, and blunted sensibilities” (Hours 144-45). One must do one’s work like a man.

If one recalls Wordsworth’s own poetry on crossing the Alps, one might see that likewise Stephen looked to the mountains not for the sublime but for an affirmation of the sheer effort it requires to be human and occasionally fail, as well as for the value of experience afforded by both individual will and tender companionship. The mountains, for Stephen, have their “amiable” side (Playground 149), which might be perceived by the “rightly prepared mind” open to seeing harmony rather than vulgar disorder (Playground 152). This amiable side consists in noting the “proper place” of the mountains “as the background of the simple domestic affections” (Playground 156). Wordsworth provided a model for physical and mental health, moral and affective sensibility, fine perception and sympathy. These might be found in walking and climbing, if a man might know to look for them as he has been taught by the poet. The mountaineer has “opened new avenues of access between the scenery and his mind. […] He has learnt a language which is but partially revealed to ordinary men” (Playground 365). His mind is properly “toned” (Playground 378). Rejecting the “morbid tendencies of the author” and modern life in urban crowds (Playground 249, 261), the
Stephen’s sympathy towards his fellow man may be what led him to make claims for Wordsworth being a poet of consolation. Stephen found sustenance in Wordsworth that eased his own sense of deep loss, and he imagined that others might find such sustenance as well. In his Mausoleum Book, created after the death of his second wife, Julia Duckworth Stephen, he speaks again of turning to Wordsworth (“I somehow come back often to him, when I am in sorrow”), and he writes that “Wordsworth’s Ethics” has “given the most pleasure”; grief must be “transmuted” into affection for others, particularly those who have survived the beloved lost person (Mausoleum 82, 70-71). Yet the Mausoleum Book also stands as a testament to the deep ambivalence Stephen experienced around grief and mourning. In this book, rather than looking outward to the words of another upon the death of his second wife as he did with his first, Stephen looks inward, to his past, his family, his own pain, his own words. In narrativizing his loss, he returns to the death of Minny and offers another version of that moment of mourning. He describes having a slab decorated with carvings of Alpine flowers made for Minny’s gravesite: “I always associate my Minny with the Alps. [...] I cannot however analyze my feeling. I only know that the sweet, delicately formed, shy little cyclamen nestling in the Alpine meadow under the great cliffs somehow represent her for me. Who can say why?” (Mausoleum 22-23). This is a different version of Stephen: not the mountaineer who “did his work like a man” as a bulwark against grief, but the widower who transforms the sublime vision of the Alps into a picturesque, domestic, feminine-inflected landscape.

It was the poet Thomas Hardy who reclaimed the Alps for the grieving Victorian, in a final monument that captures not effeminacy but a kind of power. Hardy not only climbed with Stephen but also had the distinction of being called upon to serve as witness when Stephen renounced his holy orders, and he attempted to capture Stephen’s essence in a sonnet, written in 1897 after Hardy himself climbed the Schreckhorn:

Alloof, as if a thing of mood and whim,
Now that its spare and desolate figure gleams
Upon my nearing vision, less it seems
A looming Alp-height than a guise of him
Who scaled its horn with ventured life and limb,
Drawn on by vague imaginings, maybe,
Of semblance to his personality
In its quaint glooms, keen lights, and rugged trim.
—At his last change, when Life’s dull coils unwind,
Will he, in old love, hitherward escape,
And the eternal essence of his mind
Enter this silent adamantine shape,
And his low voicing haunt its slipping snows
When dawn that calls the climber dyes them rose? (qtd. in Maitland 277-78)

Stephen’s last visit to the Alps was in 1894, three years before this sonnet was written, and one year before the death of Julia; he never returned. The Alps, and Wordsworth, were not to provide the balm they did upon the occasion of the death of his first wife. Yet Hardy asks here whether that is still possible, whether the mountains will offer a final respite, after a lifetime of the man finding his own “personality” in its “glooms” and “lights.” Hardy’s poem crystallizes the significance of the mountains for Stephen in the waning years of a life marked by grief.

Janine Utell
Widener University

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A Transequatorial Aesthetics: Virginia Woolf’s Trek South and East from the Aegean

Evelyn Haller’s “Isis Unveiled: Virginia Woolf’s Use of Egyptian Myth” and Jane Marcus’s postcolonial reading of Woolf in “Britannia Rules The Waves,” with its controversial reading of the italicized interludes of The Waves as gayatra or “Hindu prayers to the sun” (Marcus 137) both articulate Eastern and African spaces as central to Virginia Woolf’s aesthetic. While Leonard Woolf served in Ceylon as a colonial official, and critical studies of his wife’s work have probed the influence of his time period in Southeast Asia, the colonial situation in Africa also occupied Leonard’s writing, as in the nonfiction Empire and Commerce in Africa (1920). Elleke Boehmer’s study of Leonard Woolf’s early short fiction, A Tale Told by Moonlight, highlights how he was greatly influenced by Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and its “interrogation of colonization” (Boehmer 185). Despite Leonard’s concern with Africa around the time period Virginia Woolf was beginning her literary

Schreckhorn
by Stephen A. on Flickr
August 29, 2011
(image reduced in size)
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A Transequatorial Aesthetics: Virginia Woolf’s Trek South and East from the Aegean

Evelyn Haller’s “Isis Unveiled: Virginia Woolf’s Use of Egyptian Myth” and Jane Marcus’s postcolonial reading of Woolf in “Britannia Rules The Waves,” with its controversial reading of the italicized interludes of The Waves as gayatra or “Hindu prayers to the sun” (Marcus 137) both articulate Eastern and African spaces as central to Virginia Woolf’s aesthetic. While Leonard Woolf served in Ceylon as a colonial official, and critical studies of his wife’s work have probed the influence of his time period in Southeast Asia, the colonial situation in Africa also occupied Leonard’s writing, as in the nonfiction Empire and Commerce in Africa (1920). Elleke Boehmer’s study of Leonard Woolf’s early short fiction, A Tale Told by Moonlight, highlights how he was greatly influenced by Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and its “interrogation of colonization” (Boehmer 185). Despite Leonard’s concern with Africa around the time period Virginia Woolf was beginning her literary
career, the references to Africa in her work pale in comparison to the references to Asia, India, or the Orient. One cannot, however, be an extensive commentator on the colonial situation without also referencing Africa. This essay strives to dissect some of those references, more “fantastical” than the Hellenism of Woolf’s early career, in the hope that I can outline an aesthetics derived from the “East South philosophical” concern that Daniel Kim advocates in “The Invisible Asian,” a desire for a “decentering of Western philosophy” similar to that expressed in The Waves in Bernard’s dissent that “Rome is the limit” as he realizes he will never “read the Vedas” (The Waves [TW] 135). In the sentence preceding this moment late in The Waves, which includes a litany of Eastern experiences, Bernard realizes he will never have, he also claims that he will “never understand the harder problems of philosophy,” as if to suggest that understanding is predicated on experiences of the non-European in such images as the navel-contemplating old man (a yogi) in a ditch in India that Percival stumbles upon, the spear fisherman in Tahiti, or Louis’s realization of a prior life along the Nile as an Egyptian in the time of the Pharaohs.

This philosophical trans-equatorial concern of the “East South” also appears in Woolf’s work encoded in what have been termed occult interests. Haller’s convincing reading of Between the Acts reveals Woolf’s complex encoding into narrative of Theosophical Society or occult movement interpretations of ancient Egyptian rituals (109). The repeated presentation of a tea cup and a racket to Isa in Between the Acts serves as a parallel to the initial ritual elements of her namesake’s honor, the presenting of a sistra and the situla to Isis (Haller 110). My framing of Woolf’s use of Isis rituals within a discussion of the influence of the Theosophy Society and the occult movement of the late nineteenth century is intentional since Haller’s study and Barbara Lonnquist’s dissertation on ancient Egyptian references in the work of James Joyce and Woolf frame such discussion within archeological discoveries and the advent of Egyptology as a discipline (Lonnquist 89). Haller notes that “Woolf’s Egyptian mode of seeing had taken charge from the dipolar influences of the Egyptian collection in the British Museum, especially the tiers of Isis and Horus statues, and the knowledge she acquired through classical studies under women scholars” such as Jane Ellen Harrison and Clara Pater (111). However, neither Haller nor Lonnquist bring up the integral role that Egyptology played in Theosophy and other Western esoteric movements at the latter part of the nineteenth century. Lonnquist goes to great lengths to discuss the field of Woolf studies may account for the greater attention paid to her reading, Haller’s reading is more based than Marcus’s on textual correlations when she analyzes how such words from Woolf’s work written prior to the early 1990s, before there was a more serious critical interest in the relation between occult movements and Western aesthetics. While Egyptology reaches back to the seventeenth century, Erik Hornung’s The Secret Lore of Egypt makes the connection between its revival and eventual disciplinarity in the nineteenth century and the lengths to which Theosophy assisted in that endeavor (45). Alex Owen notes in The Place of Enchantment that the Theosophical society “had its hand” in several fields that developed simultaneous to the movement at the latter part of the nineteenth century (114). These were fields of study which subsequently developed into more encapsulated academic disciplines such as Indology and psychiatry. Julie Kane’s highlighting of specific elements of astral-travel and telepathy in Between the Acts, such as Lucy Swithin’s being “up in the clouds, like an air ball” (Between the Acts [BTA] 116), complicate readings of this ritual-oriented novel as strictly derived from the academic endeavors of such Western classicist scholars such as Jane Harrison and Walter Pater. While Kane mentions no specific readings in Theosophy on Woolf’s part, Woolf’s passing references to Theosophy in her novels, her involvement with people who were interested in Theosophy, and the admiration she had for the French symbolist poets heavily influenced by Theosophy shows that “proving” Theosophical interests with the presence of a specific set of readings from her library is not necessary to finding their presence in her work. In fact, demarcating academic endeavors from occult-movement inspired interests in the then-nascent field of Egyptology is a complicated matter. In such figures as the British Museum’s E. A. Wallis Budge, the translator of the popular Egyptian Book of the Dead (1901), we find Egyptologists combining a deep interest in the paranormal and the occult with the academic work of archiving and translating. Woolf’s frequent visits to the British museum are crucial to Haller’s reading (Haller 105). Of course, elements that presumably constitute “literary proof” of influence can extend to the nontextual or even be based on correlations and “critical anticipation.” This is not to suggest that readings of mysticism or of Oriental elements in Woolf’s work are limited. In fact, critics such as Judith Witt, Val Gough, Makiko Minow-Pinkney, and others consider everything from Quaker mysticism to the fluid mysticism informing scenes of transport and transport systems in Woolf’s novels. And at the social level, Woolf most certainly discussed the occult: Woolf’s letter to Lytton Strachey in March 1921 refers to a prolonged discussion of Theosophy with society members who inhabited a cottage she once rented (Virginia Woolf Reader 352). Vita Sackville-West’s letter to Woolf from Alexandria stating “I can’t imagine what you would do with this country if you were here” insinuates Woolf’s deep interest in Egyptology (114).

The importance of Haller’s reading of Between the Acts, a reading which perhaps hasn’t been as pervasively acknowledged within Woolf circles as it should, rests on the idea that Woolf could extensively employ allusions to rituals in her work at multiple structural layers. Haller’s reading hasn’t elicted the sort of critical challenge that Jane Marcus’s reading of Hindu influences in The Waves has. While Marcus’s significant status within the field of Woolf studies may account for the greater attention paid to her reading, Haller’s reading is more based than Marcus’s on textual correlations between the novel Between the Acts and texts Woolf read, such as Sackville-West’s travel letters from Egypt and Walter Pater’s Egypt-ritual section of Marius, the Epicurean (Haller 112). Haller notes how the Isis iconography surrounding the Isa character correlates to descriptions offered in Lempière’s Classical Dictionary, a text referenced too in the novel.

Once the Egyptian ritual reference points are realized in Between the Acts, other readings of possible esoteric layering within Woolf’s work become more tenable. Perhaps Haller privileges a bit much the notion of textual correlations when she analyzes how such words from Woolf’s novels as “desert...Egyptians...heiroglyphics...Horus...Isis...lotus...mummies...mu...Nile...Osiris, obsidian; palms, pyramids [...] Ramses, ruins...sarcophagi...sand, shadows” are found in Sackville-West’s Egypt travel letters, even though such terms also went hand in hand with the British museum’s permanent Egyptian collection (Haller 114). Despite this, there are strengths to Lonnquist and Haller focusing on individual relations in Woolf’s life whereby she could draw on seemingly academic routes to ancient Egypt. One such relation was with the Western classical Cambridge scholar Jane Harrison, who claims “Egypt was one of the last strongholds of goddess worship, and the Nile the center of fertility rites” (12). The parallel interests in the “shadowy nameless intangible forces dwelling below and beneath the status quo,” as Harrison framed her intellectual pursuits in “Our Debt,” do warrant the sort of comparative analyses between Woolf and Harrison that Patricia Cramer outlines in “Jane Harrison and Lesbian Plots” (Cramer 443). However, when Bernard notes in a late soliloquy from The Waves, that he will “never understand the harder problems of philosophy. Rome is the limit of my travelling. [...] Nor shall I learn Russian or read the Vedas” (TW 135), we get the sense that that which is beyond the philosophical limits of Europe (and Hellenism) is precisely a reference point for Woolf’s work (despite cross-cultural difficulties figured in various ways and through different characters, such as with the personally destructive effect of colonialism we encounter with Percival of The Waves). Lonnquist focuses on Woolf’s and Harrison’s respective travels to Greece and
insinuates a sort of literary reenactment in the former’s travel to Greece (72).

Woolf’s 1906 story “A Dialogue on Mount Pentelicus,” constructs a reference point beyond the Western classical world that Harrison stresses in her academic work. In fact, as David Adams points out in Colonial Odysseys, “A Dialogue on Mount Pentelicus” is key to Woolf’s subsequent colonial travel novel, The Voyage Out, a novel rife with discussions of Hellenism (45). Hermione Lee claims of Woolf’s 1906 travels to Greece and Turkey and related travel writings that “nowhere in her diaries does she so often complain of inarticulacy[,] [stating]: ‘I might as well leave a blank page’” (224).

But the travel to Mount Pentelicus is also a visit to foundations, as it is the site of an ancient quarry that provided the marble for such Greek structures as the Acropolis. The narrator and her six companions mirror this visit to structural foundations with a “visit” to philosophical foundations, as the six begin a discussion of Hellenism under a tree. The impasse to comprehension in “Mount Pentelicus” occurs in an encounter with a “brown monk,” whose appearance and piercing eyes left her six companions speechless:

“The light in the brown monk’s eye [...] pierced through, and went like an arrow drawing a golden chain through ages and races till the shapes of men and women and the sky and the trees rose up on either side of its passage and stretched in a solid and continuous avenue from one end of time to the other. And the English could not have told at the moment at which point they stood, for the avenue was as smooth as a ring of gold. (SF 68)

This disorientation on the part of the British Hellenophile compatriots reverses the prior linguistic power they exhibit in the disorientation experienced by the “modern Greeks” who could not understand the British traveler’s attempts to speak ancient Greek to them. David Adams’s dissection of the racial elements of this encounter relies on Woolf’s early journals, A Passionate Apprentice, and notes that Woolf characterized these modern Greeks as being from “mongrel element[s]” (PA 340) and from “the Turk & the Albanian & the French” (Travels with Virginia Woolf 213). Adams points out Woolf’s persistence “in emphasizing the darkness of the monk’s complexion” which racially aligns him with modern Greeks (185) but also Woolf’s depiction of him as one whose subsequent visual effect on the British suggest something much older than even ancient Greece: “hope shot through the minds of some who saw him that his was one of those original figures which, dipped in the crude earth, have resisted time” (SF 67). This timelessness, a representation of the sort the West heaped onto ancient cultures of the East and Africa, as well as the brownness of the monk’s complexion and the description of him as one who “wandered in obscure places” (SF 68), imply non-European spaces in Africa and Asia.

This “Mount Pentelicus moment” will be repeated in Woolf’s novels over and over again: discourses on classical ancient civilizations interrupted by elements more fantastical, more primitive, and suggestively infused with the non-European. By the time of Woolf’s writing of The Waves twenty years later, though, that temporal framing of the East and Egypt had been transformed from timelessness into a powerful colonial-infused expression of Bloomsbury’s philosophical conjectures on time, the real, and sense data. Critics such as Ann Banfield and S.P. Rosenbaum identify a Bloomsbury strain of modernist literary impressionism influenced by philosophers Bertrand Russell and George Moore, but this impressionism is also part and parcel of the exploration of the relation of these philosophical topics to transsequatorial experiences.

Whether in dreams or underlying narratives of jungle struggles in Southeast Asia or Africa on the part of colonialist North Pargiter from The Years or Oliver Giles from Between the Acts or in the way in which Percival’s fall in India represents an impasse to understanding for the London-based six main characters of The Waves, these surreal images from transsequatorial East and South spaces in Woolf’s oeuvre are also informed by an admixture of images of cloaked or obscured figures. From the brown monk of “Dialogues on Mount Pentelicus” or the lurking hooded figure in Flush, these images and memories begin to merge with images of bodily disaggregation in subsequent narratives, as with the African-bound ship in The Waves: “I think we met once on the gangway of a ship bound for Africa—a mere admixture of eyes, cheeks, nostrils[,] [...]. Yet this shadow which has sat by me for an hour or two, this mask from which peep two eyes, has power to drive me back” (TW 165). Like the image elicited by the monk in “Dialogues” of “avenues” that stretch from “one time to another,” so too is this surreal and cloaked “mask” from beyond Europe able to elicit the strong sense of historical regression and memory. Images of disaggregation, as in the Egyptian Osiris myth that Woolf deploys in Between the Acts or in Louis’s recollection of uncovering pieces of his body buried near the Nile in The Waves, merge transsequatorially with abortive moments and haunting memories in Eastern spaces beneath the “cloaked” gaze of the Other: “But the master [Mr. Giles] was not dead; only dreaming: drowsily, seeing as in a glass, its lustre spotted, himself, a young man helmeted; [...] in the sand a hoop of ribs; a bullock maggot-eaten in the sun; and in the shadow of the rock, savages; and in his hand a gun” (BTA 13).

Several critics have pointed out how this notion of disaggregation is fundamental to Woolf’s conception of her own aesthetic. For example, she wrote in a diary entry from 1926 of the vision of “a fin passing far out” as emblematic of a new type of novel (The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. 3 [D3] 113). And when she completed The Waves a few years later, that “fin,” the “impulse behind another book” (D3 113) had finally been “netted” (D4 10). Bernard, the writer character in The Waves, combines that very emblem of a new aesthetic with African and Eastern spaces that the novel has referenced and that he had previously doubted ever being able to access (“Rome is the limit”):

These moments of escape are not to be despised. They come too seldom. Tahiti becomes possible. Leaning over this parapet I see far out a waste of water. A fin turns. This bare visual impression is unattached to any line of reason, it springs up as one might see the fin of a porpoise on the horizon. Visual impressions often communicate thus briefly statements that we shall in time to come uncover and coax into words. I note under F, therefore, “Fin in a waste of waters.” (TW 137-38)

The images of bodily disaggregation rife in The Waves, though, have their most poignant expression as Louis finds parts of his body in the recollection of a prior life along the Nile. But he also has memories of other prior lives as well: “I was an Arab prince; behold my free gestures. I was a great poet in the time of Elizabeth I” (TW 92). The Arab prince’s “free gestures” highlight the physical rather than the political or the textual of the prior European lives—Duke at court and Elizabethan poet. But it is not just Louis who experiences disaggregation, as Bernard states: “We [six] saw for a moment laid out among us the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time cannot forget” (TW 156). The heightened narrative of disaggregation, and of body parts that elude wholeness, of an absent figure the six characters of The Waves (and the six British travelers on Mount Pentelicus) cannot forget, is not the figure of the charismatic Percival but Osiris and the brown monk, or rather of a figure from African and Eastern spaces, boxed and dispersed physically, temporally, and philosophically, and entirely beyond the grasp of the European.

Victor Vargus
California College of the Arts

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Challenges to Traditional Historical Discourse through the Obscure and the Everyday

Woolf’s interest in the subject of history began at an early age under the instruction of her father, the historian, biographer, and man of letters Sir Leslie Stephen. A willing student in terms of her adolescent submission to her father’s direction, Woolf’s appreciation of the far-reaching significance of history and its representation was to continue during her lifetime. Both the subject and the critique of history became recurrent themes throughout the various forms of her writings. Although Woolf possessed, to some extent, a desire to emulate her father’s approach to his work, “she was shaped too by wanting to do nothing that father did. Much of how she lived and wrote was formulated in reaction against him” (Lee 72).

Throughout her oeuvre, Woolf emphasizes her belief that traditional historical discourse has been used as a means to justify and reinforce those dualisms that marginalize certain groups within a society, particularly women and the working class. Such an approach is evident in Woolf’s first novel, The Voyage Out, in which she makes repeated references to the work of the renowned eighteenth-century historian, Edward Gibbon (1737-1794). Introducing the character St. John Hirst to the reader, Woolf presents the young Cambridge man “reading the third volume of Gibbon’s History of the Decline and Fall of Rome” (116). As the novel progresses, Hirst attempts to make conversation with the unworlly Rachel Vinrace. Upon learning that Rachel has never read Gibbon’s work, this arrogant and ultimately insecure individual openly refers to the historian’s writings as a means of measuring the young woman’s mental aptitude: “‘D’you think you’ll be able to appreciate him? He’s the test, of course. It’s awfully difficult to tell about women,’ he continued, ‘how much, I mean, is due to lack of training, and how much is native incapacity’” (172).

As Jane de Gay rightly observes, in The Voyage Out, Gibbon’s work not only “becomes a form of currency in the cultural economy of Rachel’s circle”; his writings become “a means of dividing male and female experience, and asserting male dominance” (Virginia Woolf’s Novels 21). This perspective is reflected in Woolf’s subsequent novel, Night and Day; as she describes the experience of Cassandra Otway, a young woman who feels compelled to read Lord Macaulay’s The History of England upon the advice of her future husband, William Rodney. While Rodney feels a compulsion to “educate” Cassandra (414), it is of note that Macaulay’s works were similar recommended to fifteen-year-old Woolf by her father (Passionate Apprentice 69). Unlike Cassandra, who fails to read any of Macaulay’s history, Woolf, in her 1897 diary, proudly records her experience of reading the five volumes of the historian’s work within the space of a month, using attributes such as “cherished” and “beloved” to describe the historian who was personally acquainted with her father (Passionate Apprentice 79, 80). From the perspectives of the fictional representations of Rachel Vinrace and Cassandra Otway, as well as the lived experience of young Virginia Stephen, traditional historiography becomes not only a means of social inculcation; such discourse is also used as an exclusionary tool of the patriarchal social order.

As Woolf attests in Three Guineas, the absence of women and other marginalized members of society from historical discourse itself both demonstrates and reinforces their position as social outsiders. In marked contrast to such omissions, in her 1925 diary Woolf records her intention to “read voraciously & gather material for the Lives of the Obscure— which is to tell the whole history of England in one obscure life after another” (Diary of Virginia Woolf [D] 3 37), an ambition that ultimately results in a series of essays. Comparing Woolf’s approach to history with that of Woolf’s father, Sabine Hotho-Jackson suggests that: “If for

1 This essay is taken from Chapter 4 of my monograph, Virginia Woolf and Being-in-the-world: A Heideggerian Study (forthcoming, Edinburgh UP, 2017).
2 Katherine C. Hill discusses Woolf’s early apprenticeship in history as a result of her father’s insistence that “a solid background in history and biography is necessary to the appreciation of literature” (353). It must be emphasized, however, that this influence did not result in imitation; rather, as will be discussed, Stephen’s approach inspired Woolf’s critique of traditional historical discourse.
3 As late as six months before her death, Woolf records in her diary “an idea for a Common History book” (D5 318); this idea was to culminate in her unfinished final essays, “Anon” and “The Reader.”
4 Along similar lines, in “Virginia Woolf’s Feminist Historiography in Orlando,” Jane de Gay provides a convincing argument that Woolf’s representation of history in Orlando can be read as a reaction against Stephen’s treatment of literary history.
5 As Anne Olivier Bell remarks, by 1927 Woolf “had already published two such ‘Lives’ (reprinted in the Common Reader)” (D3 129 n7). At that time Woolf’s interest and intention to write such a history still remained: “I shall write memoirs; have a plan already to get historical manuscripts & write Lives of the Obscure” (D3 129).
Stephen, the obscure were the rank and file of history, without which the
great men could not have achieved their historical impact, for Woolf they
were history itself” (310).

Throughout Woolf’s fiction and nonfiction, her interest in marginalized
lives was to remain a preoccupation. In A Room of One’s Own, for
example, the issue of the obscurity and marginalization of women’s
lives within historical discourse is a dominant concern; as Woolf
satirically observes, the lives of women are “all but absent from history”
(56). Woolf draws attention to the stark contrast between the copious
representations of women in fiction and their lack of a presence in
history: “imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she
is completely insignificant” (56). As Woolf surveys the chapter headings
in G. M. Trevelyan’s 1926 History of England, she is met with the usual
signposts of history such as war, education, politics, and religion—
spheres of society from which women have been traditionally excluded.
As Woolf ironically observes, “by no possible means could middle-class
women with nothing but brains and character at their command have
taken part in any one of the great movements which, brought together,
constitute the historian’s view of the past” (57-58).

Turning to the study of the Elizabethan woman, Woolf considers the
difficulty of catching a glimpse of this figure’s everyday life as, unlike
some of her male counterparts, she leaves behind neither plays nor
poems, and “never writes her own life and scarcely keeps a diary”
(AROO 58). Calling for the rewriting of history, Woolf facetiously asks
whether a record of the obscure lives of such women could be added as

a supplement to history? Calling it, of course, by some inconspicuous
name so that women might figure there without impropriety? For one
often catches a glimpse of them in the lives of the great, whisking
away into the background, concealing, I sometimes think, a wink, a
laugh, perhaps a tear. (58)

Lamenting the unrecorded state of women’s everyday lives, Woolf notes
that “[n]othing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography
or history has a word to say about it” (116). Emphasizing her desire to
gain an understanding of such lives, Woolf turns her thoughts to the
image of a girl serving behind a shop counter and proclaims, “I would
as soon have her true history as the hundred and fiftieth life of Napoleon
and his friends; how did he blow his nose; whom did he love, and how;
and when he came to die did he die in his bed like a Christian, or...”

For Woolf, the propensity of official biographical and historical discourse
to marginalize the everyday life of the individual conceals rather than
reveals the relationship between self and world. In response, throughout
the various forms of her writings, Woolf’s textual representations of
the past privilege the ordinary, or everyday, as the principal focus of
concern. As Lyndall Gordon writes, for Woolf, “[a]t the centre of history
...are the acts of the obscure between the acts of kings and warriors”
(163). Referring to Woolf’s oeuvre, Gillian Beer states that, “history in
her writing is a matter of textures (horse-hair or velvet), changing light
(flameaux or gas-light), not of events or ‘dominant figures of the age’”
(8).

Reflecting upon the importance of the everyday in terms of coming to
some understanding of the past, in “The Captain’s Death Bed,” Woolf
suggests that “no living writer, try though he may, can bring the past
back again, because no living writer can bring back the ordinary day.
He sees it through a glass, sentimentally, romantically; it is either too
pretty or too brutal; it lacks ordinariness” (41). For Woolf, in order to
comprehensively understand and connect with that which has been,
one must understand the somewhat elusive manifestations of the
everyday. Woolf also stresses the importance of the everyday in “The
Art of Biography,” in which she asserts the importance of “authentic
information” such as: “When and where did the real man live; how did
he look; did he wear laced boots or elastic-sided; who were his aunts,
and his friends; how did he blow his nose; whom did he love, and how;
and when he came to die did he die in his bed like a Christian, or...”

In a similar style, in Three Guineas, Woolf again uses endnotes to refer
to the unrecorded life of the domestic servant: “It is much to be regretted
that no lives ofmaids, from which a more fully documented account
could be constructed, are to be found in the Dictionary of National
Biography” (Three Guineas 390-91, note 36). Such a reference to Leslie
Stephen’s monumental dictionary is a scarcely veiled criticism of her
father’s decision-making about who is deemed worthy of inclusion in the
pages of history.

Throughout her writings, Woolf frequently presents biography as a form
of historiography, a perspective that may well have been influenced by
her father’s early and extensive instruction regarding “the interrelations
of biography, history, and literature” (Hill 353). As Robert I. Rotberg
suggests, accounts of the lives of individuals provide the foundation for
history insofar as: “Biography is history, depends on history, and
strengthens and enriches history. In turn, all history is biography” (305).
Despite her agreement with such an understanding, Woolf observes
that official biographical accounts often fail to provide an authentic
representation of the individual’s lived experience. In her 1927 essay,
“The New Biography,” for instance, Woolf reflects upon the propensity
of Victorian biographies to focus upon subject matter that has little
relevance to the individual’s everyday mode of being. As a means of
illustrating her point, Woolf calls upon her readers to “[c]onsider one’s
own life; pass under review a few years that one has actually lived.
Conceive how Lord Morley would have expounded them; how Sir
Sidney Lee would have documented them; how strangely all that has
been most real in them would have slipped through their fingers” (478).

Five years later, in her essay, “Great Men’s Houses,” Woolf again
highlights the propensity of Victorian biography to fail to document
“all that has been most real” in the life of its subjects, as she calls into
question the biographical representation of the nineteenth-century writer,
historian, and biographer, Thomas Carlyle: “Take the Carlyles, for
instance. One hour spent in 5 Cheyne Row will tell us more about them
and their lives than we can learn from all the biographies” (32). Woolf’s
essay uncovers the everyday way of life that was experienced by the
Carlyle couple, one that was founded upon—to at least some degree—
the gender and class prescriptions of the social order.

6 Reflecting upon Woolf’s desire to write a “Common History book” (356)—an
aspiration recorded in her 1940 diary—Brenda R. Silver observes that, “[m]uch
of her reading linked to her plan to begin her history as she had begun the pageant
in her novel [Between the Acts]—with the early forms of English literature and
society, and with the anonymous men and women who created them” (357).

8 Reflecting upon the importance of the everyday in terms of coming to
some understanding of the past, in “The Captain’s Death Bed,” Woolf
suggests that “no living writer, try though he may, can bring the past
back again, because no living writer can bring back the ordinary day.
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and his friends; how did he blow his nose; whom did he love, and how;
and when he came to die did he die in his bed like a Christian, or...”

125, 126. Woolf states that the capacity of the biographer to impart
such everyday details provides a reality that “does more to stimulate
the imagination than any poet or novelist save the very greatest” (126).
The significance of such ordinary details as a means of understanding the past is given fictional representation early in Woolf’s career in her short story, “Phyllis and Rosamond.” Arguing that it is time to look behind and beyond the traditionally dominant figures of history, the narrator proposes that the true sources of influence throughout society may in fact be those “obscure figures” who “occupy a place not unlike that of the showman’s hand in the dance of the marionettes” (17). Woolf suggests that in order to understand the grand events and great men of history one must understand the everyday lives of those who exist in their orbit and in their shadow.

Angeliki Spiropoulou states that such a privileging of the personal and non-official as a worthy record of the past is contrary to “the historiographical practice of traditional historicism” which is “based on formal documents which as a rule express the official point of view, excluding much personal, visual or oral evidence as well as marginal presences and ideas” (40). Woolf’s desire to subvert the emphasis of traditional historical discourse upon grand events in favor of the everyday is evident in The Years, in which she explicitly uses dates as chapter headings as a means of signposting the narrative’s particular location in history, even as she “marginalises and/or approaches obliquely” (Peach 192) those major historical events, such as war, that form the foundations of traditional representations of history. Such a disruption of war as a traditional subject of history is particularly marked in To the Lighthouse through the novel’s interlude, “Time Passes.” As Gordon suggests, within this section, the omission of “battles, gore, and political justification” acts as a “critique of what histories and newspapers accustom us to define as memorable” (161). When war is directly referred to, it is encased in square brackets: “[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]” (127). The use of such punctuation provides a performative representation of Woolf’s attitude to war as a focus of history.

Woolf’s sustained critique of war as a principal focus of concern throughout official recorded history reflects her broader desire to redefine what actually constitutes “history,” in order that those individuals, movements, and events that have long been overlooked and excluded from traditional historical discourse might take their rightful place within the collective memory rather than be forgotten. For Woolf, traditional historical discourse is representative of both the past and present marginalization of particular members of society, such as women and those belonging to the working-class. The absence of such members of society from the official pages of history means that the voices and lives of these individuals are effectively silenced and erased. Woolf draws attention to the understanding that official biographical and historical accounts fail to demonstrate an authentic view of past-worlds, as their emphasis upon grand men and grand events comes at the expense of those average everyday dealings that both reflect and define each of our lives.

_Emma Simone_  
Independent Scholar

7 In her discussion of Woolf’s disruption of Western historiography, Melba Cuddy-Keane observes that it is Woolf’s “actual historical practice that most effectively overturns the prevailing historiographical assumptions. The significance that she accords to unpublished and noncanonical works; her hybrid conflation of literary, social, and economic history; her focus on historical questions rather than on historical patterns; and perhaps most importantly, her situating of literary judgments in terms of an historical text and an historical reader—all contribute to a sense of history that is various, multiple, dynamic, and complexity interrelational” (“Historicist Experience” 61).

8 Angeliki Spiropoulou observes that, “[a]lthough The Years covers a time span when important events, such as the Great War, and the death of Parnell and King Edward take place, these occur offstage and are only alluded to, as in To the Lighthouse. Rather . . . Woolf highlights ‘the everyday’ as the prime site of human history” (123).

**Works Cited**


**Ornithology in Mrs. Dalloway: A Touch of the Bird**

Lines from Shakespeare’s tragicomedy, the meaningful _Cymbeline_, are among the recurring features in _Mrs. Dalloway_. “Fear no more the heat of the sun,” words Clarissa reads among the books displayed in Hatchard’s window, quotes the dirge that marks the faux death of Imogen who is temporarily costumed as the young man Fidele, an emblem of her character; she is a princess in disguise (_Mrs. Dalloway_ [MD] 13; _Cymbeline_ [CYM] 4.258). If Imogen has “a mind so rare,” as
embraced is also visually unusual […]. What we see on the stage is two masculine disguise, embraces her beloved husband. “The matrimonial the phoenix returns to life as a woman but still clothed in Fidele’s somehow very like him” (MD 282, 283). Similarly, Imogen, who like the ongoing motif of gender jumble for a recognition scene: “She felt disaster, her disgrace,” an unusual conclusion but one which advances were her own. She identifies herself with him. “Somehow it was her Clarissa contemplates the death of the nameless suicide as if his death illumine” (MD 280; 6).

Through it, phoenix-like: “Her dress flamed, her body burnt,” fulfilling news of the death of a young man outrages her, such that her body went mere to criticize. “It was extraordinary how Peter put her into these fire: “Might it consume her anyhow! Burn her to cinders!” He had come Similarly, Peter Walsh’s criticisms concerning her parties inspire Clarissa’s “double” has died in her place, redeemed her. That young man had killed himself; and the Bradshaw’s had talked of his death in the middle of the party she had dedicated to life. Because of her identity with Septimus, it is as if Clarissa had killed herself. It was her punishment. Now, Clarissa, penitent, examines her conscience and confesses her foibles: “She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable. She had wanted success. Lady Bexborough and the rest of it” (MD 282). Clearly, Clarissa feels she has good reason to have her life over again like the revenant phoenix, to correct her faults. Presently her wish is granted—the theme of rebirth expressed that morning resumes. “What was she trying to recover? What image of white dawn in the country?” (MD 12). Her invigoration transpires in the company of her husband, Richard, when “she could crouch like a bird and gradually revive” (MD 281-82). Clarissa, who has admittedly “lost herself in the process of living,” is renewed, finding her self “with a shock of delight as the sun rose” (MD 282). Fearlessly manifesting that touch of the sun bird with the associated solar imagery that characterizes Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa returns to the friends of her youth, “regenerated, recreated” (Kuhlmann 59; MD 284). Peter who anticipates Clarissa’s circular existence (“she kept coming back”) has often seen Clarissa with nothing striking about her except that “there she was, however; there she was.” His excitement derives from his memory of Clarissa as before “in a doorway with lots of people around her” (MD 114-15). He repeats his words that indicate Clarissa has, once again, completed her life cycle since, like the phoenix, she always came back. “For there she was” (MD 296).

Molly Hoff
Independent Scholar

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The Title of Virginia Woolf’s Between the Acts

In a diary entry for April 1938, Virginia Woolf notes her intent for a new work, Poyntzet Hall, a work not about “I” but about “‘We’ [. . .] composed of many different things [. . .] a rambling capricious but somehow unified, whole” (The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 5 [DS], 135). The novel tells the story of a village pageant performed at a small English country house, “Pointz Hall,” shortly before the outbreak of World War Two. Woolf renamed her final work Between the Acts, offering a title fittingly open to interpretation, encompassing a work Frank Kermode acknowledges as a summa (Kermode xvi), a summary of all knowledge, all society. Critics most commonly read the title as referencing the intervals in the pageant play (Poresky; Beer, “Between the Acts”), during which we witness character interactions, or as denoting the two acts of World War which the nation and the novel
are caught between (e.g., Zwerdling; Southworth; Poresky; Bennett; Beer, “Between the Acts”). But the title, *Between the Acts*, offers more tantalising possibilities of meaning; as Michael Payne suggests, the novel “has a structure on almost every level – from the sentence to the encompassing narrative – that emphasises what is in between: between the wars, in the midst of time, [and] the intrusion of reflective consciousness into a given situation” (41). The “acts” and the “between” of the title allow, then, multiple interpretations of the novel’s structure, and, I argue, an exploration of the practices – the *acts* – that create a structure that is liminal, or overdetermined, like that of the society the novel reflects. This paper surveys critical responses to the title of Woolf’s novel to aid analysis of the many practices that structure the *summa*, and to highlight criticism’s contribution to its structure and meaning. *Between the Acts* is a work caught between acts of Woolf’s writing, but also (as Woolf intended) between acts of reading, theory, and criticism.

We begin between acts of time and place. The audience sits for the pageant at “half past three on a June day in 1939” (*Between the Acts* [BTA] 69); Woolf emphasises the “now” of the novel, between the “hands of the clock […] stopped at the present moment” (BTA 167), when actors hold up mirror fragments to show the audience themselves (165, 167) in the play’s final act. The moment exists between “acts of the past and future” (Kelley 225; also see Peach 201), while the “Tick, tick, tick,” of the pageant gramophone marks time during the play, making present the seconds, minutes, and hours that structure our lives; like the mirrors, they make us conscious of “ourselves” (BTA 165) in time and place. The novel, as Louise Poresky discusses, is further divided by time: “opening and closing […] at night […] Woolf emphasises the stasis of her characters.” Day is “a time for action” and the night a “point between acts,” where one chooses “to permit this stasis” or plan an alternative set of actions (Poresky 245).

Characters’ remain, though, in a form of stasis, part of an “everyday reality” (Trnatt 117), caught between “ritual repetitions” of the everyday (Beer, “Between the Acts” 408). The pageant, for example, takes place every year, in either the garden or barn depending on the weather, of which Mrs Lucy Swithin repeatedly asks, will it “rain” or will it be “fine” (BTA 20). Alternatives and opposites underpin the novel’s structure, giving two possibilities, so as to offer between them the whole, the *summa*. Further repetitions in small talk, the making of tea (BTA 92), and the stoking of the fire (BTA 28), contribute to the present moment but also to a history that helps create the individual, family, community, and nation of that present time. All are products of what Michel de Certeau would call the practices of everyday life (1) that create society. The novel is found between the “I” and the “We,” and reveals a society “imagined as a self attempting to learn who it is, fluctuating between attaining and losing a tentative sense of identity” (Benjamin 54-5). We see the pieces, the individuals, and the community —between the mirrors, the hours, and Woolf’s words.

The pageant highlights these structuring acts of history and society through acts of theatre: a pastiche of Elizabethan drama, Restoration comedy, and Victorian life, ending in the present of mirrors. In the novel “different times … exist simultaneously” (Morris 99), showing how past practices survive in the present. As Michael Trnatt suggests, the pageant also “fragment[s] everyday reality so it can be assembled in some new way” (Trnatt 117). We read meaning between its lines and fractures; Woolf, for example, makes the reader aware of history as a patriarchal narrative, in the manipulated young woman of the Restoration comedy (BTA 119). Between the play’s acts, this patriarchal history is reflected in the history of the country house; in its family, the Olivers; in its line of male heirs glimpsed in hanging portraits (BTA 33); and in father and son, Bartholomew and Giles Oliver, thinking, respectively, of past military career (3, 16) and the conflict in Europe (43, 49). We see not only male dominance between the acts of history, but glimpse the absent woman of history too, caught in the domestic sphere of the home (28), or as the nameless, unknown woman in a hanging portrait admired only for its beauty (33). Sue Roe argues that “it is in the interstices of this novel—between the acts—that the unsuprinsuption of intention of men, veiled beneath layer upon layer of ‘ceremony’ and convention” is revealed (148).

Yet, while the novel is caught between two patriarchal acts of World War – with fighting the “chief human act or performance” (Bowlby 126), Catherine Wiley notes a “distinctly feminine face” to history (13). Miss La Trobe’s direction of the pageant reflects Woolf’s act of writing; both ask if history might stop “repeating itself as war” (Wiley 4). La Trobe, Giles’ wife Isa, and Bartholomew’s sister Lucy arguably have more essential roles than the male characters in Woolf’s narrative, as does the visiting and flamboyant Mrs Manresa; we finally, in a sense, see the women between the men, or perhaps the men relegated to supporting acts, glimpsed between the women. In a gender, but also historical, shift, war (as history) is notably absent from the pageant, and novel (BTA 141), relegated to brief thoughts from Giles and Bartholomew, or alluded to in the planes overhead (174). Maria DiBattista suggests the book is in fact a “self-insulated and self-enclosed aesthetic scene” (“Between the Acts” 139). Though, as she points out, “[o]ffstage, behind, not in the acts,” war looms (139); the planes over head still “cut” the world in “two” (BTA 174). The novel remains caught between two acts of history: between wars, but also between Mrs Swithin’s reading of her “favourite” book, an *Outline of History*, at the beginning and close of the novel. Though here, too, a patriarchal sense of history is challenged, with Mrs Swithin’s reading placing the novel between two acts of pre-history (BTA 8, 196), or between “pre-history and what Woolf dreaded would prove to be post-history” (Beer, “Between the Acts” 419). The novel and the play remain, then, almost paradoxically inside and outside of history at once, at the centre and at the margin, with pre-history also manifesting as a survival, a “part of ordinary present-day life” (Beer, “Virginia Woolf and Pre-History” 102). Again, Woolf leaves us with the whole, the *summa* caught between all possibilities.

The novel’s structure further relies on opposing male and female identities, and concerns of sex. Sexuality “pulse[s] through the book” (Beer, “Between the Acts” 419). James Naremore summarizes the narrative as a “limbo between historical events, and between two sexual acts”; “between the acts of the pageant, Isa daydreams about the gentleman farmer Haines, and while her husband is lured off by Mrs Manresa she makes half-hearted overtures to the effete William Dodge” (232). The novel is also a break in the love between Giles and Isa Oliver (Bennett 113) but, in the final moments of the novel, they seem set to reunite, the “coming act” of sex between husband and wife offering a new beginning; as Naremore explains, it is “a first act, or at least a repetition of all acts between men and women,” which “will determine the continuity of life” (Naremore 232). The final scene in the novel is a liminal point towards either life or death, for the species, the couple’s relationship, and for England. Natania Rosenfeld argues the novel imagines a space between the “aggressive and erotic instincts” that Freud believed defined humanity (130); Woolf was reading Freud while composing her novel (D5 250; DiBattista, *Major Novels* 220; Ruotolo 205). Again, this position between aggression and eroticism is one removed from patriarchal narrative, arguably outside of historical and heteronormative controls, and is reinforced by the central (in terms of Woolf’s focus) but also marginal (in terms of social position) homosexual and “outsider” identities of both La Trobe and Dodge. These characters, on the edge and between what is “normal,” are in a sense outside of patriarchal/historical/heteronormative time. Mrs Swithin and Isa, as “writers” reflecting Woolf as creator, further this sense of a “timeless” between, which contrasts with the war-thoughts of their opposites, Giles and Bartholomew. Like Patricia Maika, we might locate Isa between acts of myth and identity, a “multiple goddess,” transcending history in the guise of “Iiss, Ishtar, Venus, and Nemesis” (Maika 19). These “timeless” identities offer the possibility of a rejuvenating break in the line of male history and storytelling.
Myth offers just one of multiple structuring patterns in *Between the Acts*. Maika suggests characters as embodiments of mythical figures (e.g. Isa as goddess, Haines as Hades), so that meaning is found within a T. S. Eliot-like mythical method (Eliot 177). In contrast, Beer suggests ritual in the novel “emerges from the need for repetition and recurrence” in the “humdrum,” located in tea and small talk, not the Isis myth (*The Common Ground* 128-129). Woolf seems to suggest both, a “mingling of many voices” (Arms 394), the mundane and the sublime. The book “alternates” between the “possibilities” of pattern or no pattern (J. Hillis Miller 219), a conflict between the “impulse to order and the impulse to chaos” (Arms 401). Poresky recognises “opposites as acts,” with “three sets”: that “between humankind’s civilized disguises and the savagery it covers, that between the human world and nature, and that between love and hate” (246). Between these we search for meaning. Marlowe A. Miller discusses a similar dialectic of “Culture and Barbarism” (134), or “art and fascism,” though suggests Woolf’s text doubts such a dialectic (135), revealing no in-between, only a blurring. For Karen Schneider, Woolf’s belief in the power of art places the novel in the dichotomy (94) that Miller denies. Unsurprisingly, critical readings of opposites and patterns intersect and contradict.

Various patterns are certainly evidenced in Woolf’s text and actively encourage more than one reading, creating, I argue, a *habitus* of a novel for the reader to interact with. Like Bourdieu’s theoretical model, which suggests that the structure of physical and cultural space in which we live is built from largely unconscious “structuring practices” (72, 79). *Between the Acts* uses, and asks the reader to recognise, a multitude of such acts given literary form, in small talk, daily acts of living, social interaction and tradition. While writing the novel, Woolf read Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* (Cramer 167), which argues that all the practices of daily life are “made over into consistent patterns in accordance with unconscious canons of choice” (Cramer 170). Woolf reveals but also questions such patterns, allowing for possibilities outside the “canon” and sketching the resultant complexity – a society in which we search for meaning but also create meaning through our searching.

This structuring of society, found in “moments of harmony” but also in “disruptions” (Rosenfeld 129), is a creation of language – society, like Woolf’s novel, a “universe of words” (Sears 212), the word itself an act in creation. The novel takes shape between these words, as “life continues where art leaves off and vice versa” (Kenney 281). Opposites in word and phrase – e.g., will it be “Wet or fine?” (BTA 20) – underpin the thematic opposites of the novel, introducing both form and fragmentation to the text. Phrases, words, and syntax are broken into patterns of three. Between breaks and repetitions, we find rhyme, which “pins together the unlike” (Beer, “Between the Acts” 404), and “rhythm,” which “connects all the fragments” (Naremore 222). Word games produce variation through repetition; a much cited example is Woolf’s use of the word “sole,” to refer, in quick succession, to fish, shoes, and spirit; then the letters are reordered to become “lose” (e.g., Beer, “Between the Acts” 405; *The Common Ground* 133; see BTA 14-15). Woolf’s pieces of language reflect the acts that make society; she reveals the gaps to show us the patterns.

*Between the Acts* is a self-conscious act of art; art draws attention to the actions that create society but also suggests that art can help “make ordered shapes out of a random universe” (Rosenthal 191). Meaning, as Harper argues, is “discovered between the acts of the dramatist, the actors, and the audience” (321), or not, as the *summa* dictates: all possibilities are accounted for. We might conclude that life is “a process of enacting roles,” on- and off-stage (Putzel 88-89), but, as Wiley notes, the text also “challenges perceived relationships between” the players and “the audience’s relationship to its own collective narrative” (3). As J. Hillis Miller and Schneider point out in different ways, Woolf questions art’s meaning and utility (Miller 135; Schneider 95). Again we see the “gaps between” appear and disappear as Woolf “dissolve[s] the distinction between writer and reader so that everybody will once again take part in the song” (Hussey 143). Beer notes the “spaces on the page,” between the fragments and words, in the interrupted ideas and conversations; here we find “unrecorded areas between the acts of language” (Beer, “Virginia Woolf and Pre-History” 115). The group “song” and the white spaces are not only disruptions of the patriarchal narrative, but also an invitation for the reader to become practitioner. Whittinger-Ferguson highlights the deliberate creation of these gaps, drawing attention to the “process of forgetting” that erases detail and unambiguous meaning in each of Woolf’s three drafts of the novel (301). The creative possibilities of these spaces are aided by a rich intertextuality of sources that includes Byron, Shakespeare, and Keats; and by the half- or mis-quoted texts that allow reader participation. The critic becomes, perhaps, the greatest practitioner, evidenced in the citations that fill this paper.

With the final scene of the novel between Giles and Isa, and with the final line of the tale, “Then the curtain rose. They spoke” (BTA 197), the novel itself becomes a play; again, we are invited to do more than note this duality. We become part of the pattern; as John Graham points out, the pageant of the play and novel takes place “literally between the acts of the drama” of the reader’s own life (Graham 200). The reader becomes part of Woolf’s intended “We,” and we contribute to the novel’s structure and meaning through our acts of reading and criticism.

*Joel Hawkes*

*University of Victoria*

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The windows and mirrors in Between the Acts by Virginia Woolf and “Bliss” by Katherine Mansfield are more than a means of observation; these panes of glass serve as locations for homosexual characters to form bonds with others or to find protection from the watchful eyes of heterosexual society. Windows, which physically divide the outside world from the comfort of one’s home, are a site of safety for Woolf’s William Dodge and Mansfield’s Bertha Young, as these windows can be used to reflect on their homosexual desires without the need to explain themselves to others. Likewise, mirrors are used in these texts to help the characters confront their sexuality by showing them images that represent their unspoken feelings. Although windows and mirrors in these two texts seem to allow William and Bertha to express their sexual desires, these sheets of glass ultimately protect the characters from revealing their internal struggles to others.

In Between the Acts, William and Mrs. Swithin, an elderly widow, withdraw from the outdoors where a play will shortly be held. The two seem to have a connection of sorts; Mrs. Swithin announces “to no one in particular” (loc. 1470) that she will show off the house before the start of the play, yet William “knew she had meant him” (loc. 1470). Throughout their tour of the house, Mrs. Swithin does all the talking and yet William wonders, silently, if he might ask Mrs. Swithin to call him William. This level of familiarity is strange, as the two have no relationship. Yet William feels “she had guessed his trouble” (loc. 1512), that is, his homosexuality, and that she is someone to confide in. Mrs. Swithin’s childlike behavior, which makes her unimposing, is arguably a reason for William’s unexplained comfort in her presence. William notes how “she had spoken her thoughts, ignoring, not caring if he thought her, as he had, inconsequent, sentimental, foolish” (loc. 1512). Mrs. Swithin’s innocence and foolishness make her non-threatening—a person who is too caught up in her own affairs to matter much as a confidant. Her inability to remember William’s last name, as shown through her repeated use of the word “Mr.” and long pauses, also demonstrates that Mrs. Swithin cannot remember important details and thus would be unlikely to pass information along to others.

Mrs. Swithin continues her childlike behavior when they reach her childhood nursery by “swinging her little legs” on the bed she slept in and singing a nursery rhyme (loc. 1512) while William observes her reflection in a mirror. This mirror distorts the room, showing only fragments of the two; “cut off from their bodies, their eyes smiled, their bodiless eyes, at their eyes in the glass” (loc. 1512). Mrs. Swithin’s innocence and foolishness make her non-threatening—a person who is too caught up in her own affairs to matter much as a confidant. Her inability to remember William’s last name, as shown through her repeated use of the word “Mr.” and long pauses, also demonstrates that Mrs. Swithin cannot remember important details and thus would be unlikely to pass information along to others.

After a brief tour of the nursery, Mrs. Swithin leads William to an open window. The window here forms a slight barrier between William and the outside world where the playgoers are gathered. William’s illicit
sexual urges would not be welcome in conventional 1930s English culture, so the window might serve as a protective divide between what he feels on the inside and the watchful eyes of society. Like the wind that can freely flow through the open window, however, William finds that his words want to flow, to gain him recognition for who he is and what he desires. As he stands by the window with Mrs. Swithin, the audience begins to assemble:

But they, looking down from the window, were truants, detached. Together they leant half out of the window. […] He saw her eyes only. And he wished to kneel before her to kiss her hand, and to say: “At school they held me under a bucket of dirty water, Mrs. Swithin; when I looked up, the world was dirty, Mrs. Swithin; so I married; but my child’s not my child, Mrs. Swithin. I’m a half-man, Mrs. Swithin; a flickering, mind-divided little snake in the grass[…]” So he wished to say; but said nothing; and the breeze went lolling along the corridors, blowing the blinds out. (loc. 1521, 1541)

From William’s perspective, he and Mrs. Swithin are sharing a moment of being outsiders together; the shared view creates a deeper bonding moment in which William wants to admit his stigmatized sexual desire. This moment in front of the window gently gestures back to the eyes in the mirror by reiterating that William only notices Mrs. Swithin’s eyes, separate from her body. William still does not see himself or Mrs. Swithin as whole beings, so he is able to connect with her by imagining that they are both incomplete.

However, outside the window is the clear reminder of English society to which William has felt the need to conform since his classmates “held [him] under a bucket of dirty water” (loc. 1531). This reminder blows in like the breeze and becomes prominent when William notices Mrs. Swithin’s cross pendant swinging in the sunlight; suddenly, “the purring of the wheels [of the vehicles below] became vocal” and the two were “truants no more” (loc. 1541). These reminders of society awaiting them enter through the open window, breaking the connection that William has created with Mrs. Swithin. The wheels of the cars begin saying, he imagines, “‘hurry, hurry, hurry,[…]’ or ‘you’ll be late. Hurry, hurry, hurry’” (loc. 1541). It is Mrs. Swithin who breaks the final tie; she announces, again without much focus, that, “it is time […] to go and join—” (loc. 1541). The thought is unfinished, just as the connection between the two characters is unfinished. The call to take his place in the audience draws out William’s inner actor; he must return to the part he has been acting in society. This window serves as a safety zone only as far as William’s thoughts go. The meeting of detached eyes in the mirror ultimately means nothing over the call of “hurry, hurry, hurry” from the society gathering below the misfits at the window.

In Mansfield’s short story “Bliss,” Bertha feels suspiciously happy while preparing for a dinner party. She cannot find words for this feeling, comparing it to being “drunk and disorderly” (145), or as though her body were “shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle” (145).1 The blissful feeling glows in her bosom, a “shower of little sparks coming from it” that felt “almost unbearable” (145). Searching for this bliss places Bertha in front of a mirror, which “gave her back a woman, radiant, with smiling, trembling lips, with big, dark eyes and an air of listening, waiting for something […] divine to happen […] that she knew must happen […] infallibly” (145). This mirror encounter differs from William’s in that Bertha is the only person reflected in the mirror. Bertha, in trying to come face to face with her bliss, comes instead face to face with herself. The physical manifestation of Bertha’s bliss is a woman’s smile, a woman’s silent listening.

Bertha is the sort of woman who “always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them” (147), but she seems particularly drawn to Pearl Fulton, who comes to dinner later that night. Over dinner, the two barely look at each other and yet “Bertha knew, suddenly, as if the longest, most intimate look had passed between them—as if they had said to each other ‘You, too?’”—that Pearl Fulton […] was feeling just what she was feeling” (151). Bertha is feeling at that moment a “fire of bliss,” which is “blazing—blazing” (151) and which she does not know how to cool. The “air of listening” Bertha’s reflection depicted (145) is echoed in Pearl’s silent behavior over dinner and, although Pearl is different from Bertha in appearance, she is reminiscent of the silent, smiling woman that Bertha observes in the mirror earlier. These similarities lead Bertha to search for her bliss in Pearl.

Bertha hopes for a “sign” (152) from Pearl, which will let her know that her interpretation of Pearl’s feelings is correct. Bertha reads Pearl’s request to see Bertha’s garden as the sign she has been waiting for. The moment the two spend standing in front of Bertha’s open windows is heavy with imagery representing suppressed desire and lesbian attraction:

> The two women stood side by side looking at the slender, flowering [pear] tree. Although it was so still it seemed, like a flame of a candle, to stretch up, to point, to quiver in the bright air, to grow taller and taller as they gazed – almost to touch the rim of the round, silver moon.

> How long did they stand there? Both, as it were, caught in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world, and wondering what they were to do in this one with all this blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands? (153)

At first glance the pear tree may be read as a phallic symbol, growing and quivering in the night air. However, the tree can also be read as a symbol of Bertha’s desire: like her “blazing—blazing […] fire of bliss” (151), the tree seems to be fire itself. The fertile, blossoming tree is surely a symbol of a woman’s fertility, and the moment the two women spend admiring the tree is spent appreciating a representation of female sexuality and beauty. Walter Anderson reads the pear tree as “a composite symbol representing in its tallness Bertha’s homosexual aspirations and in its full, rich blossoms, her desire to be sexually used” (400). In a way, Bertha’s entire sexual being is wrapped up in this pear tree.2

The tree reaches up toward a “round, silver moon.” The most obvious reading is that the moon points to Artemis, the Greek goddess of virginity and of the moon, which hints that Bertha’s sexual desire cannot be fulfilled because her object, like the moon, is un touchable. However, the moon in its description also points to Pearl, dressed “all in silver, with a silver fillet binding her pale blond hair” (151). She is the object of Bertha’s desire, much as the moon seems to be the object of the pear tree’s desire. Although the words remain unspoken, Bertha imagines a connection with Pearl, the creature of “another world,” believing her desire and bliss understood.

Through this window, Bertha is allowed to see, although not touch, her ultimate desire. The window serves as a barrier between the outdoor world of the garden, full of Bertha’s lesbian desire for Pearl, and the inside world where Bertha’s desire is unacceptable. Bertha projects her desire onto the objects outside the window yet, inside the room, the understanding Bertha thinks she has with Pearl may be, as Armine Kotin

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1 The reference to a rare fiddle is cryptically sexual; Judith Neaman likens the fiddle to the shape of a woman’s body, stating that Bertha has not been played by herself or by others (247) – a reference to Betha’s lack of passion for her husband at the beginning of the novel. Thomas Dilworth agrees that Bertha is a musical instrument, and that “the music she is made for and longs for is ecstatic, orgasmic sex” (144). If this is the case, Bertha must first be awakened – the fiddle case opened, as it were – by another in order to fulfill this longing. This awakening happens later, when Bertha finally desires her husband (Dilworth 142).

2 See Chantal Cornut-Gentille D’Arcy for more on the pear tree’s symbolic nature (261).
Mortimer states, “a neurotic interpretation” that “if the feeling she shares with Miss Fulton is sexual desire, then Miss Fulton too must be feeling desire” (46). By the end of the evening it becomes evident that Bertha may have misread Pearl’s intentions—in actuality, Pearl is Bertha’s husband Harry’s lover and may not share Bertha’s lesbian desire. If Pearl feels any sexual desire while gazing at the pear tree, it may arguably be for Harry.

Thus, everything Bertha sees outside the window is the untouchable manifestation of her lesbian feelings for Pearl, who, like the silvery moon, cannot be touched by Bertha’s quivering fire of desire. Instead, heterosexual attraction commands the room and makes Bertha’s hopes impossible. Bertha’s world has shifted due to Harry’s infidelity and Pearl’s apparent rejection of what Bertha imagined to be a connection between two like minds, and so in despair she returns to the window: “but the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flowers and as still” (155). The pear tree is still burning up toward the silver moon, and thus the end of this story is still full of hope. Through the window, Bertha sees that her sexuality is still intact and that she is still blossoming and may continue to yearn for the moon as an object of her desire.

Both of these stories depict a moment when homosexual desire is nearly expressed facing an open window. For William, the open window nearly frees his speech enough to confess his homosexuality to Mrs. Swithin, though the view of the gathering audience and Mrs. Swithin’s cross pendant remind him that society, waiting below, will still disapprove of his sexual inclinations. Mrs. Swithin becomes no longer his partner in difference but a symbol of the society he is separate from. Bertha, on the other hand, views a garden paradise through her window, full of symbols of her bliss; because of what she sees out the window, Bertha imagines she and Pearl share the same desires. The window in this case is an opening for Bertha to project her lesbian desire, but the window also marks the frustration of that desire by standing as a clear divider between hope and reality. These two stories are tales of frustrated confessions of homosexuality disrupted by the conventional social world, tales in which mirrors and windows both open up and close out homoerotic possibilities.

_Alexandra DeLuise_  
University of New Haven

Works Cited


Virginia Woolf and Canterbury1,2

“There is no lovelier place than Canterbury,” remarks Virginia Woolf (then Stephen) in a letter to Emma Vaughan on April 25, 1904, before adding: “that I say with my hand on my heart as I sit in Florence—and I have seen Venice too. Venice is a place to die in beautifully: but to live [n] I never felt more depressed—that is exaggerated, but still it does shut one in and make one feel like a Bird in a Cage after a time” (Letters [L] 1 138). By contrast, Canterbury is presumably a place to live in beautifully, though the comparison takes a troubling turn when Woolf notes that for all she admires its landscape and art, Italy is a “‘degenerate,’ far ‘beastlier’ country than ‘clean’ England, before concluding “Thank God, I say, I was born an Englishwoman” (L1 139). Despite her high and perhaps hyperbolic praise, relatively little is known about Woolf’s connection to this small but historic city situated at the heart of Kent, nor how it relates to her changing view of England from these early offhand remarks to her subsequent anti-nationalist, anti-imperialist writings. When we think of Woolf and Kent it is usually her relationship with Vita Sackville-West that first comes to mind, along with her impressions of Knole House in Sevenoaks (the medieval estate had originally been bought and developed by the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Bourchier, in 1456 and became his palace until Elizabeth 1st granted it to Thomas Sackville in 1566) and Sissinghurst Castle. But Canterbury is itself a recurring presence in Woolf’s writings, whether in experiences recounted in diaries and letters or as inspiration for literary creation. In advance of the 28th Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf—which will take place at the University of Kent, Canterbury, on June 21-24, 2018—this short article will explore some of Woolf’s personal and literary associations with the city.

Woolf’s 1904 letter to Emma Vaughan reveals, on closer scrutiny, further connections to Canterbury. Referring to the city’s “sacred Precincts,” it mentions a “Canon Holland” in speculating as to why Emma Vaughan finds herself there in the first place: “have you run away with Canon [F. J.] Holland, are you married to the Sub Dean?” Woolf jokes (L1 138). Francis James Holland (1828-1907) was a Canon in the Church of England, taking up his position as Canon Residentiary at Canterbury

1 This essay is dedicated to the memory of Professor David Bradshaw, whose generosity led to Oxford World’s Classics’ sponsorship of an all-day collaborative public reading of The Waves that took place in Canterbury in 2015, and whose scholarship is on full display in his edition of that novel which participants read from. For details see: https://www.kent.ac.uk/news/kentlife/5053/day-long-reading-of-virginia-woolf-s-the-waves.

2 This essay has been adapted from a portion of a public lecture, “Virginia Woolf: Voyaging Out, 1910-1915,” given in November 2015 as part of the University of Kent’s 50th anniversary celebrations.

3 See page 4 of this issue for more information about the 2018 Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf.
Cathedral in 1882 (and remaining until his death), having been a Six Preacher there from 1859. Although he was known to Woolf, it was his son Bernard Holland (1856-1926) whose life she was more familiar with. Bernard married Helen Duckworth in 1895; he went on to be Private Secretary to the Secretary of State, Colonies between 1903 and 1908, and he lived at Canterbury’s Harbledown Lodge. In a diary entry in August 1929 Woolf records her impressions of first meeting Bernard and his father in 1902-3 when she stayed with them in Canterbury. She had admired letters of his mother that he edited, writing that she “liked them in a sentimental way, seeing in them something imaginative, too; something that was coloured & pensive & intimate, unlike anything the Stephen family produced. So that I looked at Bernard in the low room under the Cathedral with interest, & even hoped he might think me clever or imaginative or something” (Diary 3 246). But Woolf goes on to remember how he had “a false glow,” how he played the part of being “aloof, intellectual, silent,” befitting his status in relation to the clergy which provided access to “politics & Cabinet ministers” (246). In later life, she notes, “he turned Roman Catholic. He wrote a vast life of the Duke of Devonshire; he wrote a vast history of the Holland family; but that was all that came of his gloom & his imagination & his genius, & when he died, a year or two ago, even his friends never wrote to the Times about him.” Woolf’s diary entry is in equal measure affectionate about her memory of meeting him in Canterbury and all too aware of his privileged position as one those “‘brilliant’ young men” who, propped up by the patriarchal institutions of Church and State, “never do anything to prove it” (244).

Woolf wrote about both Bernard Holland and Canterbury at greater length in her 1925 short story “Together and Apart,” published posthumously in A Haunted House and Other Stories. The story is about a brief encounter between a man, Roderick Serle—inspired by Bernard Holland—and a woman, Ruth Anning, who spend most of their time standing at Mrs. Dalloway’s window remembering Canterbury. Breaking the silence as they gaze at the night sky, Miss Anning, trying to find familiar ground, recalls “a Miss Serle who lived at Canterbury when I was a girl.” At the mere mention of this Mr. Serle has visions of “all the tombs of his ancestors,” which appear to him “in a blue romantic light, and his eyes expanding and darkening” as he explains that the Serles were originally a Norman family who came to Canterbury with William the Conqueror and that one of his ancestors is buried in Canterbury Cathedral (CSF 189). When Miss Anning then asks “Do you know Canterbury yourself?” his response is emphatic:

Did he know Canterbury! Mr. Serle smiled, thinking how absurd a question it was—how little she knew, this nice quiet woman who played some instrument and seemed intelligent and had good eyes, and was wearing a nice old necklace—knew what it meant. To be asked if he knew Canterbury—when the best years of his life, all his memories, things he had never been able to tell anybody, but had tried to write—ah, had tried to write (and he sighed) all had centred in Canterbury […] “Yes, I know Canterbury,” he said reminiscently, sentimentally[.] (190-91)

Caught up in his own melancholy (or “false gloom”), to use Woolf’s description of Bernard Holland), he thinks to himself how “he had never done a tenth part of what he could have done, and had dreamed of doing as a boy in Canterbury” (190). Not for a minute does he allow that Miss Anning could herself understand what the city meant. In a fine example of Woolf satirizing male egotism, she has him say:

“It’s odd that you should know Canterbury[…] It’s always a shock […] when one meets someone […] by chance, as it were who touches the fringe of what has meant a great deal to oneself, touches accidentally, for I suppose Canterbury was nothing but a nice old town to you. So you stayed there one summer with an Aunt? […] And you saw the sights and went away and never thought of it again” (192).

Without herself being able to get a word in edgeways, Miss Anning is judged to be someone to whom things happen accidentally and are experienced thoughtlessly. And yet she thinks to herself “her three months in Canterbury had been amazing. She remembered to the last detail[…] always she saw Canterbury, all thundercloud and vivid apple blossom, and the long grey backs of the buildings […] ‘I loved Canterbury’, she said” (192).

Miss Anning’s declaration is almost interpreted by Mr. Serle as though it was made to him personally. Once again his solipsistic nature is exposed as he assimilates her experience of Canterbury into his own memories, “the old ecstasy of life; its invincible assault; for it was unpleasant, at the same time that it rejoiced and rejuvenated and filled the veins and nerves with threads of ice and fire; it was terrifying” (193). For her own part Miss Anning has a similar jolt to life at the thought of Canterbury:

“Canterbury twenty years ago,” said Miss Anning, as one lays a shade over an intense light, or covers some burning peach with a green leaf, for it is too strong, too ripe, too full.”

Sometimes she wished she had married. Sometimes the cool peace of middle life, with its automatic devices for shielding mind and body from bruises, seemed to her, compared with the thunder and the vivid apple blossom of Canterbury, base. She could imagine something different, more like lightning, more intense. She could imagine some physical sensation. She could imagine— (193)

Canterbury emerges from this story as a place intensely alive, and one that escapes Mr. Serle’s attempts to claim it entirely for himself. In an example of Woolf’s interest in both the transience and endurance of life—that feature which permeates her writing—Mr. Serle and Miss Anning “separate” after this fleeting conversation which has been exclusively about a place which remains for them solid, a kind of depository of a life lived and longed for again. Both characters agree that “whatever they may do, they can’t spoil Canterbury” (193) (though as we read it now this phrase takes on an ominous tone given what happened to the city 15 years later when it was bombed during the Second World War). In one sense “Together and Apart” lavishes Canterbury with even more praise than the letter to Emma Vaughan two decades earlier. What is different, however, between that earlier letter and this story, as well as the above diary entry on Bernard Holland, is that Woolf seems keen to dissociate Canterbury from the English establishment. She instead foregrounds the city as a setting in which patriarchal, nationalistic and imperialistic impulses that seek to capture and control are undermined and replaced by imaginative potential and open-ended desire.

Woolf herself made numerous trips to Canterbury, though they weren’t always wholly positive experiences. To give just one example from many, in January 1936 Woolf details how she and Leonard “almost crashed on way home from Canterbury!” They had come on this occasion so that Leonard could give a lecture in the County Hotel and while in the city she had listened to a full service at the Cathedral. Woolf’s (almost) accident report reads as follows: “Almost smashed coming back lights went out—we backed—a great car swung down, like a liner at sea, & was I thought on us. But missed. So home” (D5 11). There are also occasions when she recounts frustrations that trips to Canterbury had to be cancelled. For example, at the beginning of September 1932 T. S. Eliot turned up unannounced with his wife Vivienne to scupper Woolf’s plans: “we had meant to go to Canterbury […] but what[s] (sic) the good of meaning when at any moment there’s a tap—behold Tom & Vivienne: we cant [sic] buy our fish for dinner. But it was a friendly thought,—she wild as Ophelia—alas no Hamlet would love her […] L[eonard] said; Tom, poor man, all batten down as usual, prim, grey, making his kind jokes with her” (D4 122-3). But the longest and most significant period Woolf spent in Canterbury had occurred earlier, in the summer of 1910.
In the midst of a period of illness throughout that summer Woolf spent time in Cornwall, a nursing-home in Twickenham and, for almost the whole month of June, she stayed in Moat House, just on the edge of Canterbury approaching Blean Woods, which was rented from Mr Lefèvre of the Canterbury Huguenot family (L1 427).4 Given that she was advised to go by her doctors and family, who feared she was on the verge of a breakdown, we might expect Woolf’s time in Canterbury to be one of quiet recovery. But she hated convalescing, and if she couldn’t herself be at the center of things in London she would fill her letters during this month with life. Several such letters were sent during her stay: to Clive Bell, with a playful tone in keeping with the quite open flirtation she had been carrying on with him since 1908 (in spite or perhaps because of his marriage to Vanessa) (L1 425); to Lady Robert Cecil, or “Nelly,” about bumping into her niece in Canterbury (425-26)—Woolf goes on in the letter to ask if she is a suffragist, a significant question for her in a year which began with Woolf writing to Janet Case to ask if she could spend an “afternoon or two weekly in addressing envelopes for the Adult Suffragists” (L1 421); to Violet Dickinson, describing how Vanessa, Clive and Julian have all been spending time there, how she has been walking through Blean woods hoping not to run into Helen Holland (wife of Bernard) (428); and to Saxon Sydney-Turner, informing him that she has been to nearby Whitstable and inviting him to visit so that they might go to the opera together (426-27).

It is Woolf’s letter to Sydney-Turner that contains her most vivid description of life at Moat House:

The rain falls, and the birds never give over singing, and hot sulphur fumes rise from the valleys, and the red cow in the field roars for her calf. In these circumstances you would address yourself to Chaucer, and master his habits before tea. I have tried, but cant [sic] persist—I pick chocolates out of a box, and worry my sister. Shortly before the rain began, three days ago, we had our windows prized open by a Smith. The decay of centuries had sealed them. No human force can now shut them. Thus we sit exposed to wind and wet by day; and by night, we are invaded by flocks of white moths. They frizzle in the candles, and crawl up my shirts to die, in the hollow of my knee.

Woolf’s description of the intrusive weather conditions and animal life surrounding her points to significant features found throughout her writing. More precisely, as she suggests, they here set a distinctly Chaucerian scene; The Canterbury Tales opens, after all, with “that Aprill with his shoures soote” when “smale foweles maken melodye” as the pilgrims set as off towards Canterbury (Chaucer 3)—indeed cows and moths join the birds and a host of other creatures in populating Chaucer’s text (see Van Dyke). Woolf’s letter appears to foreground “Nature, uncompromised, untamed,” as she puts it in “The Pastons and Chaucer” (Essays [E] 4 28). Considered alongside the bawdiness of the tales, which Woolf also delights in (E4 29-30), the above letter might even be read asunderlining her earlier description of Canterbury as “sacred” representative of “clean” England as opposed to “beastlier” Italy.

In her final letter from Moat House, Woolf writes to Vanessa about her trepidation at entering the nursing home in Twickenham upon leaving Canterbury: “I’ve no doubt it will be damnable,” she concludes, “and the thought of the nurses and the food and the boredom is disgusting; but I also imagine the delights of being sane again.” She is particularly troubled by the weeks that await her because she is acutely aware that she is missing out on the London social scene, writing that “the glimpse I get of society in your and Adrian’s letters makes me, of course, long to be in the thick of it.” She goes on in the letter to joke that her half-brother George (Duckworth) has written her “repulsive,” patronizing letters filled with “semi-lunacy” accusing her of “smoking too much, in order to ward off mosquitos from the moat” – she expects him to send a “head net, of the newest pattern” any day now (428-30). What is striking in this and the other letters mentioned is that, while seemingly on the verge of breakdown, they contain that distinctively witty, arch, self-deprecating, curious, and vital tone that so frequently characterizes Woolf’s correspondences. What is revealed in the surviving documents of that summer, including from her stay in Canterbury, is a more nuanced picture of Woolf’s experience of life in illness than is often presented—we certainly cannot dismiss that summer in the manner in which Quentin Bell did of 1904 when he notoriously stated: “All that summer she was mad” (90; see also Lee 196). Her time at Moat House also appears to have left its mark upon her writing. While reworking Melymbrosia into The Voyage Out after that summer she inserted an allusion to the Early Modern writer John Lyly, believed to have been born in Canterbury in 1553/54. In Chapter XIX we discover that Miss Allen’s manuscript contains a reference not only to Chaucer, but to John Lyly’s 1578 text Euphues, which is described as “The germ of the English novel” (VO 295)—a comment with added significance considering it occurs in Woolf’s own first novel (see DeSalvo 21).5

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4 A photograph of Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell and Julian Bell in the garden of Moat House can be found in Quentin Bell’s biography of Woolf, plate 13a (facing page 141).

5 My thanks to Gerald Colson, at Kent College, for sharing information, for showing me around, and for the reading materials he provided.
Perhaps less treacherous to her would have been what happened to Moat House under the headmastership of David Norfolk. In 1973 it was decided that Kent College would become a coeducational school, admitting girls to study and board for the first time. In order to fund the creation of buildings to house the expansion and give the girls rooms of their own, Moat House and 12 acres of farmland were sold (Wright 109-10). Privately occupied, it sits today just a stone’s throw from the University of Kent’s Woolf College, which on or about June 2018 will be the destination of a distinctly Woolfian pilgrimage.

Derek Ryan
University of Kent

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Virginia Woolf and Her Legacy in the Age of Globalization

The 3rd Korea-Japan Virginia Woolf Conference, “Virginia Woolf and Her Legacy in the Age of Globalization,” was held at Kookmin University in Seoul, August 25-26, 2016 (the full program is available at http://www.woolf.or.kr/?p=2465&lang=en). Nineteen presenters (seven from Japan, one from China, and eleven from Korea) explored a wide range of topics in seven panels demonstrating the vitality and originality of Woolf scholarship in Asia. I was very fortunate, having been invited to give a talk at the conference (on the early relationship between Woolf and Clive Bell), to witness the excellent work being done by Korean and Japanese graduate students and professors, and also to enjoy the extraordinary hospitality of our hosts.

The Virginia Woolf Society of Korea was founded in 2003 and has met monthly since then, often to discuss and critique the ongoing work of translating Woolf’s writings into Korean. Speaking at a symposium in Moscow in 2003, Myunghye Chung, who teaches at Kookmin University, said that Woolf was “almost ridiculously popular” (98) in her country, but that the Lukácsian and Marxist preference for strict realism had long tended to align the view of most of her colleagues with the prevailing Leavisite image of Woolf as a frail aesthete. Students who might write a master’s thesis on Woolf, she said then, usually did not choose Woolf as a subject for their doctoral dissertation, writing instead on Joyce, Lawrence, or other male modernists who seemed to offer a more secure path to academic employment. Although feminism had made Woolf “a star, a celebrity and a cultural icon in Korea” (100), and had popularized her even among common readers, serious scholarly interest for a long time was confined to a small group.

That situation appears to have changed considerably in the last decade. Heesu Lee, a PhD student at Sogang University in Seoul, presented a beautifully written analysis of Mrs. Ramsay’s spatiality, drawing on the feminist geographer Doreen Massey, and taking issue with some recent readings (such as those by Andrew Thacker and by Alison Booth in the *Companion to Virginia Woolf*, edited by Jessica Berman for Wiley-Blackwell, 2016) that share the common tendency to privilege temporality in discussions of *To the Lighthouse*. Youngjoo Son, a professor at Seoul National University, offered a revisionary reading of Rachel Vinnace in her paper “The Culture of Work and Idleness: Rethinking Rachel’s *Bildung* in Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*.” Son argues that Rachel’s idleness is “a deceptive text” and that critical perspectives have sometimes been too closely aligned with those of such “mentors” as Rachel as her aunt Helen. Framing her analysis within an account of the gendered nature of work in bourgeois culture, Son showed how, far from “doing nothing,” Rachel acts very much on her own terms. In another striking reading of one of Woolf’s female characters, Haeun Cho, an MA student at Sogang University, suggested that Rhoda in *The Waves* exemplifies “a bodiless body.” And Jiwon Choi, a graduate student at Seoul National University, speaking about the significance of clothing for identity in *Between the Acts*, made the point that clothes do not hide our similarities: even when not dressed in military garb, we all participate in war—a point that jostles intriguingly with Woolf’s illustrations in *Three Guineas*.

The conference opened with a panel on “Affective Modernism” in which Professor Fuhito Endo of Seikei University, Japan argued that modernism’s traumatic encounter with “the thing itself” resulted in a division between subjective and objective as a way of repressing that trauma. The British public was “traumatized” by the 1910 Post-Impressionist exhibition, he suggested. Professor Endo made subtle use of Woolf’s biography of Roger Fry to demonstrate their shared aesthetics. In both this paper and that by Kelly Walsh, who teaches at Yonsei University in Seoul, the designation of landscape in “Time Passes” was interpreted as a figure of trauma and loss. The third paper, by Lingxiang Ke from Beijing (whose PhD is from Université Paul-Valery in Montpellier, France), also dealt with the notion of incommunicable truths. Dr. Ke’s reading of Woolf’s close engagement with Flaubert made very clear Woolf’s debt to him, and how she bends Flaubertian symbolism to her own purposes.

In a panel on “Cultural Critique in Woolf,” Professor Yuko Ito of Chubu University, Japan gave us the results of her research into smells pleasant and unpleasant. From the cesspool in *Between the Acts* to the olfactory sensibilities of Flush, Professor Ito mapped a “smell-scape” in Woolf’s narratives to which little attention has been paid. Showing ads for eau-de-cologne (which initially was not worn but, rather, sprayed into the air), and other examples of olfactory marketing from late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century periodicals, Professor Ito emphasized Woolf’s close and constant engagement with material culture. That engagement was powerfully developed in Professor Youngjoo Kim’s analysis of the first two “London Scene” essays that Woolf was commissioned to write by *Good Housekeeping*. Professor Kim (Sogang University) showed how Woolf simultaneously critiques and participates in a capitalist economy. Tracing the sexual metaphors that Woolf often used in referring to writing for money, Kim paid attention to scholarship on print culture to reveal Woolf’s self-consciousness about the form of the essay itself. Her talk was illustrated with images of the essays as they first appeared in 1931 and 1932 to show how *Good Housekeeping’s* editorial framing commodified Woolf, the “great writer.” In the third paper on
this panel, Professor Joori Lee (Seoul National University) explored the affinities between George Orwell and Woolf in their rejection of euphemism as a political tool. Reading Mrs. Dalloway’s Dr. Bradshaw alongside Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” was instructive, and the implications of Lee’s paper for our contemporary politics was inescapable.

By bringing together scholars from two countries with a deeply painful history, the conference exemplified a current I felt running through the conversations during the event itself, and also in the social encounters surrounding it. Is the legacy of “Woolf in the age of globalization” an erasure of those “chalk marks” that divide peoples, a model of harmonious interaction across borders, creating what Woolf called in Three Guineas a country that is “the whole world”? Observing a wedding in “the heart of England” in 1928, Woolf reflected that being an intellectual separated her from the country folk: “We might as well be French or German,” she wrote. “Yet I am English in some way” (The Diary of Virginia Woolf 3 198). English in “some way” Woolf certainly is; yet, in the globalized academic space of shared scholarship, where the latest critical writings can be acquired online in matter of days, she becomes a transnational writer who resonates with readers from cultures markedly different than the English.

Some papers focused on granular aspects of Woolfian narrative to illuminate her stylistics. Prominent among these was Kanako Asaka’s analysis of first- and third-person pronouns. Asaka, a PhD student at Shimane University in Japan, showed how Woolf’s pronoun choices work with verb tenses to embody either a subjective or objective point of view, sometimes in surprising ways. Drawing her specific examples from “The Mark on the Wall” and “Kew Gardens,” Asaka demonstrated the shifts between generic and eccentric uses of “one,” and showed, too, how these characteristics are found in the novels. In a discussion of free indirect discourse, Professor Soyoung Park (Chung-Ang University, Seoul) offered the interesting notion that characters sometimes perform a mode of such discourse when they “narrate” the imagined thoughts of another, as, for example, Peter Walsh does of Clarissa Dalloway. Also analyzing discrete textual elements, Professor Heonjoo Sohn (Seoul National University) used the pattern-recognition software Wordsmith to show the symmetry of Big Ben’s “leaden circles” as Woolf placed them in her narrative. Her paper convincingly showed how Woolf employed Cubist methods in structuring Mrs. Dalloway.

In the panel “Transgressing Borders,” Professor Asako Nakai (Hitotsubashi University) explored the affinities between Three Guineas and C. L. R. James’s Marxist account of the Haitian Revolution led by Toussaint L’Ouverture in his book The Black Jacobins, also published in 1938. Although Woolf and James did not meet (despite the Hogarth Press’s publishing his pamphlet on West Indian self-government in 1933), Professor Nakai drew attention to the connection between Woolf’s argument in Three Guineas in favor of wages for domestic labor and the international campaign for wages for housework championed by Selma James, C. L. R.’s partner. In another example of the materialist historical approach favored in the work of several Japanese Woolf scholars, Professor Megumi Kato (Tsruru University, Japan) moved from the text to the world in her paper “Jazzing Woolf,” which presented a rich account of allusions to popular and mass culture in Between the Acts. For an Englishman transplanted to the USA, to be sitting in Korea listening to a scholar from Japan discuss the fox-trot scene in the 1919 movie The Oyster Princess brought home the realities of globalized Woolf studies.

Between the Acts received considerable attention across the conference presentations, including an optimistic Deleuzian reading given by Professor Masayuki Iwasaki (Waseda University, Japan), of the kind of community formed in the novel’s pageant. Drawing on ecocriticism and animal studies, Iwasaki offered an insightful rationale for the many human to animal transformations figured in Woolf’s last novel. On the same panel, “Rethinking the Self and its Boundaries,” Professor Peter Lee (Kookmin University) explored the “Cacophony of Names” in Between the Acts, provocatively suggesting that Woolf’s manipulations of myriad proper names in her texts at once connect and confute the pageant characters and those in the audience. These two papers on Between the Acts were for me illuminated by Minyoung Park’s “She felt herself everywhere”: Reexamining Foreigners and Distance in Mrs. Dalloway.” Park, a graduate student at Seoul National University, brought up the “odd affinities” intuited by Clarissa even with people she had not met, a sense of merging similar to that examined by Lee and Iwasaki. Park read Woolf’s treatment of foreigners and distance as a way of challenging “national and gender conformities” to look forward to “transnational understandings,” and gave a fascinating reading of the way the word “people” operates in Mrs. Dalloway in shifting registers of implication and meaning.

In the work of the scholars presented at the 3rd Korea-Japan Virginia Woolf Conference, Woolf did indeed seem a woman without a country. Although there were occasionally references that might not be so common in Anglo-American criticism—such as Professor Endo’s use of Kojin Karatani, or Professor Yuko Kinoshita’s detailed exploration of the work of Shuzo Kuki (a philosopher whose lectures were attended by Lytton Strachey at Pontigny in 1928)—the sense of community afforded by our focus on the work of this writer did seem a cause for optimism. Nevertheless, that optimism was tempered somewhat when I recalled Sally Ruddick’s subtle suggestion that “my country is the whole world” can take on a rather sinister aspect in the age of such “super powers” as the United States with global ambitions. It was therefore significant that Youngjoo Kim brought up Gayatri Spivak’s plea for “the planet to overwite the globe” (72) in her paper. In Death of a Discipline, Spivak writes that, “The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. […] The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan” (72).

On our last day, after the conference, we were treated to a tour of the Changdok Palace, in the heart of Seoul, and of the amazing Leeum Museum. Hanging alongside the painted and embroidered Buddhas of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was Mark Rothko’s 1962 Untitled (Black and Orange on Red). The modern painting was in harmony with the beautiful ancient works, and struck me as a fitting emblem of the planetary culture that the 3rd Korea-Japan Virginia Woolf Conference promulgated through its lively and stimulating explorations. The entire intellectual endeavor was suffused with that “party consciousness” so familiar to those who attend Woolf conferences. The conversations begun in the lecture hall and continued at delicious banquets will reverberate long after we had all dispersed.

Mark Hussey
Pace University

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Word: Gesture: Language: Dance

I had the pleasure of seeing “Woolf Works,” the new ballet by Wayne McGregor for the Royal Ballet, in London on Wednesday, May 13, 2015. Talking it over with my friend Ellen McLaughlin, who accompanied me to the performance, I’ve come to the conclusion that it is a thoughtful and detailed interpretation of Woolf, one which Woolf scholars and aficionados can celebrate and even learn from.

The ballet is a triptych. The first movement, “I Now, I Then,” responds to the narrative structure of Mrs. Dalloway; the second, “Becomings,” is a phantasmagorical riff on the many selves and genders invented and parodied in Orlando; the third, “Tuesday,” weaves a series of choruses in and out of the rhythm of The Waves towards the ultimate cessation of death. Despite several reviewers who claim the dances are largely unrelated to each other, the trilogy is united by a series of subtle themes, all well-known to dedicated readers of Woolf: the relationship between past and present, the simultaneity of different versions of the self, the variability and reversibility of genders and relationships between genders, and perhaps most importantly a subtle over-arching understanding/testing of the parallels between words and language, gesture and dance, emotion and motion. This last represents a serious philosophical contribution to an understanding of Woolf.

The first movement, on Mrs. Dalloway, provides an easy entrance to this new way of seeing Woolf through dance. Announcing the thematic centrality of the motion of words and of movement as a kind of vocabulary of emotion, the curtain opens with Woolf’s voice reading an excerpt from her essay on “Craftsmanship” about how words are stored and storied with a multitude of meanings built from association with other words over time. The voice is paired with a series of images of deletions from Woolf’s holograph manuscripts, words crossed through and therefore not said, which fly like birds into patterns that briefly coalesce into what Roslyn Sulcas calls a “pointillist” vision of Woolf’s face, a breath-taking first glimpse of the delicately accurate impressionism that will follow.

The scrim then rises to reveal a single dancer holding attention center stage: is it Woolf or Clarissa? Alessandra Ferri’s tensile strength and flexibility, her fragile and eloquent expressiveness are the polar star around which the entire triptych swings, the astonishing fact that she is 52 only adding to the depth and resonance of her portrayal. She drops her coat to reveal a vaguely twenties-style, transparent, embroidered dress. What follows is a series of shifting pas-de-deux between different characters: Clarissa and Richard (or is it Virginia and Leonard?), young Clarissa and Sally Seaton, Septimus and Evans, Peter and Sally (or is it the young Clarissa?), and finally Septimus and Clarissa/Woolf. Photographic images of London are projected on large empty wooden squares, which turn into columns, stairs, rooms, or frames, suggesting a continual shifting of perspectives and locations.

A sudden tunneling into an image of the garden at Monk’s House prepares us for the shift back in time to the “I Then.” I thought immediately of the passage from “A Sketch of the Past” where Woolf speaks of the past as a long avenue at the end of which lie “the garden and the nursery” (Moments of Being 67); later I found the exact quotation in the Program, suggesting the evocation was deliberate. This kind of delicate and wide-ranging knowledge of Woolf is everywhere apparent in the ballet. One of the most breath-taking examples comes at the beginning of the dance between Septimus and Clarissa. He supports her body hanging from his arms like a tree with spread branches, while a misty image of tree leaves is projected behind the two of them, evoking the passages where Clarissa thinks of being “laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist” (Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway [MD] 9) and where Septimus feels “the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body” (MD 22).

Perhaps the most moving moments of the first dance have to do with Septimus. Ed Watson’s rendition of trauma through the fragmentation and dis-articulation of movement was brilliant and heart-wrenching. As with many moments in the dance, I found myself reciting words from memory: in this case T. S. Eliot’s “these fragments have I shored against my ruins” (The Waste Land 430). The pas-de-deux with the uniformed Evans figure adds a dimension of physical tenderness to the presentation of the relationship in the novel, which seems like a completely appropriate extension of the text, an intimate portrayal that will forever deepen and enrich my reading. At the same time, like the female-to-female pas-de-deux between Clarissa and Sally, this dance plays with the heteronormative conventions of classical ballet, preparing us for the explosive pan-sexuality of the next dance. The tenderness between the two men and the exuberance between the two women are eloquent variations on ballet’s traditional gender expectations.

The second dance, “Becomings,” departs from the narrative conventions of the first composition to emphasize the sheer stylistic exuberance and historical reach of Woolf’s novelized biography, Orlando. The curtain opens on twelve figures, dressed in metallic, vaguely Renaissance costumes. As the spotlight moved from figure to figure, I thought of the passage where Orlando’s narrator muses on the great number of selves we all have and thought, ah, they are ALL Orlando. Although traces of the narrative remain—a commanding black male dancer reminds us that it is Othello that is being performed during the Great Frost, a few passages across the stage remind us of skating across the ice—for the most part “Becomings” is about how “in every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what is above” (Woolf, Orlando 139). This fanciful meditation on sexuality is aided by the brilliant costuming: the sheen of gold and black reflective fabric doubles as armor or silk as the dancers twist and transmute themselves, female dancers leaping into sword fights, male dancers pirouetting high on toes and falling into arms, strength and grace catapulting from gender to gender. The flamboyant extensions and twists are lit by shifting rays of lasers in different colors, combining and refracting, the wooden boxes of the first dance now liberated into the insubstantial geometry of pure light. As the ballet comes to its pounding, climactic end, the lasers fan out into the audience; in a gesture similar to the end of the play in Between the Acts, we are included in the present moment.

After this display of sheer athleticism, “Tuesday,” the final movement, shifts into a softer lyricism inspired by The Waves and the inevitable associations with Woolf’s death engendered by the reading of her suicide note to Leonard. Performed by three choruses of six, including one group of children as well as the principal dancers from previous episodes, this piece is a profound study of the rhythm of repetition and variation. It provides a visual rendition of the musical form of The Waves, an eloquent and informed interpretation of Woolf’s masterpiece. Gestures—like physical words—are tossed from the Woolf figure to the various choruses who repeat and change and elaborate on them. The background image of waves in such slow motion that you can barely sense the passage of time emphasizes how the language of gesture from the previous ballets is here extended and modulated into a meditation on connection and disconnection. The presence of the dancers from other episodes enhances the continuity of the triptych, perfectly evoking the autobiographical elements of Woolf’s novel and weaving it back into the fabric of her other works. As the background motion of waves moves incrementally towards real time, the swayings and leavings, lifts and supports of the choruses enclose the central figure, carrying her into the waters of her imagination; many of the dancers are draped with shiny traces of kelp as they lower her under the waves and let her go, a gentle
counterpart to the eviscerating moment of Septimus’s death in the first act.

This sketch of the dance can only catch and highlight moments of the complete performance, multi-dimensional in its masterful integration of sets, lighting, costumes, music, and choreography with a sensitive and intelligent understanding of Woolf that teaches us new ways to read her in motion and in time. I am so grateful I had a chance to witness this and can only hope the Royal Ballet will make it a featured piece in its repertory so that more Woolfians can have a chance to experience this exuberant new reading.

Elisa Kay Sparks
Clemson University

Works Cited


Additional Resources


REVIEWS:
- THE GUARDIAN: <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/may/12/royal-ballet-woolf-works-five-star-review-wayne-mcgregor?CMP=share_btn_fb>
- THE STAGE: <https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2015/woolf-works/>
- THE NEW YORK TIMES: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/15/arts/dance/review-woolf-works-by-the-royal-ballet.html>
- THE UPCOMING: <http://www.theupcoming.co.uk/2015/05/14/woolf-works-dance-review/>

YOU-TUBE VIDEOS OF REHEARSALS AND COMMENTARY:
- Edward Watson Rehearsing Septimus: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_utmdaYpByQ>
- Alessandra Ferri and Federico Bonelli rehearse Woolf Works: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oz3gNlnQFA>
- A Conversation about Woolf Works: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UiGc3dJTLI>

Here Ends Issue 89, Spring 2016.
REVIEW

ESSAYS ON THE SELF: VIRGINIA WOOLF


This attractive clothbound collection brings together a dozen of Virginia Woolf’s essays that explore the nature of the finite self. Written between 1919 and 1940, the essays reveal changes in Woolf’s opinions and circumstances and provide both an introduction to Woolf’s writing for the first-time reader and a satisfying familiarity for the Woolf scholar/teacher. Joanna Kavenna begins her fine introduction by posing and then answering her own questions about why she has chosen to focus this particular collection on the “self.” She quickly assures the reader that the chosen essays range far beyond concern with the self, to rights of women, revolutions of modernity, and the past, present, and future of the novel. Yet, “the question of the self is central, in some way, to every essay in this collection” (viii).

Kavenna succinctly summarizes ways in which notions of ‘the self’ have changed in the seven decades since Woolf’s death, moving from a focus on the immortal self to the physical self, to the cyber-self, and even to dismissal of the self as “nothing more than a sad illusion of the brain” (ix). She reminds us that even when Woolf was writing, ideas of the immortal self to the physical self, to the cyber-self, and even to the self were in flux—from Nietzsche to Freud—and she provides a short list of Woolf’s contemporary modernist writers who through stream-of-consciousness prose imagined the inner lives of their characters.

Accessible in content and tone, avoiding the jargon of literary criticism, Kavenna’s introduction lucidly traces the major ideas of several of the essays I routinely assign in my Virginia Woolf Seminar and Twentieth-Century British Novel courses—essays that in the past I have either provided as handouts or posted on our campus intranet for students to download in addition to putting on library reserve three of Woolf’s essay collections: The Death of the Moth, The Common Reader, and The Common Reader: Second Series.

When I discovered Kavenna’s collection, I was enchanted by its design, the embossed cover, the heavy ivory paper, the clean readable typeface, the touches of red off-setting the italicized essay titles at the top of each page and repeated in page numbers centered at the bottom of every page. What a pleasure to dip into these familiar essays in such lovely packaging, especially after reading Kavenna’s lucid and sparse introduction that highlights Woolf’s ideas and her contexts, reminding us that the mysteries of ‘the self’ with which Woolf grapples continue to resonate for us. Kavenna cautions us not to imitate Woolf but rather to “reject imitative heritage writing as one more form of inauthenticity” (xxvi) and to be inspired by Woolf’s example to reside in the Now of our own times and to reach toward the Unknown.

This spring, I ordered copies for my students and assigned the essays I always teach: “Modern Fiction,” “Character in Fiction,” “A Letter to a Young Poet,” “How Should One Read a Book,” “Professions for Women,” and “The Sun and Fish,” spread throughout the semester in connection with our reading of the novels. Students brought the small pocket sized (5”x7”) book to class, and we frequently referred to “Modern Fiction” and “Character in Fiction” throughout the course alongside our major focus on selected novels.

Unlike the handouts and downloads of essays in former Woolf courses, which tended to remain in course notebooks or to be discarded at the end of semester, this little book is likely to sit on students’ shelves, squeezed between the novels we read: The Voyage Out, Jacob’s Room, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, Orlando, A Room of One’s Own, and The Waves as part of their growing collection of Woolf and Woolfian studies.

As I retire, I live vicariously through the on-going study of former students who continue to carry their work to the conferences, into their MA theses, and into doctoral programs. I have a sense this small collection will follow them in their studies. Its grey cover, in addition to announcing its title, author, and introduction, sets off in bold yellow type a quote by Woolf: “I walk over the marsh saying I AM I; and must follow that furrow, NOT COPY ANOTHER. That is the only JUSTIFICATION for my writing, living” (see Diary 5 347).

I highly recommend this book to readers who welcome as treasures and as gifts the growing number of beautiful small books devoted to Woolf’s writing. It is a wonderful addition to the reading list, not only for a course devoted entirely to Woolf, but also as recommended reading for a course on Modern British writing. My students unanimously appreciated this book in which essays converse with and echo one another in new ways because of their location in a single volume and I enjoyed teaching the essays in this form, a small book to be tucked in a backpack, a book bag, or even a cavernous pocket, to be pulled out at the bus stop or waiting in the lunch line or even at the last minute before the beginning of class.

Lindsay Baillie, second-year MA student, in response to my query, called the collection the perfect traveling companion for those interested in Virginia Woolf. Its small size makes it perfect to carry, and the essays selected showcase Woolf’s magnificent skill and wit. Joanna Kavenna does a wonderful job of introducing Woolf’s essays and provides comprehensive information about the famous female author.

First year MA student, Emily Travis, newcomer to Woolf, praised Kavenna for curating a stirring collection of Woolf’s musings on what it means to be; through Woolf, she invites us to consider our responsibility to the writer, the living character, and, most self-consciously, the reader in a way which transcends the page and produces a very real, nearly audible voice.

Woolf’s demand for the ethical treatment of literature is nourished by her unflinching dedication to the authentic representations of self, and Kavenna humanely captures Woolf’s search for this authenticity within this volume of essays. Just as Woolf unveiled the multitudes that may reside in a tidy elderly woman on a train, so does Kavenna

1 Emphasis added by Kavenna; the citation is an editorial addition.
reveal Woolf’s multifaceted exploration of the great to be in this tidy, unassuming hardcover book.

This slim book, part of Notting Hill Editions, “devoted to the best in essay writing,” has become my new favorite teaching companion. (I look forward to the forthcoming edition on Katherine Mansfield.) I heartily recommend Essays on the Self to anyone looking for the unadulterated texts and including only an introduction, details of the first publication of each essay, and a few minimalist endnotes.

Ruth Saxton
Mills College

Work Cited

REVIEWS

VIRGINIA WOOLF AS MEMOIRIST: “I AM MADE AND REMADE CONTINUALLY” by Alice Lowe.

SEPTIMUS SMITH: MODERNIST AND WAR POET: A CLOSER READING by Vara Neverow.

Although Septimus Warren Smith is often read as a failed autodidact, Vara Neverow’s monograph convincingly argues that Septimus, the “insane” complement to Clarissa’s “sanity” in Mrs. Dalloway, is a true modernist artist and war poet. Far from mere madness, Septimus’s literary and artistic accomplishments would not have seemed naïve beside the work of the successful modernists and war poets who largely inspired the character.

Neverow reviews a list of possible inspirations for Septimus, including Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, and Philip Sydney Woolf. The more compelling suggestion, however, is that Septimus’s art has more in common, aesthetically, with that of Pound and Eliot. Neverow supplies close readings of Septimus’s thoughts and works to show that, while the ostensibly neurotic young man who left Stroud before the war may not have had success, it may be because he was producing work ahead of its time. When the masculinized and taciturn Septimus returns from the War, London is prepared for the modernist break of 1922.

The general misrecognition of Septimus’s talent derives mostly from the narrator’s contemptuous derision. Neverow invokes J. Hillis Miller’s description of the narrator as a “state of mind” that has full access to the characters, and that “knows them from within.” Neverow points out, however, that the narrator is “selective” with all of the characters, and “gives us intermittent access to [Septimus’s] inner creativity” (10-11).

From the point of view of close reading, Neverow is strongest in her comparison of Septimus’s unpublished works and his aesthetic and philosophical musings, to those clearly on display in The Waste Land. The synchronicity of the composition of Mrs. Dalloway and Eliot’s publication of The Waste Land (by Woolf’s Hogarth Press in 1922) is cause enough for a close comparison of the two works, and Neverow reveals much in Septimus’s work that parallels The Waste Land, from dogs to drowned sailors. While dogs abound in Mrs. Dalloway, the surrealism of Septimus’s vision of a dog turning into a man provides one of many crucial thematic and aesthetic links to The Waste Land.

Neverow demonstrates that “[t]he compelling synergies between the ideation that drives Septimus’s musings and the published works by both the modernists of the period and the war poets of the Great War are significant” (22-23). Beyond convincingly showing those links, Neverow has also created a starting point for further comparisons of Septimus’s work to the work of the artists who, at least partially, inspired his creation.

Alice Lowe’s consideration of Virginia Woolf’s life-writing reveals a wealth of complexity about Woolf’s relationships to the forms. Although Woolf never produced an autobiography, Lowe argues that Woolf was continually writing about her life and experiences, and that “been given adequate recognition as a memoirist or acknowledged for her contributions to the genre and the craft of memoir” (4). Lowe demonstrates that Woolf was consistently engaged in life-writing beyond her well-known diary and her few unambiguously memoir essays. Further, Lowe reveals that beyond the innovation Woolf brought to the genre, she also helped open it up to women, not just through her example, but through direct exhortations to her female contemporaries to engage in autobiography and memoir.

Lowe’s primary thesis is that Woolf’s life-writing resists the form of autobiography as it was understood in her time. Lowe demonstrates that Woolf was skeptical of biography’s tendency to arrange chronologically the external aspects of a given life. As Lowe puts it, “Autobiography is bricks and mortar; memoir is design, interior, artistry” (4). As such, memoir is better suited to Woolf’s internal and reflective style. Unlike a traditional biographer, Woolf did not present her life, or anyone else’s, as a series of unambiguous facts. Rather, Woolf’s life-writing constantly engages the elusive and malleable tricks that memory can play.

The primary piece of memoir under consideration is “A Sketch of the Past,” which was published in Moments of Being, but Lowe also discusses the three essays in that volume written for Molly McCarthy’s Memoir Club. In beginning “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf realized that, for her, writing the past could only be done from the point of view of the present—not of the era in which she writes, but rather the specific moment. Woolf’s technique of contrasting the “I then” and the “I now” proved both innovative and influential.

Lowe’s contextualization of Woolf’s life-writing provides a lasting example for future authors of the genre.

Austin Riede
University of North Georgia

1 Moments of Being was initially published in 1976 by Chatto and Windus for the Sussex University Press and was edited by Jeanne Schulkind.

REVIEWS


Reinstating the Person to Whom Things Happened

In “Sketch of the Past,” Woolf identified a central problem in (auto) biographical writing: that of the elusive subject. “So many” memoirs,
she complained, were “failures” because “they leave out the person to whom things happened” (79), while biographers similarly “collect a number of events and leave the person to whom it happened unknown” (83). Throughout her career, Woolf worried at biography’s vexed attempt to combine exterior and interior perspectives, the “granitelike solidity” of truth and “the rainbow-like intangibility” of personality (“The New Biography” [TNB] 149). In “The New Biography,” Woolf’s review of Harold Nicolson’s Some People, a possible solution offered itself: one could “use many of the devices of fiction in dealing with real life” (154). Woolf followed this path in Orlando and Flash, yet suggested, in “The Art of Biography” (AOB) that the experiment had been a failure. The respective truths of fact and fiction remained irreconcilable; “you must choose,” she concluded, “and you must abide by your choice” (124).

This was arguably because Woolf lacked a sufficiently hybrid form: recognisably “a novel” but “called biography on the title page,” Orlando had “to go to the biography shelf” (A Writer’s Diary [AWD] 133), while Flash, as Michael Lackey points out, is a historical rather than a biographical novel because it is “an invention and not based on an actual life” (5). Hybridity is precisely what is offered by contemporary biofiction, which enables the writer to “make the best of both worlds” (Woolf, AOB 124) rather than having to choose. As defined by David Lodge, biofiction “takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel’s techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography” (8). It is thus able to maintain “the suggestive reality” (Woolf, AOB 122) of fact while enjoying the freedom and open-endedness of fiction, reinstating the elusive subject by imagining their thoughts.

As Lodge noted in 2007, biofiction “has become a very fashionable form of literary fiction in the last decade or so, especially as applied to the lives of writers” (8). Woolf’s life has been one of the most popular, inspiring biofictions ranging from Sigrid Nunez’s Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury and Michael Cunningham’s The Hours in the late nineties, to the recent novels that are the subjects of this review. Ranging from Woolf’s early life, to her final years, to her imagined afterlife, and moving between seriousness and subversion, these novels encapsulate the diversity of approaches to Woolf in contemporary fiction.

Taking its cue from Angelica Garnett’s perception of her aunt’s “desperate plea for forgiveness” from her mother (Author’s Note, n.p.), Priya Parmar’s Vanessa and Her Sister chronicles the disastrous impact of Virginia Woolf’s flirtation with Clive Bell on both Vanessa’s marriage and the sisters’ own relationship. The affair is blamed for “evolv(ing),” if not “end(ing),” Vanessa’s affection for Clive (246), and for revealing that, even between sisters, “nothing is unbreakable” (277). Parmar confines herself to the years 1905-1912, which explains both the sustained emphasis placed on the affair and the lack of attention given to “the sisters’ arts,” which are still embryonic when the narrative ceases. Readers hoping for insights into the composition of Bell’s most famous paintings may thus be left unsatisfied by the scarcity of references to Bell’s work and by its too-frequent presentation as an escape from the tribulations of her marriage. Similarly, fans of Woolf’s work will be disappointed to leave Virginia on the brink of her first “voyage out.” Yet Parmar’s decision to focus on an early period in her subjects’ lives enables a refreshingly autonomous Vanessa to emerge, neither her romantic nor her professional life eclipsed by the long shadow of Duncan Grant. It is Fry, rather than Grant, who is “waiting to catch me in his warm, capable heart”: but perhaps this Vanessa “do[es] not need to be caught” (334).

The novel takes the form of a capacious diary, blending both chronicle and collage. First-person entries from Vanessa surround ephemera such as letters, postcards, tickets, telegrams, and orders for art supplies. The “diary” is then subdivided into five sections, marked by extracts from published letters exchanged by members of the Bloomsbury Group. The text’s ontological status is thus a complicated one: Parmar’s ventriloquism is at times so adept that invented letters risk being mistaken for historical documents, while the diary itself makes for a symbolic addendum to Bell’s own papers. In focussing the main narrative through Vanessa, Parmar contributes to a gathering wave of interest in Bell, represented by Frances Spalding’s biography; Jane Dunn’s and Diane Gillespie’s critical studies; Susan Sellers’ novel, Vanessa and Virginia; and the BBC’s TV mini-series Life in Squares. Collectively, these works have helped nuance the representation of Bell as a “sensual, maternal,” unintellectual “other” to Woolf (Gillespie 5). Parmar’s text is most closely allied with Sellers’ Vanessa and Virginia (2008), being similarly concerned with claiming Bell as a writer and with asserting the equal value of visual and literary art. The result, in Parmar’s case, is a painterly attention to linguistic detail, as seen in Vanessa’s realisation that the “no” she gives Clive’s proposal is “a tumbledown cottage of a word, furnished in curiosity and thatched in doubt” (Parmar 95).

Parmar succeeds, then, in giving a voice to Vanessa, and in restoring much-needed plasticity to fixed portrayals of her subject as simply “enigmatic” or “serene.” Less nuanced, however, is her representation of Virginia, who is clingy and malicious by turns, too easily reducible to a foil for Vanessa. Parmar’s Virginia nurtures an unreciprocated obsession with her sister and is jealous of the competing claims of Clive and baby Julian Bell. At times, Virginia’s possessive dependence borders on incestuous attraction, a pathology also hinted at by Sellers and Cunningham. In the oblique reference to “what families are capable of” (198), Parmar connects this infatuation to Virginia’s mishandling by George and Gerald Duckworth, which produced the sense, articulated by Louise DeSALvo, that “no one in the family was ‘off-limits’” (DeSALvo 84). Virginia’s interference in Vanessa’s marriage is motivated, Parmar suggests, by this attachment to Vanessa, rather than “sincere passion” for Clive (Parmar 227). While the Letters provide evidence for Woolf’s erotic fascination with her sister, Parmar’s interpretation is ultimately problematic in reaffirming an outdated view of her sexual timidity. Unwilling to be “loved, kissed, or […] held” by anyone outside of the family (187), Virginia’s eventual marriage motivated by “decision rather than affection” (338), Parmar’s version of Virginia is too much the “sexless Sappho” content to remain in the safe waters of an unrealistic attraction, a version challenged by Eileen Barrett (6).

While Parmar confines herself to an early stage in her subject’s life, Norah Vincent’s Adeline begins in Woolf’s forties and ends on the brink of her suicide. The novel’s central conceit is that the adolescent Woolf, “the girl […] who could not speak or feel at the side of her dead mother’s bed,” exists, frozen in time, as a separate entity, able to influence and converse with “the woman she did not become” (27). The figure of Adeline enables the suggestion that Woolf’s mature personality was heavily determined by her adolescence and by adolescent trauma. Adeline’s memories of George Duckworth’s “hands on [her] in the dark” (119) are seen to determine the “ongoing non-consummation” of Leonard and Virginia’s marriage (58), while Virginia’s early fantasies of “sleeping with her mother and sister” find vicarious fulfilment in her adult affair with Vita Sackville-West (84). In a novel heavily influenced by Freudian theory, Vincent’s Adeline thus becomes a device to show how the child is “the mother of the woman.” Her introduction enlarges the novel’s scope, enabling Vincent to reach beyond her chronological setting into the late-nineteenth century. Yet this emphasis on Woolf’s adolescence is inevitably pathologizing, suggesting that Woolf’s sexual identity was encoded by her early experiences and invulnerable to change.

Adeline is also seen to have a causal influence on the deaths narrated within the novel’s pages. When Virginia tells Dora Carrington that she can think of no compelling argument against suicide, the words are attributed to Adeline, “hovering behind her like some wrong-headed guide to the underworld” (143). Various reasons are put forward for Virginia’s own death: Leonard’s decision to “tell her the truth about the
Years” (233), the “swarms of Luftwaffe” circling overhead (260), her feelings of literary failure. But ultimately, it is Adeline who is blamed. Knowing that Adeline has “never recovered” from her experiences of “unbearable loss,” Virginia herself states that Adeline’s “only [hope of] release” is in Virginia’s own death (143-44), and thus, when Virginia steps into the Ouse, Adeline responds with “radiant satisfaction” (276). Representing Virginia’s death-drive as a separate entity has the benefit of containing it and of suggesting that the mature Virginia was far more than the sum of her suicidal impulses. However, it also results in a teleological interpretation of the subject’s life, Virginia’s diverse experiences charting a discernible trajectory towards a certain death.

Notwithstanding these reservations, Vincent is to be commended for attending to Woolf’s work to a degree that is unique among biofiction. She traces the various influences of Eliot, Proust, and Joyce, details Virginia’s inspirations and setbacks, and shows her coming to terms with her increasing visibility. At its best, Adeline takes on the role of literary criticism, for instance when suggesting how The Waves might be read as a group biography of Bloomsbury. If there is a criticism to be made here, it is that the subject’s written tone too closely informs her (imagined) speech; sentences such as “Here is the multifoliate self on its journey through the dream of time” read uneasily as spoken discourse (64).

Vincent acknowledges her “copious use of […] letters, journals and autobiographical works” and of secondary sources, notably Hermione Lee’s biography (n.pag). In some instances, Adeline threatens to capsize under this weight of research. Sources such as “Sketch of the Past” and Leonard Woolf’s Growing are paraphrased rather than fully inhabited, and Adeline suffers in comparison to Cunningham’s more nuanced handling of the same material in The Hours. Elsewhere, Lee’s influence is felt so strongly that the text reads more like biography than fiction, for instance when Vincent describes the reorganization of the Hogarth Press: “the changes had brought the press more fully into the hands of the younger generation, a move Leonard and Virginia had hoped would ensure both its continued relevance and its longevity” (234-35). In part, this concerns a problem with which all of Woolf’s “mythographers” must grapple: that of writing creatively about such a heavily (re)written subject. At times, Vincent succeeds and Adeline offers unique perspectives on Woolf’s life and work; at others, previous discourse overwhelms her, and Virginia simply disappears.

Such problems are brought center stage in Maggie Gee’s Virginia Woolf in Manhattan, a highly self-aware novel which takes the biographical as its subject matter as much as its form. Inspired, perhaps, by Woolf’s suggestion that “great poets do not die; they are continuing presences,” Gee resurrects Woolf in the twenty-first century, giving her “the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh” (A Room of One’s Own [AROO] 131). Woolf is conjured by a British novelist reading Woolf’s manuscripts in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library in preparation for a keynote address at an international Woolf conference. Part One of the novel is set in London and New York, and Part Three at the conference in Istanbul; the two sections are bridged by an interlude entitled “Time Passes.” This section functions as a gentle parody of the conference in Istanbul; the two sections are bridged by an interlude —. This is a masterful novel, whose only flaws are ones of pace: the plot lags somewhat towards the end of the Manhattan section, and Gee offers a succession of potential endings, which provide little in the way of closure while distracting from the triumphant climax of the conference sequence. But these are more than compensated for by the novel’s range of implications for life-writing in general, and for biofiction in particular. Believing her diaries to have been destroyed, Virginia remains blissfully unaware of the biographies they inspired, “so thick, so intimate, so many” (74). This raises ethical questions about the publication of (auto)biographical writings, wherein the benefits to literature are diametrically opposed to the subject’s right to privacy. Angela calls her subject by her first name (“as if I belonged to her,” complains Virginia [21]) but cannot escape the sense that in all matters of import, Virginia has “got there first” (106-7). She thus experiences the simultaneous feeling of proprietorship and belatedness commonly described by biographers.

By lending Virginia her clothes, Angela symbolically remakes her in her own image: “that face shone out from my own blue coat, those white hands gestured from its wide blue sleeves” (67). This points towards a truism about life writing: that each new biography, whether fictional or otherwise, constitutes a reinvention, which is as much a “portrait of the artist” as of the subject. The scene in which Angela helps the spectral Virginia to sign her name suggests the implications of this: that Woolf’s writings, as well as her life, are reinterpreted with each successive incarnation of her image. And as witnessed with Parmar’s and Vincent’s novels, such reinterpretations can simplify, creating a Virginia who is “so much less trouble” than the real thing (Gee 139). In the end, then, Gee’s acknowledgement should serve as a disclaimer for all three novels: each Virginia is “a phantasm […] always and only [the author’s] own” (475). But what a wonderful phantasm Gee’s is: in one of her characters’ own words, “she will help Virginia go on into the future” (446).

Bethany Lane
University of Reading

Works Cited
Planetary Modernisms brings together more than a decade's worth of provocative efforts by Susan Stanford Friedman to interrogate the temporal and spatial coordinates of modernism while simultaneously engaging the recent multiple 'turns' – ethical, transnational, global – in literary and cultural studies. Her primary aim is to "rethink modernity and modernism outside the long twentieth century, outside the post-1950 temporal frame commonly understood as the period of the modern in its stages from early to late" (7) in an effort to destabilize traditional modernist studies' center/periphery model of the West as the initiator and measure of both modernity and modernism. Friedman posits "multiple, recurrent and polycentric" modernities (322) across the long duree of world history, taking her readers back to the Tang Dynasty and the Mongol Empire and forward into the twenty-first century, and explores the varieties of modernisms they generate as the "aesthetic domain of any given modernity" (191). Recasting modernity so expansively inevitably disrupts modernism canonically understood, yet Friedman also utilizes the planetary lens to re-vision traditional modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf, yielding fresh perspectives.

Friedman is fully aware that such a significant expansion of what constitutes "modernism" in an already rapidly proliferating field of "new" modernist studies can have dizzying effects on scholarly practice, especially for those trained with conventional markers for both modernity and modernism (and whose institutional locations are still largely dependent upon them). She guides the reader through the "labyrinthine maze" of often-contradictory understandings of modernity and modernism (10), then offers four "modes for reading modernism planetarily, each strategy with its own particular, manageable focus and archive" (11). These modes include:

- re-vision, seeing traditionally conceptualized modernism(s) anew with an eye to the global;
- recovery, bringing to focus work that arises from outside the temporal/spatial boundaries of traditional modernism;
- circulation, recognizing the transnational circuit of aesthetic responses to the ruptures of modernity; and
- collaging, using "radical juxtaposition" for reading multiple modernisms comparatively (11).

Fulfilling the spirit of the transnational turn in Friedman's view requires a genuine paradigm shift. "What I ask for […] is that we stop using this particular modernism as the default position for modernism per se, that we stop universalizing it to stand in for modernism itself and as the measure of all other modernisms. Instead of modifiers like 'high,' we should use spatio/temporal modifiers to indicate its geohistorical location" (186). For Woolf scholars and readers in particular, this approach broadens Woolf's inheritance and reconsideration of ideas generated through global and historical cultural circuits, though some will perceive such a move as destabilizing her authority as a modernist initiator. Friedman rereads A Room of One's Own's story of Shakespeare's imaginary sister Judith through a recovery of what she calls the "trope of the woman writer as gifted as a man, particularly in the brother-sister dyad" (259) across many colonial precursors utilizing this trope, as well as several "postcolonial afterlives" (such as Satyajit Ray's 1964 film Charulata, screened at the 2006 Woolf conference organized by Jessica Berman, a form of collage that Friedman acknowledges).

Friedman's comparative textual collage focuses on this particular trope, reconstellating Woolf with colonial writers such as James Joyce and Olive Schreiner, among others, zooming in to a more intensive focus on Rabindranath Tagore and his (actual) sister Swarnakumari Devi. "These earlier instances of the trope – versions of it that appear in Ireland, South Africa, and India before Woolf creates Judith Shakespeare – challenge the diffusionist model of feminist modernity" (259), Friedman writes. She isn't simply making a case regarding influence, but suggesting how a canonical western model of feminism and modernism flattens out the circulation of such an important trope both temporally and spatially, all but erasing its "embodiment" in these various geohistorical locations (261). While a planetary reading of Woolf and the Tagores previously appeared in Friedman's essay published in 2011, its place in this chapter and section of the book amplifies the ways that Woolf herself participates in a transnational circulation of ideas. Such a reading also complicates Woolf's relation to her own brothers Thoby and Adrian, while challenging the critical establishment's role in closing itself off to such circulations. "Are there patterns of talented brother-sister contestation in Woolf's narratives that could be seen anew," Friedman asks, "not in place of but in subterranean relationship to the oedipal/preoedipal plots that are admittedly so significant in her work?" (275).

Additional collages pair novels by Joseph Conrad and Tayeb Salih, and E.M. Forster and Arundhati Roy, with threads connecting collage to collage (for example, the brother-sister relationship reappears in Roy's The God of Small Things, which also explores the politics of gender and power). In another interesting pairing, Friedman shifts genres to the "long poems" of Aime Cesaire and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. A subsequent collage reads the poetry of the Tang Dynasty's celebrated Du Fu, the innovative development of cobalt-blue ceramic glaze by potters in Basra during the Abbasid Caliphate, and the inheritance among both Muslims and Hindus of the poet/singer Kabir's formal innovations in the era of Tamerlane's rule in India as examples of modernisms circulating outside the West and long before the 'long twentieth century.' While some readers will challenge Friedman's findings that all of these "genuinely" constitute "modernism," the readings skillfully and passionately make their case for the benefits of a planetary strategy that fosters associations, connections, comparisons and juxtapositions across space and time.

Challenging readers to see Western history as part of a geohistory, drawing on and adapting Fernand Braudel's idea of the long duree, Wai Chee Dimock's notion of reading through a lens of "deep time," and Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems methodology (see Works Cited), the book provides a sustained attack on periodization, one that has far-reaching implications not only for scholarship but the very institutional structures – libraries, museums, publishing houses, and the university itself – that sustain it. Friedman's most controversial examples include pre-1500 modernities focused around readings of the Tang and Song Dynasties and the Mongol Empire, offering a speculative thesis that modernity "seems constitutively related to empire, not to the post-Westphalian nation-state as is so often assumed" (118).

For those who have followed Friedman's intellectual journey from her highly influential Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter (1998) to her more recent work, the arguments presented here aren't new. Many of these previous published essays reappear in
Planetary Modernisms, generally in revised form. What they gain in being brought together between the covers of one book is the force of Friedman’s expansive encounters with scholars across multiple disciplines – world historians, anthropologists, comparativists, economists, art historians, literary theorists, sociologists – over several years and as the humanities and modernist studies itself have undergone radical shifts in focus, scope and theoretical emphasis. The book functions as a navigational system for charting the ways these fields have altered our understanding of literature and material culture’s work in the world since the late 1990s. Friedman’s expansiveness as a scholar and her willingness to continually question her own conclusions enhance the book’s value as a generative model of scholarship. It also takes its place as a landmark study undertaking the challenge of reading “with the planet,” as Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru put it in their Introduction to their recent anthology on The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century (xxvi).

This doesn’t eliminate some of the problems of such expansiveness: the book is long and often repetitive. The frequent, short-hand reliance on terms such as “deep time” (Dimock) or “fiery core” (Edward W. Said) felt clichéd after a while. More substantively, Friedman’s characterization of Fredric Jameson’s continued insistence on a singular modernity tied to shifts in capitalism as “reductionist economism,” revealing a “vulgar Marxism” and a “colonialist dismissal” of multiple cultural modernities itself seemed reductive. In a review of the book forthcoming in Modern Fiction Studies, Matthew Eatough agrees, calling her approach “a somewhat harsh critique of Jameson’s work, in part because Jameson’s notion of a singleton modernity ‘imagines capitalism as a global system that is not restricted to Europe, but which instead first finds form in the very global trade networks that Friedman herself places so much emphasis on’” (4-5). In terms of its ambitious scope, other readers will likely agree with Christian Moraru, who, in a recent review in symplēkē of The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms (to which Friedman is a contributor) suggests that Friedman’s labeling of a “‘modernity’ of pre-1500 entities such as the Mongol Empire (one that had a devastatingly and demonstrably anti-modern impact through Eurasia) […] is the kind of critical move that can one make [sic] feel nostalgic about less elastic timelines and more modest epistemologies” (306). Moraru challenges Friedman’s move to claim the unravelings achieved by postmodernism for modernism in what he calls the “‘modernifying’ of entire literary history, before and after modernism’s contested ‘classical’ age (the late 1800s-mid-1950s).”

Even with these challenges, Planetary Modernisms makes a signal contribution to the multi-disciplinary study of modernism and offers an incisive engagement with the planetary turn in the humanities and human sciences. The planetary lens has the potential to enrich our reading of Woolf in multiple directions, even while necessarily redefining her position as traditional modernism becomes one among many modernisms responding to the upheavals leading to modernity. How far the planetary turn realigns our understanding of aesthetics and politics generally, and literary studies in particular, will depend on the next generation of scholars, but one suspects more fruitful engagements will open as established critical paradigms continue to collapse.

Jeanette McVicker
SUNY Fredonia

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**REVIEW**

A HOUSE FULL OF DAUGHTERS: A MEMOIR OF SEVEN GENERATIONS


Courageously, beautifully written, revealing: Juliet Nicolson’s newest book, A House Full of Daughters: A Memoir of Seven Generations, is all of these. The Sackville-West and Nicolson families are very much in the habit of writing memoirs that reflect upon their ancestors. But this book is different, both for its scope and its point of view, that of a daughter, looking back over generations of mothers and fathers, and using that perspective to come to terms with her own family struggles. In this way, Juliet Nicolson raises some of the same questions Virginia Woolf takes up in Moments of Being—and of course in A Room of One’s Own.

A House Full of Daughters: A Memoir of Seven Generations begins with the life and loves of the Spanish dancer Pepita. Many of us will have read the details of Pepita’s career and long affair with Lionel Sackville-West in the biography Pepita, written by Juliet Nicolson’s grandmother, Vita Sackville-West. But Nicolson’s version of Pepita’s life is notable for its arresting descriptions. In addition to the many family documents available to her, Nicolson makes effective use of her own time in Malaga, Arcachon, and other places in Europe where Pepita lived and performed. In Arcachon, she writes, “shepherds tending their flock and dressed in leather jerkins would stand on stilts to prevent themselves from sinking into the treacherous mudflats, seeking out from their commanding height any sheep that had become lost and entangled in the marshy bushes” (36-37). The flamenco dancers in Malaga, like Pepita, “arch their supple bodies into curves of such sensuality that as soon as they began to dance an electric current of desire ran through every onlooker” (17).

Nicolson’s portraits of the lives of her great-grandmother and her grandmother—Victoria Sackville-West (1862-1936) and Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962) respectively—are deftly drawn. But the story of mothers, daughters and fathers told in this section of the book, especially when seen through the daughter’s eyes, is heartbreaking. Mothers abandon their children: Victoria at first dotes on her daughter, Vita, but eventually calls her “a selfish, callous, ungrateful child to the
best mother anyone could have ever had” (127). Vita herself, perhaps befuddled by the idea of motherhood, neglects her own two boys, Ben and Nigel Nicolson. Daughters shuttle between parents, trying to keep the lines of communication open. More often than not, fathers fill the emotional void. Victoria’s father, Lionel Sackville-West, makes Victoria the emotional center of his life after her mother dies, and engages her to act as his hostess when he becomes England’s Ambassador to the United States. When Victoria rages at Vita, Vita clings to her father, the younger Lionel Sackville-West. A generation later, Harold Nicolson becomes the father who “mothers” his two boys: he counsels them through difficult emotional times in their adolescence and, as Juliet Nicolson puts it, “fills the sensitive maternal role for his two sons” (136).

These patterns—maternal abandonment, fatherly support, daughterly confusion and devotion—dominate the second half of A House Full of Daughters. In her account of her life with her own mother and father, Philippa Tennyson d’Eyncourt and Nigel Nicolson, we see Nicolson struggling to come to terms with her mother’s many desertions of her family and children. To the child Juliet, Philippa seems always to be leaving the family home for some unnecessary “vacation” in the south of France. As a result, Juliet is sent to boarding schools she despises, where she cries herself to sleep every night. Nigel Nicolson, to the extent he can, fills the void. He takes his children out in rowboats in the Hebrides and on vacations to Ireland and Norway. For the first week Juliet is away at boarding school, he writes her every day; then three letters a week for the next three weeks; then one letter a week for the rest of her life, whenever they are apart from each other. Repeating a familiar familial pattern, Juliet becomes central to her father’s life and acts as his hostess and emotional mainstay. In the course of her struggle to understand her mother, Juliet Nicolson grows to understand the extent to which Philippa herself had been abandoned by emotionally remote parents who considered her to be a disappointment and inconvenience. Philippa herself never learned how to love as a child, much less rely on herself or love a child. As Philippa descends into alcoholism, and into loneliness, regret, and denial, Juliet Nicolson struggles to save her, but is pushed away a final time.

The last pages of A House Full of Daughters tell the story of Juliet Nicolson’s marriage and the birth of her two daughters. It is her own motherhood that finally provides Nicolson with the perspective that makes forgiveness and redemption possible. By the closing pages of A House Full of Daughters, Nicolson has gained the distance and emotional insight to forgive her mother, to invest herself in other women’s lives, and to see the future in promising bright colors, through the eyes of her granddaughter, Imogen.

Although Juliet Nicolson’s experience of the family romance is very different from Virginia Woolf’s, both writers come to terms with losing a mother and both also profit from the guidance of a mentoring father. This remarkable book has both scope and depth: the sweep of seven generations of Sackvilles and Nicolsons—much glamour and much pain—seen through the eyes of a sensitive and gifted daughter of the twenty-first century. This book is beautifully written and a delight to read, both for the color of the family plot and for the clarity of its psychological insight. A House Full of Daughters is a book one shouldn’t miss.

Katherine C. Hill-Miller
C. W. Post Campus/ Long Island University

Issue 90, Fall 2016
Virginia Woolf and Illness
edited by Cheryl Hindrichs

Cheryl Hindrichs’ Introduction to
Virginia Woolf and Illness

(continued from Page 1, Column 2)

Own for its feminist framework—as a provocation to reassess our paradigms for reading modernism. This issue’s essays show that Woolf’s meditations on illness not only have implications for new directions in disability and feminist studies (Claire Barber-Stetson, Elise Swinford, and Layla Colón Vale), but also for late modernist studies (Jane Salisbury and Naomi Milthorpe), and our understanding of modernism in its historical and cultural contexts (David Eberly, David Rasmussen, and Eileen Yu).

The virtuoso opening sentence of On Being Ill (if you haven’t had the opportunity to read it, take a moment for yourself to do so) asks why, given “how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings,” it “has not taken its place […] among the prime themes of literature” (4) alongside love, war, and jealousy? “Novels, one would have thought,” Woolf writes, “would have been devoted to influenza” (OBI 4). Modernist novels, one would add, in particular. Certainly illness is general all over modernism, but our critical discussion about the modernist body has focused on sexuality, the war, and psychology. As scholars, we readily recognize the end of the First World War, 1918, as a momentous year; its far reaching trauma opened up a chasm that has definitively marked modernism. Woolf’s essay reminds us that there is another definitive historical trauma twinned with the war that shaped modernist writers, one that literary critics have largely failed to recognize. The tone of Woolf’s opening sentence, which might strike one as quixotic—the implied absurdity of a novel devoted to influenza—takes on a darker humor when one contrasts the scope of the global 1918 influenza pandemic and the scope of WWI. Compared to the estimated 9 million that died in the war’s four years, current estimates are “that the 1918-1920 influenza pandemic killed at least 50 million worldwide and probably closer to 100 million” in less than two years (Fisher 14). (This bit of trivia, with its satisfying statistical thud, proved very popular with the medical staff who asked what I was “working on”—“Virginia Woolf” sometimes led to “are you in biology or the environment then?”). At least one-fifth of the world’s population was decimated by a disease that

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spread and acted rapidly, killing its victims often within one day, and that had no cure. Given the ubiquity and virulence of illness for modernists, why then, have we lacked a paradigm for reading it?

Thanks to a confluence of interdisciplinary work—the steady progress in establishing the field of the medical humanities by writers like Rita Charon and Susan M. Squier, the bird flu scares of the last decade that have prompted new detailed histories of the 1918 flu pandemic (as well as a flood of cinematic apocalypses), and the Paris Press reissue of Woolf’s On Being Ill (first published as a monograph by the Hogarth Press in 1926)—it is now possible to see and say that one of the decisive shaping forces of the early twentieth century was the worldwide influenza pandemic. Woolf scholars such as Lorraine Sim, Kimberly Engdahl Coates, and Madelyn Detloff, and scholars of the pandemic such as Jane Fisher, study illness in Woolf’s work without, as Woolf writes, “taper[ing] into mysticism, or ris[ing] [...] into the raptures of transcendentalism” (OBI 6). Rather than reading illness through a psychoanalytic lens, they have forged new paths in asking us to attend to how Woolf tackles “this monster, the body, this miracle, its pain” (OBI 6). In illuminating new introductions to Woolf’s essay and its companion piece Notes from Sick Rooms by Woolf’s mother, Julia Stephen, Hermione Lee and Mark Hussey have made powerful arguments for the importance of On Being Ill in understanding Woolf’s aesthetics and philosophy.

Elizabeth Fisher argues that the pandemic was suppressed in literature between the wars because reading about the event would have been difficult for survivors, whereas today creative nonfiction writers find it a fertile “historical trauma” (37). Often, I would add, and oddly, in new children’s books. This should also be true of WWI, and indeed its appearance in literature and criticism was not immediate and often is characterized by modernist techniques to create absences and silence. We can thus take a cue from the tradition of literary criticism of war trauma in modernism, a criticism so productive that it has also occluded our recognition of the ubiquity of the pandemic, to reconsider those absent presences. For example, prominent ghosts appear in The Waste Land, in the first section titled “Burial of the Dead”: “Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many. Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled” (60-64). Typically, the crowd is read as the speaker’s hallucination of war dead. However, might we not also consider this an evocation of the “Unreal” city of the pandemic, when the burial of the dead was so overwhelming that funeral homes ran out of coffins, undertakers, and transport, and family members were indeed buried in back gardens. “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?” (71-72). The trauma of the pandemic, coupled with the trauma of the war, would take several years to “sprout” and bloom into a garden of strange flowers.

Such moments are oblique to us, but would have been immediately recognizable by Eliot’s and Woolf’s contemporary readers who had shared that experience. As Hermione Lee has argued, the most evocative presences of the pandemic’s losses are captured in the opened silences of Woolf’s work (xix). For example, the empty house, empty arms, and devastating parenthesis of “Time Passes.” The two-syllable repeated names called and unanswered throughout Woolf’s work: “Rachel, Rachel” in The Voyage Out, “Jacob, Jacob,” in Jacob’s Room, “Mrs. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay” in To the Lighthouse. It is through Woolf’s ability to create this palpable absence, a palpable silence that pierces the reader with a rhythm aching for its answer, that Woolf overcomes our formulas for resisting with false sympathy or commemoration and instead begin to engage with the common experience of imperfect sympathy and loss.

Woolf’s essay argues that illness has not been a prime theme of literature because, perhaps, of the “poverty of language” (OBI 6). Illness, according to Woolf, has no “ready made” models (OBI 7). This dearth of language, of narrative paradigms in the literary tradition, has implications for lived experience: “The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself” (OBI 6-7). Here, Woolf makes the case for her work as well as other modernists who would “make it new”: forced to abandon the given plots and known meaning making structures, illness produces the modernist writer experimenting with new words and forms. Doubting that English writers will “take liberties with the language,” she calls on Americans to answer the call for “a new language [...] more primitive, more sensual, more obscene” as well as “a new hierarchy of the passions; love must be deposited in favor of a temperature of 104; jealously give place to the pangs of sciatica; sleeplessness play the part of villain, and the hero become a white liquid with a sweet taste” (OBI 7-8).

Whereas Sontag claims “that illness is not a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking” (3), Woolf writes a manifesto replete with and calling for more metaphoric thinking, and, further, she draws the reader to see what might be glimpsed if this unconventional perspective were extended to habitual ways of seeing. Although Sontag’s work is important in revealing the Foucauldian dynamics underlying conventional designations of the healthy and the well and a check on the impulse to sentimentalize illness, her fundamental rejection of metaphoric thinking would leave illness in the literary quarantine or surrender it to the new professional medical discourse that Woolf wrote against. Each of us in America who has been asked to “describe your pain” by pointing to a number corresponding to a smiling or unsmiling cartoon face in the Wrong-Baker FACES Pain Rating Scale would no doubt join Woolf in desiring aesthetic innovation that would alter not only the tradition but also the well of experience for the reader to draw upon in life.

Although Woolf felt Eliot was skeptical of On Being Ill, he published its first version in the New Criterion in January 1926 (Lee xx), and like Woolf, T. S. Eliot argued for new paradigms for making the tradition useful to the individual contemporary talent. In “The Metaphysical Poets,” Eliot suggests that the historical, material contexts of modernity dictate not a universal rule for the scope of the poet, but argues the “variety and complexity” of civilization “playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results” in modern poetry (2330). He thus positions his individual talent within the tradition (calling out Racine and Baudelaire) as combining innovative diction (the poet must be “more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning”) with a sensibility that can connect “soul” and soma (2331). For Eliot, modernism’s inward turn was not a turn away from the body or material culture but a passionate pursuit of how the self is experienced as a kind of mobius strip of psyche and soma. Eliot writes, “Those who object to the ‘artificiality’ of Milton or Dryden sometimes tell us to ‘look into our hearts and write.’ But that is not looking deep enough; Racine or Donne looked into a good deal more than the heart. One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts” (2331). While criticism has noted outliers such as the anti-modernist modernist D.H. Lawrence as readily rifeing on the digestive tracts (see also Joyce), analysis tends to focus on the body within the matrix of sex. On the other side of the spectrum, the modernism of Eliot, Woolf, and Proust has been characterized by its cerebral and psychological acuity—its abstraction from the body. Woolf herself helped develop our paradigm for reading modernism by distinguishing between the “materialists” of conventional fiction and modernists such as Joyce whose work was “spiritual” (1925). “Spiritual,” it should be noted, is how Woolf describes the change illness brings to our sense of life in “On Being Ill,” reorienting mind with body.

Elise Swindon in this issue adroitly uses Madelyn Detloff’s phrase “neuro/affective atypicality” to describe Woolf’s approach to the psyche/soma connection of the body in illness.
Our paradigms for reading illness in modernism will need to be informed by the historical context of the pandemic and alert for articulate silences. The swift, ubiquitous slaughter of the pandemic and its undermining of medical authority made it unsympathetic to the paradigms of conventional portrayals of the war that dominated the period’s social and historical narratives, designed to contain the war’s trauma in larger structures of meaning. As sociologists and scientists today exhumate the pandemic, re-embattling ourselves with this history will not only illuminate marginalized texts—particularly those of women writers—but suggest new readings of canonical ones. For example, scientists now recognize the interwar epidemic of “sleeping sickness,” *encephalitis lethargica*, as a complication of the influenza pandemic; this illness, virtually unknown today, offers a new context for reading the protagonist’s mysterious and transformative seven-day sleep in Woolf’s *Orlando*. In his *The Post Card*, Jacques Derrida identifies another significant trace of the pandemic’s trauma in the evolution of psychoanalytic theory in Sigmund Freud’s addition of a footnote to his revisions of “On the Pleasure Principle” which describes the “fort-da” game and evokes, without naming, his beloved daughter who has died from influenza. The suppression and expression of that grief (Freud denied claims that his theory of the death drive was influenced by Sophie’s death, yet he inscribes her absence in a footnote about his theory which is illustrated with her son’s mastery of loss) is symptomatic of the influenza pandemic’s absence presence. The destabilizing effects of the pandemic were manifold: 1) it undermined narratives of history and civilization as a march of progress; 2) it upset class, race, and gender hierarchies; and, 3) in a modernity which had already fundamentally rocked the given meaning-making narratives such as religion, nation, and family, it struck at customary notions of a coherent self.

To focus on the latter point, literature that attempts to do justice to the defamiliarizing experience of illness tends to produce two effects: a departure from narrative progression into the lyric mode and the revelation of alternative possibilities, both at the level of the character’s mimetic life as well as at the level of the reader’s and author’s aesthetic and ontological propensities. In literally interrupting habit, illness departs from the linear march of our conventional, day-to-day narrative tracks and diverts us into poetic perception. The habit of prosaic perception and its attending illusions, according to Woolf, facilitates the sustenance of the status quo: “in health the genial pretence must be kept up and the effort renewed—to communicate, to civilize, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work together by day and by night to sport. In illness this make-believe ceases” (OBI 12). The literal displacement of the body triggers a metaphoric displacement of one’s metaphorical orientation; indeed, Woolf’s prose shows how diversion from the forward march of narrative or argument is productive of lyric, horizontal, blooming:

> Directly the bed is called for, or, sunk deep among pillows in one chair, we raise our feet even an inch above the ground on another, we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters. They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream; helter-skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time for years, to look round, to look up—to look, for example at the sky. (12)

The perspective afforded by illness as Woolf portrays it here (described aptly in this issue by Elise Swinford as “Gone Sideways”) likewise characterizes the perspective modernism seeks in creating defamiliarizing standpoints. The position of the exile, the insider perspective of an outsider, is emphasized in the characterization of the invalid as a deserter. It is certainly no coincidence that the only white characters to fall ill in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* are Kurtz, gone rogue from the Company, and Marlow, the teller of unconventional tales. Modernism’s ambivalent position in a market economy, desiring autonomy from its interests but requiring patronage, is likewise reflected in the emphasis on the revelatory vision afforded to the “disinterested” outsider (OBI 12). The defamiliarizing perspective of the oppressed, those disinterested in maintaining the status quo, is privileged in modernism and requires us to revalue the assumed worth of conventional social narratives, structures, and priorities.

Modernism’s ethic of defamiliarization, voiced in such manifesto-like texts as Conrad’s preface to the *Nigger of the Narcissus*, Woolf’s “Modern Fiction,” and Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” reveals that modernists took up the aestheticist slogan *l’art pour l’art* not in pursuit of an apolitical, transcendent aesthetic, but with the conviction that the process of art is itself a reengagement with the ground of experience. As Woolf’s *On Being Ill* reminds us, no experience so readily strips perception of habitual patterns of thought or so thoroughly exposes social structures for meaning making as illness, an experience at once other-worldly and deeply mortal. From the twenty-first century, when autopathography and self-help genres proliferate, it can be hard to register the relative silence that Woolf’s work breaches, particularly when market discourses collude with biomedical discourse to make illness and aging an unnatural state that must be cured and contained. Indeed, Woolf’s essay and novels chart the transition from illness’s relegation in the Victorian era to the domestic sphere to its professionalization. Woolf writes, “Sympathy nowadays is dispensed chieFly by the laggards and failures, women for the most part (in whom the obsolete exists so strangely side by side with anarchy and newness), who, having dropped out of the race, have time to spend upon fantastic and unprofitable excursions” (OBI 10). *On Being Ill* condemns the false sympathy of duty and the cult of domesticity, but likewise rejects the paternalism of the profession that had begun to displace it, as Jane Salisbury and Naomi Milthorpe show in their reading of *The Years*.

With the faith that you have at one time or another surrendered your passport of the well, perhaps you have at this moment of reading, I suggest *On Being Ill* confers a “Kingly sublimity” that invites us to proceed as readers without any obesiance to the tradition that conspires to thus “dull in us that thunder clap of conviction which, if an illusion, is still so helpful an illusion, so prodigious a pleasure, so keen a stimulus in reading the great” (OBI 22-23). With Woolf’s “overweening power” and illness’s “overweening arrogance, the barriers go down” (OBI 23), and invite us to pursue those thunderclap moments between text and experience for examining Woolf’s many claims in *On Being Ill*—claims that often appear deeply contradictory at first glance. It is indeed the contradictory seeming claims of Woolf’s work, including its purposeful genre crossing, which invite rich interpretive dives into her literary works.

The genius of Woolf’s *On Being Ill* is its ability to both recreate the perspective of the ill (particularly since writing was often impossible in illness), satirically philosophize on its defamiliarizing powers, all the while speaking from a space that invites the reader to inhabit that perspective rather than observing it as a visitor might. The essay avoids “I” entirely, excepting one instance, which distances the “I” from the speaker by cordonning it in a quotation: Woolf asks us to “return to the invalid. ‘I am in bed with influenza’” to then expound on the inadequacy of the sentence (OBI 8). Throughout, Woolf deploys “we” and “us,” thus positioning readers as active participants, and while it provides no autopathography, the essay feels intensely personal and it is this intimacy that inspires creative work. For example, Hilary Mantel’s *London Review of Books* diary entry describing one of her hospital experiences includes a passionate refuting of several of Woolf’s claims in *On Being Ill* while nonetheless remaining deeply indebted to the model Woolf pioneered. Taking liberties with language, passionate, sensual, obscene, she effectively continues Woolf’s entreaty.

*On Being Ill* is filled with eminently quotable declamations for the reader to seize upon, and indeed one of these seems to offer carte blanche to “rifle the poet of their flowers. We break off a line or two” (OBI 20) and float them on an email or frame a close reading. After a second week passed in the hospital, and I hadn’t opened *On Being Ill* except...
in “sudden, fitful, intense” bursts to pin down a citation, I glibly played up the invalid’s freedom — for who is going to exact criticism from an invalid or sound sense from the bed-ridden? —” (OBI 20). Preferring poets to prose, Woolf declares “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire is not the book for influenza” (OBI 19), and, if anyone should argue, I would refer them to the case study of its effects in The Voyage Out for evidence. “Illness,” according to Woolf, “makes us disinclined for the long campaign that prose extracts” (OBI 19). This would perhaps explain why my copy of Evelyn Waugh’s Decline and Fall, which I happily handed over to a nurse to give to another patient in need of a book, was returned to me after a week in completely, disappointingly pristine condition. I had thought perhaps that Waugh’s terse prose with its dark humor might be precisely the thing for a fellow patient (Mantel’s diary entry has her reading Waugh’s entire Sword of Honor trilogy) but perhaps the title itself was too evocative of Edward Gibbon’s six-volume legacy. For myself, I took it up with Woolf’s claim that “some prose writers are to be read as poets” (OBI 20). On reflection, her dismissal of the campaigns required by prosaic histories like Gibbon’s and her approval of novels that may be read poetically isn’t a contradiction but a fitting suture—the point of Woolf’s commentary on attempting to read poetry or prose while ill is not about the text at hand, not to pen a note for sickrooms, but is instead the mind of the reader and the creative engagement the altered perspective of illness makes possible, a perspective lyric narrative prose can indeed create for the reader, well or ill.

Understanding this conundrum can help clarify what to many seems an aberration if not a black hole at the end of the essay, Woolf’s long recounting of Augustus Hare’s The Story of Two Noble Lives. She offers a feint at first, owning up to the text’s “mediocrity” but claiming that it is precisely this inferiority that beckons the invalid (OBI 23). If we follow the feint as an excuse, however, we miss that she chooses these volumes precisely because of their insight into life as it was then: “For life then was not the life of Charlotte and Louisa. It was the life of families, of groups. It was a web, a net, spreading wide and enmeshing, every sort of cousin, dependent, and old retainer” (OBI 25). Woolf’s recounting frames an absence—the “life of Charlotte and Louisa”—emphasizing the lives of the obscure in the final image. This image should disclose an intimate understanding of what Louisa, Lady Waterford, is feeling in the moment when she watches her husband’s hearse depart, but instead we have Sir John Leslie’s third-person perspective: “never could Sir John Leslie forget, when he ran downstairs on the day of the burial, the beauty of the great lady standing to see the hearse depart, nor, when he came back, how the curtain, heavy, mid-Victorian, plush perhaps, was all crushed together where she had grasped it in her agony” (OBI 28). And the essay ends. The reader perhaps gawns on a pencil in frustration.

However, if we have been reading as Woolf recommends, that is as an “outlaw” and with “rashness” (OBI 22), then we haven’t taken up the expectations and rules of notice of the middlebrow Victorian novel in our reading but instead have been finding that, “the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored,” as Woolf writes in “Modern Fiction” (CR1 150). Woolf claims that moderns were interested in “the dark places of psychology,” and, as her retelling of Tolstoy’s “Gusev” in that essay attests, her interest is particularly in the body’s involvement. “Gusev” is praised because “[t]he emphasis is laid upon such unexpected places that at first it seems as if there were no emphasis at all” (CR1 152). Tolstoy, like the moderns, has created a lyric narrative that induces the kind of reading that illness also makes possible emphasis at all” (CR1 152). Tolstoy, like the moderns, has created a lyric narrative prose can indeed create for the reader, well or ill.

In questioning the omission of illness as a great theme of literature, Woolf exemplifies a modernist tendency to use illness to reexamine the conventions and values of the narratives that structure and give meaning to our lives, and she proposes that paying attention to stories and voices that have been occluded by dominant narratives will make possible new avenues not only in art but in life. By attending to the marginal—such as the point of view of the nurse, the surreal experience of a fever, or the subtleties of the waiting room—modernist literature, like illness, makes everyday experience strange, creating a site to examine what is missed in habitual patterns of thought, including and especially those concerning the body. Claire Barber-Stetson’s essay in this issue, “‘On Being Ill’ in the Twenty-first Century,” reveals the important implications of On Being Ill for the study of disability and pathography and the similarity of Alison Kafer’s theorization of “crip-time” and Woolf’s own use of time in her work. According to Barber-Stetson, in contrast to the experience of loss in her novels, which critics have described as an inability to access, Woolf portrays illness as opening access to other opportunities. Woolf’s rhetorical strategies create complex standpoints and subvert metaphors of “seeing” to bring the reader to contemplate illness and death without the comforts of given narratives. Like Hermione Lee who notes the essay “does not say I (“tyrannical ‘I’”) (xxxi), a rhetorical skill difficult to master, Barber-Stetson notes the rhetorical choice of Woolf’s use of “we,” citing her identification as a defector of the “army of the upright” (12). Although it may be read as a bid for sympathy for the ill, Barber-Stetson reminds us that shortly the essay also sternly rebuffs the desire for sympathy, and thus Woolf’s real aim is to expose the conflation of health and morality. As Madelyn Detloff has shown, Woolf’s epistemological standpoint anticipates the contemporary work of disability studies to subvert given categories of “ill,” “disabled,” and “crippled.” In comparing Woolf’s rhetorical position to contemporary writers of pathography, Barber-Stetson notes her insistence on the importance of the subject and the counterpoint of the “levity” of her tone. The turns of wit in Woolf’s writing about illness, as in many pathographies, are illustrative of the ways in which she attempts to answer the very challenges and questions the essay lays out: how to write illness in a way that appeals to readers’ desires.

In “Gone Sideways: Woolf’s Empathetic Sick Bed Travel,” Elise Swinford suggests Woolf’s success in doing so lies largely in her ability to displace masculine narrative paradigms of travel and conquest with what Giuliana Bruno calls a “traveling theory of dwelling.” Swinford relocates Woolf’s On Being Ill in the context of a geomodernist aesthetics of physical travel, arguing that her focus on interiors and domestic spaces enable imaginative and experimental wandering that privileges the “cognitive, affective, and imaginative.” The Hogarth Press and Woolf’s relationship with Mulk Raj Anand are the literary avenues that have been occluded by dominant narratives will make possible new avenues, and she proposes that paying attention to stories and voices that have been occluded by dominant narratives will make possible new avenues not only in art but in life. By attending to the marginal—such as the point of view of the nurse, the surreal experience of a fever, or the subtleties of the waiting room—modernist literature, like illness, makes everyday experience strange, creating a site to examine what is missed in habitual patterns of thought, including and especially those concerning the body. Claire Barber-Stetson’s essay in this issue, “‘On Being Ill’ in the Twenty-first Century,” reveals the important implications of On Being Ill for the study of disability and pathography and the similarity of Alison Kafer’s theorization of “crip-time” and Woolf’s own use of time in her work. According to Barber-Stetson, in contrast to the experience of loss in her novels, which critics have described as an inability to access, Woolf portrays illness as opening access to other opportunities. Woolf’s rhetorical strategies create complex standpoints and subvert metaphors of “seeing” to bring the reader to contemplate illness and death without the comforts of given narratives. Like Hermione Lee who notes the essay “does not say I (“tyrannical ‘I’”) (xxxi), a rhetorical skill difficult to master, Barber-Stetson notes the rhetorical choice of Woolf’s use of “we,” citing her identification as a defector of the “army of the upright” (12). Although it may be read as a bid for sympathy for the ill, Barber-Stetson reminds us that shortly the essay also sternly rebuffs the desire for sympathy, and thus Woolf’s real aim is to expose the conflation of health and morality. As Madelyn Detloff has shown, Woolf’s epistemological standpoint anticipates the contemporary work of disability studies to subvert given categories of “ill,” “disabled,” and “crippled.” In comparing Woolf’s rhetorical position to contemporary writers of pathography, Barber-Stetson notes her insistence on the importance of the subject and the counterpoint of the “levity” of her tone. The turns of wit in Woolf’s writing about illness, as in many pathographies, are illustrative of the ways in which she attempts to answer the very challenges and questions the essay lays out: how to write illness in a way that appeals to readers’ desires.

David Eberly also considers gender and the professionalization of medicine in his fascinating essay “Gassed: Virginia Woolf and Dentistry.” Eberly adroitly draws attention to Woolf’s opening gambit not only to point out her cavalier reference to influenza, but also to point out that she begins her meditation on illness with the experience of waking from anesthesia. Eberly’s photograph of the dentist’s chair from the British Museum, with its ornate velvet nappery but also its iron foot restraint, underscores his important work in historicizing Woolf’s experience of illness, reminding us that “[d]entistry, depression, and disease are inextricably intertwined.” Contrasting On Being Ill with Woolf’s 1929 essay “Gassed,” Eberly illuminates the dark humor of the
former and shows that the latter calls for a reconsideration of the shared trauma of going under for that generation.

David Rasmussen, in “War, Alienation, and the Concept of Parrēsia in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway,” also considers the postwar generation’s trauma. Rasmussen interprets Septimus Smith’s post-traumatic stress disorder and compulsion to convey his message as reflective of “‘the Greek idea of parrēsia,’ not as a penitent individual sinner but as a scapegoat whose behavior ultimately serves to critique patriarchal culture. Rasmussen argues the novel critiques not only the patriarchy of the military but also medicine, in which patient and doctor play roles similar to “penitent and confessor.” Eileen Yu reads Septimus Smith’s gesture and Mrs. Dalloway’s reception of it as an attempt at communication in the context of Woolf’s meditation on Nature and its lack of sympathy in On Being Ill. In “Indifference Over Sympathy: Transcendental Communication in Virginia Woolf’s On Being Ill and Mrs. Dalloway,” Yu argues since Septimus and Clarissa’s bond lies in Nature, not the “inter-subjective bond,” theirs is a “transcendental communication” that provides resolution for both protagonists.

The bond formed between dog and woman writer, likewise unmediated by patriarchal discourse and closer to Nature, is the focus of Layla Colón Vale’s “Flush, the Sickroom, and the Heroine.” Vale approaches Flush through the lens of disability studies and raises the question of what Woolf achieves in choosing Flush’s point of view. Lacking the internalization of medical or patriarchal discourse, Flush’s perspective can expose how Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s suffering is largely a consequence of those discourses. Jane Salisbury and Naomi Milthorpe’s essay, “‘The borderland between life and death’: The Spatial Politics of Illness in The Years,” shows the evolution of Woolf’s own discourse about illness and is an important contribution to the growing field of late modernist studies. Salisbury and Milthorpe argue that, whereas Woolf’s earlier works such as On Being Ill are ambivalent though they offer a consolatory vision of epiphanic possibility in illness for women, a marked change can be seen in her later works, particularly The Years, in which such horizons are foreclosed. Salisbury and Milthorpe consider the references to dirt in The Years in the context of late modernist documentary realism and the feminine connotations of dirt with sickness and transgression. They argue that Woolf sees in the dirty communal spaces of Maggie Pargiter and Renny’s house the possibility of fruitful contamination.

As the essays in this special issue suggest, and as Sandra Inskeep Fox’s poem “down, down into truth” underscores, modernist engagement with illness departs from popular fiction and non-fiction by staging and rejecting biomedical and commercial frameworks and examining alternative perspectives—illness as a site for reflection, personal and cultural analysis, affirmation of our human mortality, and a redirection of our desire for the immortal toward a desire to dwell in the present moment. Raise your “feet an inch or more above the ground” and explore for yourself that snowfield, that forest in each (OBI 12).

Cheryl Hindrichs
Boise State University

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On Being Ill in the Twenty-First Century

For many years, critics have focused on the prominent place that loss holds in Virginia Woolf’s oeuvre. This theme is most often considered in the sense of physical loss or death. As Roberta Rubenstein notes, “Between 1895 and 1906, she [Woolf] lost her mother, her half-sister, one of her brothers, and her father” (36). Such physical losses recur in the texts she writes with the deaths of Rachel Vinrace (The Voyage Out); Jacob Flanders (Jacob’s Room); Septimus Warren Smith (Mrs. Dalloway); Mrs. Ramsay, Andrew Ramsay, Prue Ramsay (To the Lighthouse); and Percival and Rhoda (The Waves). Loss can also be represented figuratively as a lack of mental access; those who are physically close to us may remain cognitively or emotionally inaccessible, a fact that Woolf emphasizes time and again.

As a result, readers may expect Woolf’s essay On Being Ill (OBI 1926) to present the eponymous experience as a negative one. Yet, Woolf subverts this expectation. Though she characterizes illness as a painful experience with potentially serious social repercussions, she also highlights opportunities to which it gives access. Because this position is radical even today, Woolf’s essay has an important contribution to make to disability studies and pathography by blurring the boundaries between the two disciplines. In On Being Ill, Woolf engages in the “collective reimagining” that disability-studies theorist Alison Kafer proposes is necessary to re-politicize the experience of disability (9). Woolf reimagines the experience of being ill such that it overlaps significantly with contemporary representations of disability in the positive potential that she attributes to it. Reading Woolf’s essay in the context of literature by disabled individuals and disability-studies scholarship draws attention to the need to reconsider the relationship between disability and illness—embodied situations that have been much too starkly distinguished—and it suggests a productive avenue for Woolf scholars in ongoing elaborations of “crip time.”

1 Kafer writes that, “Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of ‘how long things take’ are based on very particular minds and bodies” (27).
I begin by focusing on the opening line of *On Being Ill* (OBI) because Woolf wastes no time in complicating the negative connotaton that illness has had since at least the year 1500. She writes,

> Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us by the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of amnihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist’s arm-chair and confuse his “Rinse the mouth—rinse the mouth” with the greeting of the Deity stooping from the floor of Heaven to welcome us—when we think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature. (OBI 3-4)

At the most basic interpretive level, Woolf makes the same point here that G. Thomas Couser does much later in his 1997 *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing*; illness, as well as the existing “literature of pathology” that Hermione Lee identifies in her Introduction to *On Being Ill* (Lee xxii), deserves more literary attention than they have received. Yet, the seriousness of this proposal is counterbalanced by a curious note of levity that pervades the sentence, most notably in the dentist’s scene. The tone of the essay vacillates, as it does in this single sentence, making Woolf’s position difficult to pin down. The sentence’s complex grammar—evinced by the dependent clause that seems never to end—mirrors the complexity of the position that Woolf establishes in relation to illness.

In this sentence, Woolf acknowledges both the negative and productive potential of illness through visual rhetoric. She positions the experience of falling ill as liberating and enjoyable as it reveals “undiscovered countries” and “lawns sprinkled with bright flowers,” which were previously inaccessible because they could not be seen. However, Woolf also acknowledges that this newly accessible world contains dangers, “precipices” from which one can fall to one’s death at any moment. Yet, rather than turning the light on or up to reveal these spaces and features, Woolf paradoxically suggests that illness turns the light “down.” It gives our eyes a rest, not unlike the act of putting up one’s feet, which figures importantly later in the essay. Because of its positive resonance, this metaphor resists a rhetorical trope in place since at least the Enlightenment and, as a result, appears counterintuitive; how could one, in fact, see better and travel further with less light? Such a position will be very familiar to scholars of disability as it contravenes established expectations for how the body should function.

Despite the positive resonance Woolf introduces, she does not go so far as to present illness as wholly positive; in fact, she highlights it as an experience that bring us closer to death as we lose our visual access to the precipices. Later in the sentence, Woolf further highlights this proximity to death through natural images. Both deserts and the act of uprooting extinguish life because of a lack of water, and Woolf suggests that even “language at once runs dry” when used to describe the experience of being ill (OBI 7). Yet, too much water can also cause death, as Woolf reminds us by comparing the experience of anesthesia to drowning.

When read with a later passage, these descriptions indicate that the experience of being ill forces acceptance of a situation as it is and a refusal to continue contributing to social fictions. As she writes, in health the genial pretense must be kept up and the effort renewed—to communicate, to civilize, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work together by day and by night to sport. In illness this make-believe ceases. Directly the bed is called for, or, sunk deep among pillows in one chair, we raise our feet even an inch above the ground on another, we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters. (12)

Woolf’s word choice (desert) here calls forth earlier scenes; however, the disembodied voice evoked by passive verb in the third sentence—“is called for”—indicates reluctance in leaving behind “the genial pretense,” or the attitude one puts on for social interactions. It is a social death with real consequences. However, the danger presented by illness influences one to acquiesce, which Woolf frames as a betrayal by describing those who are ill as “deserters.” Yet, she includes herself in this group by using the pronoun “we,” which tempers any negative judgment attached to it. This rhetorical strategy also includes the reader, calling her to identify with those who are ill and the experience of being ill. One motivation would be to elicit sympathy for these individuals, but Woolf presents such emotional identification as unproductive and unpleasant, for “it is in their [plants’] indifference that they are comforting” (OBI 15). She has another goal in mind. She foregrounds the assumption that accepting accommodations reflects a moral failing with the goal of ridiculing it by contrasting the ill deserters with the ironically named “army of the upright.”

In this phrase, Woolf plays with the literal and figurative senses of “upright” to create a false distinction between those who are healthy and those who are ill. In its literal sense, this modifier suggests that health is visible in one’s physical orientation to the environment, and its figurative sense adds an additional layer by indicating that this physical orientation reflects a strong moral character. Her ironic tone ridicules the conflation of health (or, in other cases, able-bodiedness) and a strong moral character, which her word choice makes visible. This tone carries over to the (false) opposition Woolf creates between the healthy army and the ill deserters.

Because of their recumbent position, those who are ill have access to different texts than those who are upright. According to Woolf, those who are ill are “able, perhaps for the first time in years, to look round, to look up—to look, for example, at the sky” (OBI 12). When upright, we may assume the sky remains static, but when lying down, we are reminded of its “endless activity” (OBI 13). It is unusual to see healthy people looking at the sky as their physical orientation—facing ahead or down—makes this attitude more difficult. A recumbent attitude also does not follow the pace of modern life, as suggested by their abnegation of the “genial pretense.” Woolf draws attention to the assumption that by lying down, those who are ill ignore their social duty to be productive members of society. Such an attitude again recalls capitalist attitudes toward disabled individuals who are worthless because they are not productive.2

In a broader context, Woolf’s views can be aligned with the experiences of those with autism spectrum disorders. Though the danger of the illness may influence people to desert their social commitments, Woolf reveals what they stand to gain in a way that strikingly evokes a passage from *Aquamarine Blue* 5, a collection of essays written by American college students with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). One of the contributors, Myriam, describes a situation in which the different texts than those who are upright. According to Woolf, those who are sick are “able, perhaps for the first time in years, to look round, to look up—to look, for example, at the sky” (OBI 12). When upright, we may assume the sky remains static, but when lying down, we are reminded of its “endless activity” (OBI 13). It is unusual to see healthy people looking at the sky as their physical orientation—facing ahead or down—makes this attitude more difficult. A recumbent attitude also does not follow the pace of modern life, as suggested by their abnegation of the “genial pretense.” Woolf draws attention to the assumption that by lying down, those who are ill ignore their social duty to be productive members of society. Such an attitude again recalls capitalist attitudes toward disabled individuals who are worthless because they are not productive.

Imagine person A and person B meet each other. They are looking up to the sky and watching clouds, both looking now at the same cloud and trying to see something special in it. Person A sees a rabbit-head in this cloud, person B sees a geometrical figure. Now person A thinks that person B sees the same thing and starts talking about the nutrition of animals. Person B also thinking that person A sees the

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2 See Mitchell and Snyder for a critique of this logic based in disability studies.
same thing will be irritated because person B will think about angles, goniometric functions, 3-dimensional things. (60)

Both Myriam and Woolf emphasize how these perspectives—Woolf’s more spatially different than Myriam’s—produce negative affects like irritation among those who try to communicate about them. For instance, Woolf suggests that those who are ill exhibit “a childish outspokenness,” known for “truths blurted out,” behaviors out of step with appropriate social interactions (OBI 11). Individuals with ASDs are criticized for exhibiting the same behavior, suggesting that social responses to those with illnesses and disabilities are strikingly similar.

Woolf affilates those who are healthy with parents, colonizers, and the army—those with authority who maintain their power through socially accepted fictions. One such figure is Dr. Holmes, a character in the contemporeaneous Mrs. Dalloway (MD). His philosophy of health demonstrates that he approaches illness as Woolf positioned it earlier, as a matter of choice. In the novel, he proposes that “health is largely a matter in our own control” (MD 91). Yet, it is he who pushes Septimus over the edge both figuratively and literally, no doubt in part because he sees the sick person as doing nothing; “[w]ouldn’t it be better to do something instead of lying in bed?” he thinks (MD 92). Woolf directly addresses this interpretation of illness by exploring the spaces and information to which being ill gives access.

While lying down, those who are ill are reading, whether the object is a written text or their surroundings. Woolf specifically suggests that that those who are ill read poetry because they cannot abide the “long campaign[n]” required by prose (OBI 19). Woolf’s word choice continues the military theme identified earlier while also highlighting the connection between the act of reading and the country, or text, one traverses (via campaign’s etymological origin in campagne, or “country”). As they read these texts, they do not read in a “normal” way, from beginning to end. Instead, they read snippets “and let them open in the depths of the mind” (OBI 20). The process Woolf depicts here could take just as long as reading prose, but it allows a different kind of movement with a less prescriptive conclusion. In fact, it sounds much like the situation described by Myriam in which two people read the same text in different ways.

According to Woolf, those who are ill are free to pursue “other tastes” like the activities described above because they are assumed to have neither “responsibility” nor “reason” (OBI 20). Such assumed mental incapacity again aligns those who are ill with disabled individuals. Woolf suggests that these “tastes” also include sensations words produce, “their scent and [...] their flavor” (OBI 21). These individuals gain different appreciation for a sensation because of their physical orientation to it. The healthy primarily treat words as conveyors of meaning, but they gain “a mystic quality” for those who are ill through their access to less familiar linguistic properties (OBI 21). Being ill also familiarizes one with the fact that nature “in the end will conquer; heat will leave the world,” that all people will die (OBI 16). They have a different physical orientation, which gives them access to different knowledge.

In “On Being Ill,” states of illness appear strikingly similar to some disabilities in terms of what they afford. Woolf takes an approach familiar to disability studies by proposing that falling ill is seen as a moral and social failing, which removes one from the ranks of productive society. This perspective counteracts a common attitude in disability studies, where illness is completely divorced from disability. As Alison Kafer suggests in Feminist, Queer, Crip, this tendency emerges out of the social model of disability, which treats disability as a social issue requiring accommodation (in contrast to the medical model, which frames disability as an individual problem needing a cure). Those who adhere to this model often present illness as temporary, whereas disability is more permanent. This temporal relationship suggests that illness will pass, typically without significant effects on the sufferer, other than temporary discomfort. On the contrary, disability has a much longer duration, which suggests it significantly influences one’s identity.

This emphasis on duration as the determinant for influence on one’s identity and worldview operates according to an externally determined sense of time, which Woolf actively counters throughout her oeuvre. Curiously, time is a much more subdued force in On Being Ill than it is in others, such as Orlando. Yet, On Being Ill reveals an obvious point of contact between Woolf’s interest in temporality and contemporary discussions of "crip time" in which scholars like Kafer (27) engage. In fact, one of Kafer’s descriptions of crip time parallels Woolf’s treatment of time in this text. According to Kafer, crip time is not just an allotment of more time, but instead “a reorientoation to time” emphasizing its “flexibility” (27); “rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds” (27). As much Woolf scholarship has discussed, clocks are tools used to regulate and organize social behavior. “Bending the clock” in this case is akin to stopping on the street to look at the sky, refusing “time on the clock” in favor of “time in the mind,” as Orlando does.

Those who maintain firm distinctions between illness and disability often argue that disability only causes problems because of the way our environments (including society) are built, whereas illness would be a problem in any environment. In this essay, Woolf blurs the boundaries between these two categories. She presents being ill as a sometimes painful change of perspective, which gives people access to different aspects of the texts they read; however, these aspects and the way those who are ill access them are not valued by their society.

Woolf alludes to the sense of loss that those who are ill may feel as a result of the social attitude toward illness in the image with which she closes. It shows Lady Waterford “standing [at the window] to see the hearse depart” and leaving “the curtain […] all crushed together where she had grasped it in her agony” (OBI 28). Because of this image, the essay ends on a mark of unspoken loss and grief, one familiar in discussions of disability. Disabilities of different kinds are often viewed as a physical death sentence or as a social death through the need for supports not required by able-bodied individuals. It may appear a lighthearted treatment on the surface, but in this essay, Woolf grapples with complex social issues, which she accesses through the experience of being ill. However, accepting this loss—the dimmed light—and looking instead at the countries that are revealed has the potential to expand our perspectives. The same logic applies to revising the contemporary distinction imposed between illness and disability.

Claire Barber-Stetson
Marquette University

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Gone Sideways: Woolf’s Empathetic Sick Bed Travel

The perception of Virginia Woolf as a domestic writer has traditionally been conceived in gendered terms. Compared to works by her male contemporaries’ works such as Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness or E. M. Forster’s Passage to India, novels full of global movement and transnational engagements, Woolf’s fiction occurs largely in England (with the exception of her first novel, The Voyage Out) and Woolf’s travels were mostly limited to England and Western Europe. The depiction of traveling in novels like Conrad’s and Forster’s resonates with modernist literature’s investments in new modes of transportation, exploration, and global conflict. Investments most often associated with Woolf’s rootedness, however, were not constrained by gendered limitations such as a comparison suggests. The public performances of Woolf’s youth certainly do not paint the picture of a woman confined to domestic roles: she appeared at Roger Fry’s Post- impressionist Exhibition dressed as a “Gauguin girl” in a revealing costume and participated in the Dreadnought Hoax of 1910 in blackface to impersonate an Abyssinian prince aboard the Royal Navy’s flagship (Lee, Virginia Woolf 278-87). Since Woolf came to have both money and freedom, the two elements she also described as limiting women’s ability to pursue art, why did she travel less and less over time? Why did she so often choose settings of rooms, family houses, or villages for her narratives? Though it is tempting to attribute Woolf’s domestic perspective to the “disabling” effect of her “neuro/affective” condition, I argue that viewing Woolf’s aesthetic as one that travels through liminal space, experiential stages, and the imagination allows for a richer understanding of Woolf’s as a geomodernist aesthetic.

Calling for a “traveling theory of dwelling,” Giuliana Bruno asks us to “picture gender and space in a series of constant displacements, reviewing them and remapping them through the lens of more transient notions” (81). The notion of the “traveling domestic” puts together two terms that at first seem antithetical: “domestic” calls forth associations of stagnation, immobility, and bounded space (the “private sphere” so often assigned to women), while “traveling” resonates with narratives of exploration and adventure. Woolf’s essay On Being Ill (OBI), which Woolf wrote while on a treatment of bed rest in 1922, provides a different insight into her relationship with the domestic and travel. In order to theorize Woolf’s “travelling through dwelling,” it is necessary to remap not only her spatial relationship with gender, but also her relationship to disability. Speaking of the altered perspective of the ill from the sick bed, Woolf describes seeing the sky in a way one of the “army of the upright” never could: “the sky is discovered to be something so different [than an upright perspective allows] that really it is a little shocking” (OBI 13). Staring up into the sky, travel ceases to exist only geographically, but becomes reframed to privilege the cognitive, affective, and imaginative: instead of simply moving from point A to point B, travel becomes as much about one’s experience of the world as it does moving physically through it.

Woolf’s emphasis on this affective, imaginative experience of travel may be in part attributable to her relationship to able-bodiness: her symptoms and treatment rendered her literally un-able to leave the house, or write, or sometimes move. I suggest that a theory of “travelling in dwelling” for Woolf and her aesthetic must remap the relationship between able-bodiness and space as much as that of space and gender. In reinterpreting what it means to “voyage” in a disabled body, Woolf’s work radically rejects gendered constructions of private space as well as patriarchal authoritarian medical practices. From the sideways perspective of the sick bed, what Hermione Lee has termed “recumbent literature” (Introduction xxv), Woolf offers new possibilities for experiencing travel as affective, interpersonal, and experiential that is not dependent on the mobilization of the body.

Hugh Kenner explains in a 1984 article in the Chicago Review that Woolf is a “provincial writer” claiming that she is “not part of International Modernism; she is an English novelist of manners, writing village gossip from a village called Bloomsbury” (57). Recent scholarship repositions Bloomsbury and Virginia Woolf in particular as forces of global modernism, engaged in anti-imperial pursuits and international concerns. Scholars such as Kathy J. Phillips and Susan Stanford Friedman have illustrated that, though Woolf was the least travelled of the group, her fiction set in even the most domestic settings is concerned with the patriarchy of imperialism and the global exchanges of modernity. Representations of the global in Woolf’s oeuvre runs the gamut from imperial conquest—the head of the Moor swinging on a beam in Orlando’s manor house—to the colonialist’s return to the imperial metropole in Mrs. Dalloway, where Peter Walsh carries India with him as he strolls the streets of London. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel convincingly argue that a “geomodernist approach” necessitates a “geocultural consciousness—a sense of speaking from outside or inside or both at once, of orienting toward and away from the metropole, of existing somewhere between belonging and dispersion” (4).

Woolf’s fiction, geocultural consciousness is situated between images of the domestic, In Jacob’s Room, for example, Betty Flanders hears the guns of the First World War—a conflict of global empires jockeying for power—across the channel from her home and likens them to the domestic image of women beating carpets. And in Between the Acts, we find Lucy Swithin, a character associated with the domestic images of the family manor house, gazing into the manor’s lily pool and imagining each floating leaf as a nation, “naming leaves India, Africa, America. Islands of security, glossy and thick” (205). In a novel saturated with images of global imperial engagement at the brink of WWII, Lucy’s imagining of this quotidian image in terms of former and current British territories is rich in its implications for a theory of travelling in dwelling.

Woolf’s Betty Flanders and Lucy Swithin illustrate how a geomodernist domestic aesthetic is shaped by gendered constructions of space and travel. Both women interpret the global war within domestic spaces, for example, because their gendered roles limit their access to travel and formal education. Woolf’s chronic and recurrent illness informed her portrayal of such characters. Over five major episodes, Woolf suffered headaches, weight loss, an inability to eat, and long periods of high temperature and was also treated for an irregular heart rate, all symptoms that may have been exacerbated by their treatments. She cycled from deep depressions to periods of mania, and experienced visual and aural hallucinations and delusions. Biographer Hermione Lee importantly cautions against naming Woolf’s illness since doing so risks limiting her to a clinical category and attributing her writing to an exercise in therapy (Virginia Woolf 172). What is clear from Woolf’s letters is that she was often immobilized by both the symptoms and treatments, which included rest cures and avoidance of over-excitement and exercise. She also was not allowed to write except for single-page letters to family member (Virginia Woolf viii). The spatial dimensions of illness in this model—tangled in the gendered constructions of mental illness—construct a clear division between public and private spaces. How common it

1 I borrow Madelyn Detloff’s phrase of “neuro/affective atypicality” here to avoid the ad nauseam debate over the “proper” diagnosis or Woolf’s mental and physical condition, but I use “disability” later to suggest an association with “able-bodiness” and the connection between Woolf’s “neuro/affective” condition and the bodily limitations (both enforced and embodied) (“Woolf and Crip Theory” [“Crip"] 277).

2 For a nuanced and thorough overview of Woolf’s mental and physical condition, see Hermoine Lee, Virginia Woolf 171-196.

3 Complicating an interpretation of these symptoms are the range of potential drug side effects: veronal, choral, and postassium bromide (sedatives), as well as digitalis (used to treat irregular heart rate and notorious for the range of possible drug interactions including confusion, nausea, vomiting, and irregular heart rate) (Cheriyan).
is for illness to be constructed by the language of the domestic: bed rest, homebound, sickroom, going to a ‘home’ (as Virginia did twice). On Being Ill represents Woolf’s negotiation with her husband and the male doctors who controlled her movements and actions as part of a larger infantilizing of women in particular in medical treatments. This patriarchal medical discourse often had the effect of limiting her contact with the outside world, yet expanded her affective and imaginative travelling.

On Being Ill is particularly aimed at critiquing the valuation of the domestic and illness. It does not simply celebrate either, but shows how power and discourse shape those spaces. Janet Lyon has productively suggested Freud’s unheimlich—literally the un-home-like—is an element of the spatial constructions of disability: “The Woolfian unheimlich is […] the unbuffered, unanticipated appearance in public […] of what ‘certainly’ ought to have remained secret and private” (568). The uncanny quality of On Being Ill is its taking illness seriously as a literary subject and exposing how social and medical discourses concerning illness have sought to limit or conceal both the ill and their perspective from the sick bed.

Lyon goes on to address a 1915 entry in Woolf’s diary, recording an uncanny encounter on a towpath with “a long line of imbeciles. The first was a very tall young man, just queer enough to look twice at […] . It was perfectly horrible. They should certainly be killed” (qtd. in Lyon 551). Lyon notes that the sense of “shock” in Woolf’s reaction “must surely extend to her own tenuous mental sovereignty” (559). Although it is impossible to discern Woolf’s thinking from her diary entry—a private, fleeting thought? A revulsion to the mentally unfit, reflected in the eugenicist thinking of intellectuals she knew at the time?—this entry represents the limits of Woolf’s empathy, a refusal to bridge the divide to a group whose perceived abjection was perhaps too close to her own self image. Nonetheless, her meditation on her own reaction is significant. Madelyn Detloff describes this entry as Woolf recognizing her own precarious mental and physical state, a pattern that runs “toward recognition and justice for those excluded or made monstrous by the norm, and another in the troubling direction of the norm” (“Value” 60). In terms of her own, less visible (and thus marginally less stigmatized) disability status, Woolf nonetheless creates within the domestic space a sense of the unheimlich, an un-home-like state of dwelling. Whereas the sickroom had been conceived as a space of limitation and domesticity, Woolf sees it as a source of travel. Woolf’s diary entry self-reflectively highlights the limits of her intellectual and imaginative travel that causes a failure of empathy for the cognitively disabled. Nonetheless, through the act of critically examining this limitation, the same space creates new opportunities for empathy, which I explore below.

In an introduction to On Being Ill, Lee names Woolf’s style “recumbent literature” (xxv). Written in bed, the essay possesses, as Lee describes it, “a point of view derived from gazing up at the clouds and looking sideways on to the world” (xxv). What makes this sideways perspective especially deviant is its refusal to remain contained to the sickroom. Woolf explains upon

the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, …how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels. (OBI 3)

This traveling, not despite but because of disability, radically reframes the agency of the disabled body, refusing the terms of the mind as slave to the immobilized sick body. This sort of voyaging disrupts the mind/body dichotomy attributed to the ill—traveling is experienced as imagination, yes, but it is the body as connected to the mind through pain that travels through liminal states of fever, the highs and lows of mania and depression that creates a physical, embodied sensation of travel. In this voyage, Woolf radically rejects the strictures of psychiatric and psychoanalytic treatments of the time that were so often wrapped up in patriarchal, authoritarian, and moralistic views of mental illness. Although bound to the home, the sickroom, the bed, the mind places the body at the precipice of a cliff, poised to jump, as a result of this “monstrous” body, a fate to which Woolf alludes (OBI 18).

Woolf’s sideways perspective from the rest home or the sick bed serves to remap constructions of domestic space as limited, limiting, or bounded, by reconfiguring the production of gender and ability difference through public/private space. Speaking of this new view afforded by Woolf’s recumbent perspective, Detloff urges that we follow Woolf’s lead and allow her “messy archive” to inform our reading of Woolf’s disability: “We might regard it […] as a variation that caused her pain and distress but also allowed her to see the world differently[…] with a perspective that opens a more complex and compelling understanding of the world to her readers” (“Crip” 287). In this spirit, we might also regard Woolf’s disability as what allowed her to ‘see the world,’ quite literally, and to imbue her fiction with a rich sense of global awareness. Finally, I want to suggest that this reconfiguration of the domestic/global split also occurs in efforts toward, or rejections of, empathy. As opposed to true empathy, Woolf has stern words for sympathetic gestures: “About sympathy,” Woolf proclaims, “we can do without it” (OBI 11). She describes the typical response to illness: “[the invalid’s] own suffering serves but to wake memories in his friends’ minds of their influenza[s], their aches and pains […] and now cry […] for the divine relief of sympathy” (8-9). Woolf’s ironic mocking of sympathy lies in its domestic associations in which it becomes a duty of one’s gender as opposed to a gesture of true empathy. “Sympathy nowadays,” she says, “is dispensed chiefly by the laggards and failures, women for the most part” (OBI 10). As a writer deeply concerned with the (im)possibility of human connection, Woolf clearly objects to the patriarchal constrictions of the sick space as marginal and feminine, not the effort of comforting and connection. This vitriol towards the ineffective female sympathizers brings to mind the idiom of “tea and sympathy,” the comforting of the less fortunate over a cup of tea in one’s home, another domestic ritual that serves to gender private space as feminine.

By representing a sideways perspective, On Being Ill rejects the positioning of disability as something to be hidden, and instead offers readers insight into her experience. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have suggested that representing disability in literature invites connection with “that which is believed to be off the map of recognizable human experiences. Making comprehensible that which appears to be inherently unknowable situates narrative in the powerful position of mediator between two separate worlds” (5). The language here of mapping and “two separate worlds” echoes Woolf’s account: while the travelling is imaginative, both in empathetic connection and in the voyaging of the mind while immobilized, it is the whole of the mind and body in unity that experiences the voyage of moving between the worlds of knowable human experience and of the liminal spaces related to active illness.

Despite her physical immobilization, Woolf sought connection between “separate worlds” in her fiction as well as her work with the Hogarth Press, which operated from her home and served as a mode of global circulation for writers concerned with geopolitical change. Mulk Raj Anand remembers his time working for the press in the essay, “Tea and Empathy from Virginia Woolf.” In her drawing room, Woolf engages Anand in a discussion about androgyny in Hinduism. She is writing a novel called Orlando, she says, to suggest that “we are male-female-male, perhaps more female than male,” as the Hindu

4 Woolf suggestively asks, “Would one of [the churchgoers] dare to leap straight into Heaven off Beachy Head?,” seemingly placing them in contrast with the “recumbent” (18, 17).
beliefs they were discussing suggest (111). Woolf moves from her space of domesticity—the space of empathy—and Anand voyages in geographically and artistically from across the world (represented most vividly in his postscript to Untouchable; “Simla—SS Viceroy of India—Bloomsbury”). These moments of connection become the point of departure for Woolf’s geomodernist domestic aesthetic. Returning to the narrator’s reflection on her recumbent perspective of the sky in On Being III, she continues that, if one can see the sky in such a new light, “Perhaps then, if we look down at something very small and close and familiar, we shall find sympathy” (14). It is the false sympathy associated with gendered domesticity that Woolf rejects while she embraces a connection originating from a new perspective on the everyday: here, the domestic space occupied by the Press becomes a space of exploration that allowed Woolf to give a voice to writers from both underrepresented populations and those with controversial geopolitical perspectives.5

Through disability—both in the sense of using disability and reaching past it—Woolf claims the domestic as a space of imaginative voyaging, of mobilizing the mind despite the body’s immobilization, and in recognizing the body’s parallel movement through liminal spaces in illness. It is this sensibility, developed through efforts to understand her own incapacitating episodes early in her adult life, that influences Woolf’s larger sense of the global in the domestic, both in her fiction and in her configuration of her own domestic space as publisher and writer. To “only connect” in the words of Forster (133), necessitates for Woolf a sense of the geomodernist domestic: we find an imaginative and empathetic voyaging out, a traveling-in-dwelling, which nonetheless thus enters into modernist global circulations.

Elise Swinford
University of Massachusetts—Amherst

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Gassed: Virginia Woolf and Dentistry

“Consider how common illness is,” Woolf begins her essay On Being III, “how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of angels and harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist’s arm chair and confuse his ‘Rinse the mouth—rinse the mouth’ with the greeting of the Deity” (OBI 3). Curiously, Woolf chooses to start her essay on illness not with the discomfort and pain of actual dental surgery, but with the aftereffect of anesthesia, while in the same paragraph cavalierly referencing a “slight attack of influenza” only a few years after the “Spanish Flu” pandemic sickened a quarter of Britain’s population and killed 228,000, and which she herself contracted. “Influenza began on the Friday,” Woolf wrote on March 2, 1918, “I was kept in bed eight days” (Diary of Virginia Woolf 119). Woolf’s biggest complaint of her time in bed was that she could not write, “a whole current of life cut off” (119). The consequence of a “slight” infection may be imaginative amputation; any illness for Woolf could become a life-threatening risk.

On Being III was first published as an essay in January 1926, only five years after the Dental Act of 1921 required a dental degree from an accredited dental hospital or school to practice dentistry. A British Dental Association Museum history of dental health states that “by the end of the end of the nineteenth century dental health in Britain appears to be worse than at the beginning of that century” (BDA “Health Histories”). A survey of children, published in 1893, when Woolf was nine years old, and cited by the British Dental Association, reported that only 8% of children had sound teeth without decay, and that 32% had more than five defective teeth. While wealthier children could afford a dentist, “[T]hey weren’t assured of an excellent service. Many dentists were unqualified” (BDA). As an upper middle-class child living in London, Woolf would have benefited from proximity to established dental schools and nearby specialists, but dental care remained rudimentary. “The bristles of toothbrushes were made from hollow animal hairs which trapped germs […] the toothpaste included brick dust […] Scientific and medical knowledge was developing but wasn’t always accurate” (BDA).

Dentistry, depression, and disease are inextricably entwined in Virginia Woolf’s life. Between 1917 and 1918 Woolf contracted influenza several times, and “also saw the dentist seven or eight times, and lost three or four teeth, one severely abscessed” (Orr 91). On the recommendation of Sir Maurice Craig, the neurological specialist who suggested to Leonard and Virginia Woolf that they remain childless, at least one tooth was prophylactically pulled on the basis of focal infection theory, which claimed that bacteria trapped in dental tubules could result in other illnesses. Introduced in the early 1900s, focal infection theory was later championed in the 1920s by Dr. Weston A. Price who advocated tooth extraction—“the most traumatic dental procedure,” the American Association of Endodontists notes—for diseases of the heart, kidney, and nerves among many others. This discredited theory “resulted in a frightening era of tooth extraction both for treatment of systemic disease and as a prophylactic measure against future illness” (AAE Fact

5 A brief survey of the Hogarth Press’s catalogue gives a sense of global influences on and by Virginia and Leonard Woolf as publishers. A sampling of publications include Joseph Burtt’s The People of Ararat (1926); Charles Buxton’s The Colour Problem in Africa (1931); G. S. Dutt’s A Woman of India (1929); Sydney Haldane Olivier’s The Anatomy of African Misery (1927); William Plomer’s I Speak of Africa (1927); and Leonard Woolf’s Empire and Commerce in Africa (1925), Imperialism and Civilization (1928), and The Village in the Jungle (1931) (Hogarth Press Ephemera).
While Woolf sought to present tooth extraction as a jeu d’esprit in a comfortable place in the drawing room. 

you were afraid it wouldn’t be fresh” (31). Loose dentures take their place in Woolf’s open smile and delighted laughter caught in snapshots of the Garsington Manor garden parties she attended, where she was among friends, including T. S. Eliot, who wrote in The Waste Land, “You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set” (58).

Late in her life, Woolf wrote as comic a skit in Between the Acts as any performed by George Burns and Gracie Allen, mixing false teeth and fish with first cousin marriage, reminding the reader of the outrageous fancy for which Woolf was celebrated among those who knew her. Isa Oliver, Bartholomew Oliver, and Lucy Swithin are chatting before luncheon when Isa suddenly remembers that her dentist told her that savages wore false teeth (perhaps Woolf’s wicked pun on the “pigheaded” Dr. George Savage, who had treated her during her earlier mental illnesses). Whom do you go to? Mrs. Swithin asks. “The same old couple,” Isa answers, Savage, who had treated her during her earlier mental illnesses). Whom do you go to? Mrs. Swithin asks. “The same old couple,” Isa answers, “Batty and Bates in Sloane Street.”

“And Batty told you they had false teeth in the time of the Pharaohs,” Mrs. Swithin pondered.


Batty, she recalled, only talked about Royalty. Batty, she told Mrs. Swithin, had a patient a Princess.

“So he kept me waiting well over an hour. And you know, when one’s a child, how long that seems.”

“Marriages with cousins,” said Mrs. Swithin, “can’t be good for the teeth.”

Bart put his finger inside his mouth and projected the upper row outside his lips. They were false. Yet, he said, the Olivers hadn’t married cousins.” (30-31)

“How did we begin this talk,” Mrs. Swithin asks herself. “Fish [...] and you were afraid it wouldn’t be fresh” (31). Loose dentures take their comfortable place in the drawing room.

The author gratefully acknowledges Rachel Bairsto, Head of Museum Services, British Dental Association Museum, for permission to use the photograph of the museum’s reconstructed dental surgery of the early twentieth century.

While Woolf sought to present tooth extraction as a jeu d’esprit in On Being Ill and made a joke of dentures in Between the Acts, she offered a much darker picture of dentistry in her essay “Gas.” Written in 1929 between the journal version of On Being Ill and its final publication in book form, “Gas” presents a revision of her dental encounter that reverberates with the trauma of physical pain and psychological distress. The dentist whose voice in On Being Ill is confused with that of the Deity, now stands “very clean and impersonal in his long white coat,” telling one “not to cross one’s legs” (The Captain’s Deathbed (CDB) 219). The “waters of annihilation” into which Woolf dove so quickly are more ominously described, not only suggesting the metaphor of childbirth but also evoking the dissociative state related to sexual abuse. “One flounders without support, attended only by strange relics of old memories, elongated, stretched out [...]. We rush faster and faster and the whole world becomes spiral [...] pressing closer and closer until it seems by its pressure to force us through a central hole, very narrow through which it hurts us.” “Rinse the mouth,” the dentist orders as he did in the opening paragraph of On Being Ill, but in “Gas” Woolf adds a chilling detail: “Rinse the mouth,” while a trickle of warm blood runs from between the lips” (CDB 220-21).

When made by a male physician to a female patient, the command to not cross one’s legs will be heard, if only unconsciously, as a sexual one, which, in the context of administering anesthesia, may suggest sexual molestation, as the all-too-numerous reports of patient abuse remind us. In Woolf’s circumstance, such a command would stir up memories of childhood sexual trauma. Woolf’s description of her experience of anesthesia is evocative of her sexual abuse by her half-brother Gerald and the powerlessness, dissociation, and shame she felt in response to it: “[W]e plunger deeper and deeper away from the shore, we seem to be drawn on in the wake of some fast flying always disappearing black object.” The disappearing “black object” recalls the “horrible face—the face of an animal” which she associated with her abuse (Moments of Being 69). The “looking glass” that she describes in her memoir becomes in “Gas” “the curved glass at a fair [which] makes the body seem tapering and then bloated” (CDB 220). Dentistry and trauma are indeed inextricably linked.

“Such a very common experience,” Woolf claims of her extraordinary hallucinatory experience of anesthesia, “Everybody goes through it” (CDB 221). After her declaration, Woolf proceeds to examine the faces of those she observes in a third-class railway carriage, as she did in “An Unwritten Novel,” where the facticity of her subjects confounded her invention. What, she asks, accounts for the process that turns their faces from one of a three-year old “into that.” “It seems,” she writes, “as if the passing of sixty or seventy years had inflicted a terrible punishment on the smooth pink face [...]. Is it probably that all these people have been several times under gas?” (CDB 222). While the “several times” reflects the reality of dental care in Britain in the 1920s, when by the age of 13 over 60% of children had a decayed or missing lower molar, reflecting the reality of dental care in Britain in the 1920s, when by the age of 13 over 60% of children had a decayed or missing lower molar, the sweeping generalization of “all the men and women” may also point to Woolf’s awareness of the chemical gas attacks which ravaged the combatants of WWI, yet another traumatized population.

Such an attack was graphically described by Wilfred Owen in his poem, “Dulce et Decorum Est,” in language disturbingly like Woolf’s:

“Gas! Quick boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,”

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,

2 “Whether dream, or if it happened,” the truthfulness of Woolf’s account still requires emphasis: “I do not suppose that I have got at the truth; yet this is a simple incident; and it happened to me personally; and I have no motive for lying about it” (MOB 69).

3 While the long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse on overall adult health are well documented, specific research about its impact on dental care is less robust. A 2007 NIH study stated that “around 20% of female patients seeking dental care may have experienced childhood sexual abuse (CSA). Women exposed to CSA “exhibited several-long term effects of major psychological strain during dental treatment; of these “28% suffered from memories of their original abuse.”
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunders at me, guttering, choking, drowning. (13-16)

The similarity of imagery between the war poet and the novelist is remarkable. “With each breath,” Woolf wrote, “one draws in confusion, one draws in darkness, falling, scattering, like a cloud of falling soot flakes. And also one puts out to sea [...] one cleaves the hot waves of some new sulphurous dark existence in which one flounders without support” (CBD 220). Woolf is on the whole reticent about the physical suffering she sees around her in the aftermath of the war, but her description of the public’s reaction to John Singer Sargent’s panoramic painting Gassed in her essay “The Royal Academy” suggests a scathing critique of the society viewing it: “How they shrieked and gibbered! How they danced and sidled! Honor, patriotism, chastity, wealth, success, importance, position, patronage, power – their cries rang and echoed from all quarters [...] Anywhere, anywhere, out of this world” (The Essays of Virginia Woolf 3 93), she exclaims, fleeing the exhibition.

In a quieter and more charitable moment, Woolf mourns for the “other world” that vanished before her imagined companions in the third class carriage could grasp it: “And perhaps to forget it, to cover it over, they went to a public house, they went to Oxford Street and bought a hat” (CBD 222). Dentistry, disease, ether, abuse, denial and death—all the humanity afflicted by illness and exposed to a “moment of being” in their treatment, only a few will “look as if they had caught the thing that dashes through the water.”

David Eberly
Boston, MA

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War, Alienation, and the Concept of Parrēsia in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway

The suicide of Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf’s novel Mrs. Dalloway (MD) can be read as a dramatic sacrifice in order to convey his message to the world. Septimus’s difficulties with Dr. William Bradshaw, whose stratified mindset of domination and control leads to the impulse of war and suggests that Septimus can be read as Woolf’s metaphoric criticism of patriarchal Britain in the immediate years following the First World War. Septimus’s unheard message to the doctors and his shellshock are symptomatic of society’s ills and disrupt the normative operations of the larger public sphere. Septimus’s need to unburden himself of his undeliverable critique of military patriarchy functions as a criticism of war in Woolf’s novel and in Mrs. Dalloway’s society, but also leaves him feeling like “a young man who carries in him the greatest message in the world” (MD 91). Truth, for Septimus, represents an emancipatory act whose action unravels the conditions of power, unmasking and exposing the “supreme secret [that] must be told to the Cabinet” (MD 74) and existing power structures and their repressive policies. Although Septimus feels an absolute loss of clarity, the vagueness and confusion creeping into his consciousness is a direct reflection of Bradshaw’s intervention in the spreading of Septimus’s message.

In this sense, Septimus’s post-traumatic stress disorder reflects the Greek idea of parrēsia. Whereas medieval Christian theology interpreted parrēsia along the lines of a penitent, and therefore individual sinner, I locate Septimus as a scapegoat, representing society’s effects on the soldier and also the penitent confessing not just his own sins, but Britain’s sins. Read in this context, the delusional and hallucinatory episodes experienced by Septimus are symptoms of a psychological malady as well as, and perhaps even more powerful as, criticisms of the guilt of patriarchal systems whose dominance and repression marginalize those who do not fall in line with the cultural logic of war. Mrs. Dalloway suggests madness is symptomatic of society and the social controls being imprinted on the young men entering war. Woolf traces the system whereby men are trained for combat and to fulfill the social roles through which they exemplify Bradshaw’s proportion. Proportion, or rather “divine proportion, Sir William’s goddess” (MD 109), coerces individuals into the accepted parameters of the social body. Michel Foucault in his work on the mental health industry, A History of Madness, comments that psychiatry is a social science “obscure even to those who practise it” (508) and spends much of his expansive research into the history of psychiatry criticizing the imperialist mode in which it operates. Foucault is skeptical of the doctor-patient relationship, particularly in regards to the early nineteenth century’s use of asylums to institutionalize individuals, which involves an inclination towards a master/servant power dynamic:

Patients increasingly accepted this abandonment in the hands of a doctor who was both divine and satanic, or in any case beyond human measure; the more they were alienated in the doctor, accepting entirely in advance all his prestige, and submitting immediately to a will that they felt to be magical and to a form of science which seemed endowed with prescience and divination, the more such
patients became the ideal and perfect correlate to the powers that were projected onto the physician, pure objects with no resistance other than inertia. (History 509)

This is a description easily applied to Bradshaw and Septimus, who perhaps feels that suicide was the only response to such powerlessness before a psychiatrist. While Septimus is initially reluctant to accept his treatment, the power structure behind Bradshaw will eventually impress itself upon the patients who have been marginalized by Britain in the years following the First World War. At one point in Bradshaw’s treatment Septimus seemingly acquiesces to his authority and therefore psychiatry’s imposed categories:

   But if he confessed? If he communicated? Would they let him off then, Holmes and Bradshaw?”

   “I-I-” he stammered.

   But what was his crime? He could not remember it. (MD 107)

The power structures inherent to psychiatry and its imposed categories of rationality are of such oppressive force that resistance, particularly for an individual like Septimus who feels as if he is, “suffering for ever, the scapegoat, the eternal sufferer” (MD 27), will be broken down and incorporated into the governing social body.

As Foucault observes, “in confinement the sensibility to a madness was not autonomous, but linked to a moral order where it appeared as merely a disturbance” (History 133). Since Septimus’s attempt to tell his truth will be construed as disturbance to the moral order, that is, lacking proportion, Septimus only has recourse to silence as a symbolic act, and even this symbolic act is contained by medical discourse as another such disturbance. Medicine, in this regard, is not a neutral or objective science concerned with an effective treatment of patients, but instead is emblematic of a political agenda rather than a process of communication and recovery. Septimus recognizes the positive aspect of therapy and mental health in his personal reflection “communication is health; communication is happiness” (MD 102). Yet Bradshaw and Holmes, practitioners characterized by Mrs. Dalloway as “men who made ten thousand a year and talked of proportion; who differed in their verdicts (for Holmes said one thing, Bradshaw another). Yet judges they were” (MD 162), obstruct Septimus’s access to the parrhēsiastic function of confidant. In essence the culpability of the larger society can be located in Septimus’s textual function, as he represents the dangers of patriarchal Britain and its repressive structures.

Bradshaw enforces an imbalance between patient and doctor, generating, by extension, Septimus’s feeling that “human nature is on you. Holmes is on you” (MD 101) which limits his ability to transcend Bradshaw’s and Holmes’s judgement and silencing treatment. Indeed it is only through a connection with Rezia that Septimus obtains a positive sense of what society could be in contrast to the return of the specter of trench warfare is paralleled in Bradshaw’s (MD 26). In failing this endeavor Septimus feels it imperative to resort to brute physical action, or care of the self, that Foucault refers to as being the locus of the self’s transformation into a greater whole: “The soul seeks a touchstone that will enable it to know the state of its health, that is to say the truth of its opinions, then it needs someone, another soul characterized by episteme (knowledge), eunoia (benevolence), and parrēsia” (“Parrēsia” 229). Bradshaw, by extension the medical profession, does not ignore shell shock as a serious condition, but his treatment is flawed by considering it a curable and temporary illness. While Holmes and Bradshaw differ in their respective treatment of Septimus (Holmes recommends a trip to the country to alleviate Septimus’s symptoms, Bradshaw is more severe in his treatment), they both signify a continuation of hegemonic control.

It is Clarissa Dalloway who, much like Septimus, sees through the veneer of Bradshaw and comes away with the perception that he is “obscurely evil” (MD 202). Bradshaw’s manipulation is such that he appears to be an impartial professional, an objective judge of character interested in the welfare of his patients to everyone with the exception of Mrs. Dalloway. Mrs. Dalloway blames Bradshaw’s vanity, his depersonalized and profit focused approach to medicine, and his elevated position above Septimus as a master-medical professional and gatekeeper to categories of sanity and insanity. More significantly Bradshaw is endemic of the medical profession as a whole, cordonning Septimus off from society. Parrēsia, as Foucault states, “is therefore a freedom, a freedom that the sovereign has to grant” (“Parrēsia” 231), a capacity which Bradshaw and Holmes deny Septimus. Bradshaw’s depersonalized approach to treatment is analogous to the dehumanization of the war and how positions of authority have a vested interest in maintaining tyrannical methods of social conformity. Bradshaw’s primary impetus for practicing is distinctly political with the main objective to “toil to raise funds, propagate reforms, initiate institutions!” (MD 11). Medical discourse is intimately connected to patriarchal authority. With no particular interest in the psychological betterment of Septimus’s mental state, nor any consideration for Septimus’s point of view, Bradshaw’s only interest is in the securing of his own singular ideology and therefore his social position of prosperity. Foucault, in Discipline and Punish, refers to a “policy of coercions that act upon the body” (138) that treats the human body as “entering the machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down, rearranges it” (Discipline 138). This political mechanization of the corporeal, with Septimus’s enforced confinement being the extension of discipline as a control measure and expression of patriarchal authority, emphasizes what Foucault describes as a discipline that “produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile bodies’” (Discipline 138). Having gone through army training and now being subjected to the discipline of Bradshaw’s proportion, Septimus is continually cajoled into normative modes of operation and that imposed categories which are disrupted by his eventual suicide.

Septimus, feeling trapped by the main ideological projects of war and patriarchy, conceives of suicide as the only recourse to convey his message. Upon hearing the arrival of Dr. Holmes, “the brute with red nostrils” (MD 161), Septimus feels the oppressive framework of professionalism and totalizing systems bearing down on him. Suicide then is an emblematic gesture of defiance as well as a progression of the despair Septimus feels over humanity resembling “lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities” (MD 98). Septimus’s compulsion to communicate and express his message is evident in “the table drawer [that] was full of these writings; about war; about Shakespeare; about great discoveries; how there is no death” (MD 153). However, since these will only be seen by Rezia, Septimus must resort to drastic efforts to “change the world. Make it known” (MD 26). In failing this endeavor Septimus feels it imperative to resort to brute physical action to communicate with the body what he could not in writing, having “called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth” (MD 74).

The failure of Holmes and Bradshaw to properly diagnose or treat Septimus (a failure that Rezia places squarely on the shoulders of the medical profession: “Never, never had [she] felt such agony in her life! She had asked for help and been deserted!” [MD 108]) is emblematic of society’s denial of the reality of the First World War. The brutality of trench warfare is paralleled in Mrs. Dalloway by an alienation from uncomfortable realities and a denial about the conditions of war. Septimus contemplates this denial as he watches Rezia assemble a hat:
For the truth is (let her ignore it) that humans have neither kindness, nor faith, nor charity beyond what serves to increase the pleasure of the moment. They hunt in packs. Their packs scour the desert and vanish into the wilderness. They desert the fallen. They are plastered over with grimaces. (MD 98)

Symbolically, Septimus’s mental illness is in essence an incommunicable message and not just the delusions ascribed to him by Holmes and Bradshaw. Septimus’s liminal position in the novel exemplifies the need for a dramatic sacrifice in order to convey his message to the world.

Septimus in Mrs. Dalloway is a brutally honest look at the effects of combat on a soldier returning home from the battlefield and the ways post-traumatic stress disorder was perceived by immediate post-war Britain. Mrs. Dalloway traces the system whereby men are not only trained for war but for social roles that force them into a converted position through which they exemplify Bradshaw’s idea of proportion. Septimus, having returned home physically unharmed yet still deeply wounded, disrupts through his presence the existing power structures that lead to war. The hallucinatory episodes in fact are a critical engagement with the sins of society, and I would postulate that Septimus’s suicide is a parrēsia struggling against the repressive doctrines of the social body, attempting to subvert the dominant ideology while within that dominant ideology’s discourse. Septimus’s liminality and his urgent but incommunicable message illuminates a reluctance in British society to acknowledge a complicit role in the deaths of many young men. Bradshaw, according to the novel, “not only prospered himself but made England prosper, sealed her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion” (MD 109). Bradshaw has positioned himself at the vertex of rationality and categorization, determining the validity of his patients’ truths thereby restricting their capacity for confession outside the parameters he has established, including suicide. However, Mrs. Dalloway subverts traditional modes of perception (namely that Septimus’s suicide is the desperate act of someone suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder) by having Clarissa, the character most removed from Septimus but to the reader the novel’s focal point, recognize and find empathy with Septimus’s final actions. Clarissa, and by extension the reader, locate an inevitable truth about war and its effects on the human psyche.

Douglas Rasmussen
University of Saskatchewan

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Indifference over Sympathy: Transcendental Communication in Virginia Woolf’s On Being Ill and Mrs. Dalloway

Soon after Virginia Woolf fell down in a faint at a party in 1925, she was confined to bed, which lasted for months with “all writing forbidden” (Letters [L] 3 217). The days in the sickroom were full of distress—a state, however, not only imposed by illness itself, but also the undulations of the mind as an inevitable corollary. As the body constantly intervenes throughout the day, “[a] great part of every day is not lived consciously” (Moments of Being [MOB] 70)—but in a state of “non-being” (70), as Woolf would later describe in her memoir. On Being Ill was born out of her contemplation during that period, which unfolds as a stream of dream-like thoughts, covering not only illness, but language, literature, the cinema, human nature, and life as a whole.

This article examines Woolf’s representation of sympathy and communication in On Being Ill and how the theories are illustrated in her novel Mrs. Dalloway, particularly by the two protagonists Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith. In the essay, Woolf emphasizes the conundrum of sympathy which requires communication but is impossible to communicate. Likewise, in the novel, it is the failure to communicate that leads to Septimus’s suicide. Ironically, Clarissa interprets his suicide not as an escape, but “an attempt to communicate” (Mrs. Dalloway [MD] 137). This ultimate attempt succeeds, insofar as his intention is grasped by Clarissa. The transcendental communication (Clarissa and Septimus never meet each other) also serves as a resolution for both protagonists in the novel. What links them close together, as I will argue in this article, resides primarily in the natural world that transcends sympathy as an inter-subjective bond. The idea is meanwhile echoed in the illness essay, in which Woolf similarly addresses the indifference of nature as condolence.

Woolf’s essay argues that illness has not been adequately represented because of the inexpressibility of suffering. The inner experience of the invalid, which is purely subjective, often goes beyond the reach of language. Because the experience is so subjective, whatever the invalid conveys through language only “serves but to wake memories in his friends’ minds” (On Being Ill [OBI] 8) of their previous experience. Alphonse Daudet’s study of pain echoes Woolf, arguing that words are doomed to fail in describing what pain really feels like, as “[t]hey refer only to memory, and are either powerless or untruthful” (15). Daudet further observes that “[p]ain is always new to the sufferer, but loses its originality for those around him” (19). In this vein, the inadequacy of language also evokes Jacques Lacan’s concept of the signifier, which itself “has no meaning, only refers to another signifier of the signifying chain” (Glowinski, Marks, and Murphy 200). What the invalid really experiences is thus inexpressible/untransferable, for the moment it enters the symbolic register of language, it gets distorted and thus rendered void. Therefore, “sympathy we cannot have” (OBI 7), since, without the shared experience or mutual knowledge it is predicated upon, the so-called sympathy is no more than a masquerade, behind which nothing exists.

The problem with language in conveying inner experience also links the invalid with Septimus, the shell-shocked WWI veteran who struggles in vain for communication. Like the invalid whose inner experience exceeds or even resists language, Septimus suffers in finding a way to communicate because his experience threatens the established social order. Oscillating between his imaginary world and the real world, seeing what other people could not see, Septimus repeatedly claims that he knows the truth. However, society rejects his attempt to communicate by labeling him as mentally ill. His words are thus divested of power as they are seen as a sign of his madness or insanity. Whereas Dr. Bradshaw
preaches “proportion” and uses medical discourse to reify his social power, Septimus argues that “communication is health; communication is happiness” (MD 71).

Here, it is noteworthy that in this description of his mutterings, Woolf echoes her earlier essay “Montaigne”, in which she writes, “[c]ommunication is health; communication is truth; communication is happiness” (The Common Reader [CR] 64-65). What Woolf perceives in Montaigne is his endeavor to “communicate his soul” (64). Nevertheless, this is by no means easy, for “[t]his soul, or life within us, by no means agrees with the life outside us” (59). For Septimus, “beyond the difficulty of communicating oneself, there is the supreme difficulty of being oneself” (CR 59) because of his social alienation. Although his suicide has been read as an escape (see Brower 200-01; Henke 126; and Thomas 53-54), Septimus’s act can be understood as his defiant assertion against social conventions, or as Clarissa comprehends it: “Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death” (MD 137).

Most of society fails to grasp the meaning of Septimus’s suicide. Like Dr. Bradshaw and other party guests, they regard his death as no more than “a very sad case” (MD 136), a conventional tragedy of a traumatized patient. Nevertheless, Septimus’s act seems to have been sympathetically understood by Clarissa. But how is that possible since they never encountered each other? Here, Clarissa’s “transcendental theory” described earlier in the text seems to provide the explanation:

since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death. (MD 114)

It is through this kind of transcendental communication that the “unseen part” of Septimus survives and haunts Clarissa. His exact message is left unclear, but despite its failure to translate into the symbolic except as absence, it does function to evoke Clarissa’s meditation upon life and death, or more exactly, reflection upon her own life through Septimus’s death. However, “she did not pity him” (MD 138)—she could not have shared his experience—but “[s]he felt somehow very like him” (MD 138), for it is Septimus who initiates her fantasy that is self-reflective in nature, and it is in this fantasy that she recovers an “unseen part” of herself that has long eluded her. If Septimus was devoid of a life outside his inner self, what Clarissa has long neglected, in contrast, is the inner life that is lost “in the processing of living” (MD 138). In other words, her sense of identity is largely built upon social discourse, or the symbolic order, without which she “must have perished” (MD 137). Clarissa thus has “an awful fear” (MD 137) in living this life to the end and feels glad that Septimus has killed himself, for she has been living under a mask. Like those so-called sympathizers whose “genial pretense must be kept up and the effort renewed—to communicate, to civilise, to share” (OBI 12), Clarissa has been wearing the mask to maintain the make-believe.

Although the novel’s ending emphasizes the importance of sympathy in privileging Clarissa’s understanding, in “On Being Ill,” Woolf argues, “[a]lways to have sympathy, always to be accompanied, always to be understood would be intolerable” (12). What makes sympathy problematic is in fact the lack of genuine sympathy, as Woolf further observes, “[s]ympathy nowadays is dispensed chiefly by the laggards and failures, women for the most part […] who, having dropped out of the race, have time to spend upon fantastic and unprofitable excursions”.

1 For an account of the similarities between “Montaigne” and On Being Ill with regard to illness, see Carl Klaus and Lucio Ruotolo.

2 I’m indebted to Wyatt Bonikowski, who points this out in his study on shell shock and modernist writings.

(10). In associating sympathy with people of inferior social status, Woolf positions genuine sympathy, which is largely free from social interventions, against the goal of civilization. By imposing social orders upon the public, civilization renders sympathy impossible and makes it merely a masquerade.

It is this masquerade of sympathy that makes life intolerable for Septimus. When Dr. Holmes prescribes that Septimus should be separated from Rezia, he says “[i]t was a question of law” (MD 73). This adherence to law, like Dr. Bradshaw’s preaching of “proportion” (MD 75-77), only functions to reinforce his own social authority, and hence to maintain the established social order. Septimus recognizes their masquerade, as Woolf describes the character in her preliminary notes for the novel, “[h]e [Septimus] must somehow see through human nature—see its hypocrisy, & insincerity, its power to recover from every wound, incapable of taking any final impression” (qtd. in Zwerdling 131). Human nature in this sense offers no comforts to Septimus and eventually condemns him to death. Instead, it is in the natural world that Septimus finds moments of consolation. As he looks up into the London sky, he is touched by its exquisite beauty, and when he closes his eyes, he further imagines the tree leaves as “connected by millions of fibres with his body” (MD 19). Septimus’s sense of connection with the natural world, however, does not reach Clarissa until after his suicide. As Clarissa stands in front the window contemplating his death—or her own life—she also feels the beauty of the sky and renews her perception of the outside world. “He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun.” (MD 138) Thus the whole view appears completely new to Clarissa, as does the “unseen part” of her life she has newly discovered.

Here, it is interesting to note Woolf’s description of the sky as Clarissa sees it (which appeared in her earlier draft, but was deleted in the later version)—“the remarkable & indifferent nature of the familiar sight” (The Hours 397). The “indifferent nature” not only defines the fundamental essence of their transcendental communication, but also points to an alternative to the unattainable sympathy in On Being Ill:

Wonderful to relate, poets have found religion in nature; people live in the country to learn virtue from plants. It is in their indifference that they are comforting. That snowfield of the mind, where man has not trodden, is visited by the cloud, kissed by the falling petal[,] (15-16)

The indifference thus transcends a sympathy mired in the existing symbolic and instead goes beyond human relations. Unlike the sympathy whose deceptive nature renders it a mask between human beings, which “Nature is at no pains to conceal” (OBI 16). Indifferent coexistence which resides with nature thus offers a form of communication that is not circumscribed by given social forms. As invalids, Septimus and Clarissa (who has had influenza) share the privilege to “look at the sky for any length of time,” and it is in the very way that the invalid discovers what “has been going on” (OBI 13) in the sky that Clarissa discovers her inner life. In this vein, we might as well say that sympathy exists, but only emerges from the encounter with nature.

In a way, Septimus does not have to die. “He did not want to die. Life was good. [...] Only human beings—what did they want?” (MD 111). Even at the very last moment before Septimus leaps to his death, he still shows a desire to know others and to communicate—a desire, if fulfilled, would have saved him from committing suicide. But seeing no hope in this ultimate quest, Septimus resorts to death as his final attempt to communicate. However, Clarissa “felt glad that he had done it” (MD 138), for he “plunged holding his treasure” (MD 137), a treasure he preserved through his death: “A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved” (MD 137).

3 For more on the parallels between On Being Ill and Mrs. Dalloway, see Jane Fisher.
While this “thing” might be difficult to pin down, Clarissa recognizes its essential role in unveiling the masquerade imposed by social norms. The treasure thus points to something that underlies genuine sympathy and communication. By recovering this treasure as an “unseen part” of Septimus, Clarissa gains a new way in viewing and perceiving the outside world. It is with this renewed vision and perception that Clarissa finds it fascinating to watch the old lady in the opposite room and feels somehow attached to her. The transcendental connection, as Wyatt Bonikowski sees it, “suggests the possibility of a new relation […] one not subject to the cultural and social requirements that Septimus finds repulsive and that many of the novel’s characters, including Clarissa, find unfulfilling” (167-68). Nevertheless, Clarissa has to return to the party—to her own life, but she returns differently, for she has regained her treasure in life.

Eileen Yu Xiaoxi
University of Otago

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Flush, the Sickroom, and the Heroine

The 1933 novel Flush by Virginia Woolf is a compelling biography told from the point of view of a dog. It encompasses the life of its eponymous character and her human, the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The novel has had, until recently, relatively little significant literary criticism, particularly through the perspective of disability studies. Flush presents a compelling narrative of disability, especially for the time it was published, as twentieth-century texts that include characters with disabilities who are accurately and respectfully portrayed are generally rare. Disability is typically “Othered,” but in the case of Flush, it is central to the plot. Nonetheless, critics typically mention that Barrett is an invalid but few investigate further, even though the story is an exception to disability tropes since Barrett’s disability is portrayed in a realistic and poignant light by Woolf. Still, it should be noted that Barrett’s disability is never specified in the novel, perhaps because the real Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s disability was unknown at the time (Buchanan 480). Flush’s perspective did not have medical discourse but is meaningful because women and animals are marginalized groups within the patriarchy. Thus, from Flush’s point of view, the reader can see that Barrett’s disability is exacerbated by the patriarchal context of Wimpole Street. This depiction is significant because, as Ruth Hubbard has noted, people with disabilities have often stressed that it is “far easier to cope with the physical aspects of a disability than with the discrimination and oppression they encounter because of it” (107). With Flush, Woolf is able to highlight this fact, portraying Barrett’s disability insightfully.

The Sickroom

Miriam Bailin describes the familiar setting of the sickroom in The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction, serving, at their most typical, as a kind of forcing ground of the self—a conventional rite of passage issuing in personal, moral, or social recuperation. The scenes are precipitated by or fortuitously linked to moments of crisis during which the sufferers […] have become separated from the social roles and norms by which they previously defined themselves. (5)

In Flush, Barrett’s disability is presented in a similar context. However, the narrative deviates from the classic Victorian trope of the sickroom. For instance, Barrett’s awareness that she is a writer provides great comfort, even though it may be considered a source of crisis because it was a profession not encouraged for women at the time. Nonetheless, the stimulation of writing keeps her as grounded and focused as possible, although it sometimes overwhelms her. For example, Flush would observe Barrett writing for hours “and her eyes would suddenly fill with tears” (Flush [F] 44-5). Susannah B. Mintz has noted that the erasure of women writers with disabilities is significant to writing, for “disability has tended to be stigmatized as a sign of failure and inadequacy, or ignored altogether as a meaningful component of identity” (69). This is because the concept of disability, as evidenced by the sickroom, is dangerous to society, despite being merely a social construct (Siebers 737). Thus, writing becomes a mode of representation in the sickroom, where Barrett is able to not only take back but to define the disabled body. In her examination of the Victorian sickroom, Bailin also claims that “so desirable are the conditions within the sickroom walls that characters are wont to express a desire to be or to remain sick in order to have access to its benefits” (6). It must be noted that Bailin has no intention of trivializing the hardships of disability, but instead means to
highlight the comforts of the sickroom. If this is true for certain stories, then it demonstrates how portrayals of disability are consistently faulty and problematic in suggesting that sickness is a choice, that people with disabilities are lazy. Woolf presents a different narrative where Barrett is able to manipulate the sickroom to her advantage; it becomes a safe haven for writing and subverting the patriarchy, which leads to her eventual escape. In fact, Buchanan has pointed out that biographer Margaret Foster alleged that the real Barrett Browning would “‘escape into illness’ [because it] was her way of dealing with the frustration of being an intelligent woman in Victorian England, or a reaction to the exceptional sternness of her widowed, religiously strict father” (480). Regardless, Woolf posits that the sickroom is nonetheless horrendous, despite its apparent protections, by presenting it through the perspective of Flush, who notes that the room is dark, haunting, and akin to a mausoleum, especially due to its smell. By likening Barrett’s sickroom to a tomb, Woolf deviates from traditional perspectives of the sickroom which construct it as a place of comfort—instead it is a place of horror and abjection, and it is especially evident as Flush comes face-to-face with Barrett for the first time and sees that “hers was the pale worn face of an invalid, cut off from air, light, freedom” (F 31).

Barrett rarely goes out, and when she is allowed to go out it is only in favorable weather, and she must be “veiled and muffled” (F 36). Clothing extends the restrictions of the patriarchal house. Although she may be covered in order to be protected from the weather, the clothes also conspire to make the disability mysterious and Other. This impulse to isolate and conceal has both a public and private aspect; Hubbard has noted that, “people shun persons who have disabilities and isolate them so they will not have to see them” (107). Flush shows that even when Barrett does receive guests occasionally, she cloaks her illness: “The bed would be carefully disguised as a sofa. The armchair would be drawn up beside it; Barrett herself would be wrapped becomingly in Indian shawls; the toilet things would be scrupulously hidden” (F 48). Having internalized social expectations, Barrett must veil her state of vulnerability. Flush shows how the Victorian sickroom functioned as a kind of stage in which the ill and well perform their identities. In company, Barrett becomes an actress—she “laughed, expostulated, exclaimed, sighed too, and laughed again,” but she would sink “back very white, very tired on her pillows” once her visitors left (F 49-50).

When fall approaches, Barrett must settle “down to a life of complete seclusion in her bedroom” (F 40). The language used by the narrator to describe Barrett’s time in the room again alludes to incarceration, as “she could not go out. She was chained to the sofa” (F 43). The environment becomes a cage, inducing Barrett’s depression, which causes her to lose her appetite. Flush ends up eating her food on her behalf. Her lack of appetite is construed as exhaustion, but the manner in which Woolf presents it indicates Flush had been eating Barrett’s food on her behalf for quite some time. Thus, her lack of appetite could be considered a side effect of her disability. Perhaps, in fact, her refusal to eat is a way to establish some control of her own, for her disability renders her unequal and thus at the machinations of others, similar to Woolf’s history with anorexia nervosa, which coincided with her menstruation and her half-brother’s assault (Showalter 268-69). As Barrett writes to Mr. Horne, “And then came the failure in my health […] and then the enforced exile to Torquay […] which gave a nightmare to my life for ever, and robbed it of more than I can speak of here” (F 45). Her refusal to eat, however, only serves to prolong her situation as that of a “bird in its cage” (F 57). She rarely leaves the family home and when she does, it is only for a short time and with assistance.

**The Heroine**

Through the rigid cultural norms of the abled, Barrett is supposed to remain in the abjection of the sickroom. However, she becomes a champion of sexual and romantic agency when *Flush* progresses beyond the Victorian sickroom through the love story with Mr. Browning, which is based on writing and shared intellectual interests. This begs the question, is Woolf trivializing Barrett’s disability? Did she simply need someone to love her so that she would be “fixed”? What is curious is that Barrett’s lack of appetite does not afflict her any longer; she begins eating again. However, as aforementioned, people with disabilities have noted that it is harder to cope with culture and society’s reaction to their disabilities than with the actual disability. If the reader considers this perspective, then Barrett’s sudden robust health can be contextualized. Mr. Browning does strengthen Barrett, but he is not necessarily her savior. While he certainly has some influence on her transformation and liberation, ultimately she comes into her own by realizing her worth, particularly through the act of writing. She had been working towards her health slowly but surely before Mr. Browning came along. Moreover, women with disabilities have been institutionally denied romantic and sexual agency, as Abby Wilkerson has noted, having been constructed as damaged and defective by culture and society. For Barrett, to be wanted and truly seen by Mr. Browning is a powerful catalyst. Nevertheless, it is only one of various factors, including writing, her maid Wilson, and Flush himself. Flush, however, perhaps impacts Barrett’s life more than Mr. Browning, as Flush’s kidnapping shows. Is it merely Flush’s point of view that explains his centrality to her health? There is extensive evidence of dogs serving as therapy for people with disabilities, since they are a calming and grounding influence. Moreover, Flush may be considered to be family in a way that does not replicate the patriarchal house, whereas the marriage to Mr. Browning could. Thus, Barrett’s decision to stand up to her family and the act of speaking back to them and even to Mr. Browning when Flush is kidnapped is, in fact, radical and dangerous for her. By attempting to save Flush, she risks her life and relegation to the category of the ‘ill.’ Nonetheless, Barrett remains calm and reasonable in the face of this conflict, continuously practical and cautious about the situation, thereby upsetting the social construction that people with disabilities are incompetent, uneducated, and unable to make sound judgments. Flush is a central force that brings Barrett to the forefront, demanding to be seen and heard.

After being married for some time and living in Italy, Barrett finds out she is pregnant. For her, having a child is an act of healing, centering, and autonomy. This is seen when Flush examines how the former Miss Barrett (now Mrs. Barrett Browning) “had become two people” (F 134). Consequently, motherhood is an empowering experience for Barrett because exile from England and Flush’s perspective means her choices are not restricted nor questioned within a Victorian or misogynist frame. In Casa Guidi, Barrett Browning’s relationships with Flush, her maid Wilson, and Mr. Browning have allowed her to explore what it means to be a woman and not an object, to be a mother, and to be a writer. Ultimately, *Flush* presents a narrative that rejects the gendered tropes of disability and the woman writer.

**Laia Colón Vale**  
*University of Puerto Rico—Rio Piedras*

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1 For a review of literature on this subject, see Connor and Miller 20-26.


““The borderland between life and death”: The Spatial Polities of Illness in The Years

Virginia Woolf’s writing has long been recognized as preoccupied with the politics and experience of illness, and several of her works are read as exemplary of illness narratives and autopgraphy. In Mrs. Dalloway and On Being Ill, Woolf’s representation of illness is both ambivalent and consolatory: while the non-rational experiences of the invalid are necessarily restrictive, they also enable epiphanic vision. However, there is a noticeable shift in Woolf’s late writing in the representation of illness. The perceptive and visionary consolations of illness hopefully proffered in the earlier fiction are noticeably absent in The Years (1937), in which Woolf offers a confronting picture of the ill and infirm living like “cripples in a cave” (The Years [Y] 282). Woolf’s representation of illness has mutated: what tentative solace illness once offered is, by the end of the thirties, impossible. In The Years women are confined—threatened and threatening sources of bodily, political and sexual corruption. This pessimistic development parallels a broader literary shift in the nineteen thirties, in which the visionary possibilities promised by high modernism mutate into the grimy and sordid texts of late modernism.

I. The Consolations of Illness

Woolf’s interest in illness in Mrs. Dalloway and her 1926 essay On Being Ill is well known. Mrs. Dalloway, the experience of the sick woman, “beyond reason or logic,” is sympathetically contrasted with the coldly rational approach of Holmes and Bradshaw (Utell 6). Likewise, On Being Ill (OBI), privileges the non-rational qualities of illness, which enhance the invalid’s sensory perception: “[i]n illness words seem to possess a mystic quality. […] If at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having come to us sensually first” (OBI 108).

During the Victorian period, illness was viewed as an opportunity for solitude, privacy, and freedom. Describing the confinement of tuberculosis sufferers and the insane alike, Sontag claims that in illness the sick find “a duplicate world with special rules […] a kind of exile” (36). Elaine Showalter influentially argues that, for many Victorian women, “[s]ickness present[ed] a tempting escape from the contingency of the feminine role; it offer[ed] a respectable reason to be alone, and real, if perverse, opportunities for self-development” (Female 64). This doubled world, whether escape or exile, thus allows withdrawal into privacy even as it necessarily curtails material or public experience.

Jane Elizabeth Fisher has marked the tendency for women’s narratives of the 1918 influenza pandemic to emphasize its constructive consequences: women become “courageous, reflective, and future-oriented” through the experience of illness, gaining insight – and the will to act upon it (36). While Woolf’s representation of illness is by no means unambiguously celebratory, she nevertheless offers in this earlier writing a circumscribed consolation that echoes such representations of illness. For example, in On Being Ill, illness is “the great confessional” (104), severing the subject from the “cautious respectability” of ideal Victorian health and thus enabling a more honest communication (104). This is borne out in Mrs. Dalloway, Fisher argues, in Clarissa’s enhanced capacity for vision (Mrs Dalloway [MD] 73). Likewise, Septimus’s mental illness – which binds him narratively to Clarissa – is marked as mystic. This suggests that Woolf shared, in the nineteen twenties, what Susan Sontag diagnoses as a pathologically “romantic view […] that illness exacerbates consciousness” (36-37) – that is, aggravates or irritates the conscious mind into a “paroxysmic enlightenment” (37).

A consolatory view of illness is particularly apparent in Mrs. Dalloway’s attic scene (34-35), which demonstrates Woolf’s fruitful ambivalence towards the sickroom. Clarissa feels like “a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower” (MD 33), childish excitement and penitent resignation in her ascent. Clarissa’s confinement is marked by a parallel retreat from sexuality that proves both oppressive and empowering; her virginity, “preserved through childbirth […] clung to her like a sheet” (MD 34). The sheet becomes a shroud for Clarissa and her dormant sexuality; her confinement brings a sexual death, the narrator ominously intoning “[n]arrower and narrower would her bed be” (MD 33-34) until, presumably, it becomes a coffin. But voluntary mid-life celibacy provides a subversion of and an escape from maternal and marital expectation. Clarissa and Richard’s conjugal arrangement enables both parties, as Jesse Wolfe argues, to “flourish in their separateness” (50) and for Clarissa to recognize the oppressive masculine romance embodied in the predatory Peter Walsh: “thank heaven she had refused to marry him!” (MD 50). Clarissa’s confinement, however ambivalent, espouses the pragmatic feminism of Woolf’s earlier work. The ill female body, neutered by the sickroom, is liberated from the aggressive desires of men, the clinging demands of motherhood, and the oppressive conventions of Victorian and Edwardian mores.

II. The Spatial Polities of Dirt and Disorder

By the time The Years was published in 1937 the forms and language Woolf employed in writing about illness had shifted and mutated. Woolf’s writing had always acknowledged the ways in which illness defies normative modes of being; in her earlier writing this proffered a kind of consolation ranged against the restrictions and cordons of Victorian ideology. In The Years, Woolf’s sense of the ways in which illness entraps the female subject through both medical discourse and spatial confinement continue, but the consolations of the earlier fiction – the possibility of heightened vision – is impossible. The novel’s invalid matriarch, Mrs. Pargiter, lives in a “private world” (Y 21) but one without solace or succor. Confined to her room, “even in sleep little obstacles lay across her path” (Y 20-21); here is not freedom from but haunting by Victorian convention. Illness and the confinement necessitated by illness fail to deliver escape from duty, convention, or expectation. Instead, illness is an unambiguous imprisonment within
a world that incubates its contagion. A reading of Woolf’s spatial representation of illness in *The Years*, and her association of sickness with dirt, is instructive in further understanding her perception of the lingering Victorian values that kept women confined within the home.

Woolf’s changing representation of illness can in part be explained by a growing historical mood of anxiety and malaise reflected in the obsession of several thirty texts with grime and filth, a reflection also of modernism’s turn towards social or documentary realism. Anthony Powell’s *Afternoon Men* (1931) dolefully notes smuts soiling the air of London, while in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), George Orwell describes “inveretably dirty” hotel rooms housing “innumerable bugs” (n.p.). Later in the decade, Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight* (1938) finds “black specks” on hotel walls (12), while Christopher Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) opens with a view of the “tarnished” and “dirty” streetscape viewed by Christopher’s camera consciousness (3). These texts’ concern with physical filth reflects the affective anxieties of a decade of economic straitening and increasing political tensions at home and abroad.

Mary Douglas, documenting the historical role and meanings of dirt, defines it as “essentially disorder”; attempts to control dirt represent “positive effort[s] to organise the environment” (2): dirt is thus a “by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter” (35). Dirt is paradigmatically associated with boundaries and their violation, whether in the Kristevaean theory of abjection, in Stallybrass and White’s work on transgression, or in William Ian Miller’s *Anatomy of Disgust*. As Anne McClintock writes, during the Victorian period, dirt was implicated in a “poetics of surveillance, deployed increasingly to police the boundaries” between the ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ in the realms of work, leisure, and sexuality (154). Moreover, as William A. Cohen, during the nineteenth century dirt was fundamentally associated with disease (xii); the dirty body was associated with the sick body. Ian Scott Todd suggests that increasing urban density and metropolitan travel created a particularly modern problem in the need to manage and confine human waste in the name of public respectability (192). As Freud observed, dirt – whether on the body or in the street – is “incompatabil with civilization” (46). From the Victorian period through to the early twentieth century, “filth supplies a means of both ordering and disrupting collective experience alike.” (Cohen xxiv)

Transgression and dirt are closely associated due to the “undefinable” (Douglas 96) nature of the threshold as transitional space. In *The Years*, women are creatures of the threshold; sacred and profane, pure yet profoundly dirty, confined and controlled by doctrines of imprisonment and protection. Even by the novel’s ‘Present Day’ the Pargiter women still occupy a liminal space associated with feminine dirt. Peggy, a successful doctor, observes her hands to be “a compromise […] between science and…” (Y 310). Peggy’s elliptical compromise leaves unstated the possible paradoxical associations embodied in the hands of a female doctor: between rationality and emotion, healing and illness, cleanliness and dirt, liberation and confinement. A woman in a historically masculine professional space, Peggy is neither more liberated, nor less managed than her predecessors trapped in the drawing-room; later, she compares her role within a patriarchal profession to monastic isolation (Y 337) and describes herself as “in a groove” (Y 336). Here, we should contrast Peggy’s despair with Elizabeth Dalloway’s hopeful ambition to become a doctor (MD 150). Peggy’s cramped spatial metaphors show that the confinements of traditional femininity can extend even to the modern, apparently emancipated, working woman.

Dirt and sickness, characterized as feminine, are feared and managed through the assignation of appropriate space. Dirt in *The Years* symbolizes the unclassifiable; it is aligned with women and their transgression of behavioral, spatial, and physiological taboos. Women’s paradoxical position — as threat to, and keeper of, the home and morality — results from a confusion of sacred and profane. Women are, to borrow William Ian Miller’s phrase, “moral menials” (184), domestically identified with the dirt they are supposed to keep in check.

In its gendered demarcation of space, the Victorian home had to make allowances for accommodating undesirable dirt, an affective as well as physical category. As Victoria Rosner demonstrates, the toilet exemplifies the Victorian home’s simultaneous denial and accommodation of its necessary filth (73). Human waste, inappropriate gendered behavior and emotion were all policed with similar avidity (Rosner 68); significantly, in *The Years*, it is in the bathroom that Rose Pargiter self-harms (340). In *The Years* the sickroom likewise functions to cordon off the threat of dirt’s contagion. By creating and policing a designated space for dirt and sickness, Abercorn Terrace ensures the continuation of a patriarchal household which circumscribes women within the domestic sphere both as invalid and caretaker. *The Years* shows that the Victorian house functions like Foucault’s hospital, in which the ward is a “differentiated, distinct space” (19) that preserves the disease via viral, social, or indeed narrative replication and reproduction. Although Victorian women were granted a limited authority either in caring for the invalid or in claiming an invalid’s identity, this authority is circumscribed by the larger patriarchal familial and medical hierarchies. Crucially, the Victorian house is not one lacking in dirt and disease, but one which reproduces filth as one of its many well-kept spatial “secrets” (Rosner 81). In *The Years*, Mrs. Pargiter’s degraded body is thus the inevitable by-product of Victorian domesticity and a threat to its existence. For instance, Mrs. Pargiter interrupts the routines of Victorian domesticity by dying slowly: dinner is spoilt (Y 38) and the children are unable to go about their usual tasks of reading and sewing (Y 42). Delia, more explicitly, feels her mother is “an obstacle, a prevention, an impediment to all life” (Y 21).

While Mrs. Pargiter represents the presence of illness in the house – a threat contained by Victorian social forms – her daughters both embody and threaten Victorian spatial ideologies in their ability to contagiously move through sites of physical, emotional, and behavioral dirt, and cross the threshold of the private sphere into the public. For instance, Rose is reprimanded for a stain on her dress. Criticized twice by her father, Rose covers the stain in shame and embarrassment (Y 12, 15): the novel thus shows how Victorian ideology reproduces the association of female transgression and (social) dirt. The threshold confining Mrs. Pargiter, the “borderland between life and death” (Y 21), forms one of the “sites of intersection and difference” that Rosner identifies in modernist depictions of domestic space (65). Trapped and obviously disoriented, Mrs. Pargiter cries repeatedly “[w]here am I?” (Y 22, 23) and fails to recognize her daughter (Y 22). When Delia leaves her mother’s sickroom, she echoes her disoriented liminality: “[w]here am I? […] For a moment she seemed to be in some borderland between life and death. Where am I?” (Y 24). The paradox of being between spaces, at the threshold of sickness, is experienced by the apparently healthy Delia; the verbal forms of illness (“where am I”) are reproduced and replicated even outside of the sickroom, and are carried out of them by the nursing family member. Illness has become a purgatorial state, the threshold to the sickroom its spatial intersection.

Sara Pargiter in *The Years* suffers from a physical deformity that makes Abel Pargiter “uncomfortable” (117) and renders her body unfit for public interaction. Eugenie, loving her daughter “perhaps because of her shoulder” (Y 136), is nevertheless complicit in managing her bodily difference through enclosure (within both the sheets and the space of her room): “[w]hat did the doctor say? Lie straight, lie still” (Y 135). Sara thus encased enters a virginal death: she “laid herself out, under the cold smooth sheets, and pulled the pillow over her ears. The one sheet and the one blanket fitted softly round her” (Y 131). Thus Sara becomes a “chrysais wrapped round in the sharp white folds of the sheet” (Y 138), her sheet-shroud recalling, in its coldness and whiteness, the clinging “white” sheet of Clarissa Dalloway’s “cold” virginity (MD 34). Woolf uses the image of the chrysais not to perpetuate normative bodily
ideologies but to subvert them: the chrysalis of course incubates a bodily mutation, but this need not be positive. Moreover the chrysalis is, like the sickroom, restrictive, enclosing the subject within uncomfortably narrow spatial boundaries. As Showalter notes, illness is only liberating up to a certain point: “a room of one’s own is a prison as well as a sanctuary” (“Killing” 344). The sickrooms of The Years are less like sanctuaries than prisons whose inhabitants are denied any upside to illness.

Despite this pessimism in Woolf’s late writing, the advent of a new, different sort of space – one not so rigorously managed – is proffered as a solution to the oppression of women and the sick. Maggie Pargiter and her husband Renny’s house is characterized as healthy in its disorder, in which dirt collects in communal spaces: the floor of the sitting-room is “strewn with papers,” and Renny proudly proclaims “we are extremely dirty” (Y 269). This new space has a profound effect on Eleanor which she attributes to “the light after the dark, talk after silence; the war, perhaps, removing barriers” (Y 271). The binaries organizing the Victorian house, “proper and improper, public and private, clean and dirty” (Rosner 65), no longer hold, as each category fruitfully contaminates the other.

III. Moral Bodies

In the interwar period the disintegration of physical health was strongly linked to the disintegration of moral behavior in the national psyche (Overy 153). The great change in the aesthetics of Woolf’s ill bodies between Mrs. Dalloway and The Years indicates her evolving views on the ways in which illness and gender are put to work to categorize and degrade women’s bodies. In Mrs. Dalloway, Mia Carter argues, bodies suffer from “imperialist exhaustion” (112): Clarissa and Septimus are made sick by war-facilitated influenza and neurasthenia and are confined under an imperialist system of suppression. Importantly, Carter’s diagnosis can also be applied to the women of The Years, which describes its ill bodies in significantly more abject terms. As Patricia Moran writes, abjection in Woolf’s writing is characterized by “the disappearance of the speaking subject into the intolerable, uncontrollable, and engulfing significance of materiality: the body overwhelms, speaks for, drowns out the subject” (35). While Moran cites Clarissa Dalloway as hopelessly grounded in her physicality, it is in The Years that women experience the sheer “impossibility to transcend embodiment” (Moran 85) in all its repulsiveness. In The Years it is not simply rebellious bodies like Septimus and Clarissa, but women as a gender who are made and kept sick by spatial, sexual, and political restriction, living as Eleanor laments “like cripples in a cave” (Y 282).

The novel’s opening chapter, describing Mrs. Pargiter’s protracted illness and death, uses grotesque imagery unusual for Woolf (Radin 27). Mrs. Pargiter appears “soft, decayed but ever-lasting” (Y 21), and Delia is repulsed by the “sour-sweet smell of illness” (Y 20). A self-sacrificing existence ensures a drawn-out, unglamorous death; equally grotesque and alarming is the cyclical repetition of spatial and bodily imprisonment upon Mrs. Pargiter’s descendants. Eleanor inherits both Mrs. Pargiter’s writing-table (Y 33) and the role of angel in the house; by 1908 she feels “old, heavy and dull” (Y 143). Similarly, Milly’s acceptance of marriage and maternity has caused a bodily degradation in which her body divides “into innumerable babies” (Y 356), budding like a hydra. Milly’s body is textually tainted like her ill mother’s. Where Mrs. Pargiter’s skin was “stained with brown patches” and her hair looks as though “dipped in the yolk of an egg” (Y 21), Milly’s skin is “colourless save for a brown stain on her forehead; and her hair colorless save for a stain like the yolk of an egg” (Y 357). North Pargiter sees Milly as rotting fruit, “soft and discoloured like a pear that has gone sleepy” (Y 357), completing her tri-degradation to animal, vegetable, and self-reproducing microbial. Maternity and matrimony have thus caused the demise of the daughter some fifty years after the mother.

Amidst The Years’s undeniable pessimism, however, Woolf proffers an alternative way of living. The new space of Maggie and Renny’s house with its unashamed dirt and dazzling light is free from those oppressive ideologies so embedded in the darkness of Abercorn Terrace which brought about the hereditary abjection of Mrs. Pargiter and her daughters. When entering this new space Eleanor feels as if walls have been removed, her movement freed (Y 271). Additionally, the aged heaviness she feels as angelic custodian of Abercorn Terrace (Y 143) is relieved upon its sale (Y 206, 207). New space in turn fosters new kinds of relationships: the companionate marriage of Maggie and Renny, and the deep communicative friendships between Nicholas, Eleanor, and Sara. Freedom from spatial and gendered confinement, from feminized illness and abjection, is possible only when women are released from old spaces and the traditional roles they enforce.

The development of Woolf’s representation of illness, space, and dirt is both political and personal and parallels a shift in modernist literary culture between the twenties and thirties, between high and late modernism. High modernist texts proffered a possibility for changing the world, and for exploring the transcendent, even liberating potential of domestic interiority as a space for subverting normative discourse. By the nineteen thirties, however, this enthusiasm had waned and in its place a disillusionment emerged in a preoccupation with dirt and grime. Such a preoccupation is perhaps an inevitable result of political, economic and social forces of the nineteen thirties: for instance the physical straitening, poverty and homelessness experienced during the Slump, or the political extreme of fascism that proclaimed progress even as it mandated an oppressive, violent conformity. As Tyrus Miller has argued, the writing of the nineteen thirties could no longer reproduce the transcendent effects of high modernism. Late modernism offers a “disfigured likeness” (Miller 14), that is, a sick modernism. Perhaps this is what we see in The Years, too – not a break but a mutation, from hopeful narratives of consolation and liberation, to a confrontation with the continuing confinement of women within the locked rooms of empire, home, and their own bodies. Woolf’s dirt, however, is not entirely to be deplored. A bi-product of oppression, it can also enable a potentially subversive disorder, eroding the imperialist pseudo-distinction between sacred and profane. In new space, dirt, aligned with women and illness, is an accepted aspect of modern life which proffers the (necessarily circumscribed) potential for bodily, spatial, and political autonomy.


Listening for the Voices of Women: A Close Reading of *On Being Ill*

Wherever you were going when you started on the 180-word sentence that begins your voyage *On Being Ill*? I turn the page to finish the sentence, expecting to find “undiscovered countries” of headaches and toothaches, falls and fevers. Instead I find your disappointment at literature’s failure to deliver embodied accounts. In that first tightly constructed sentence of loosely associated thoughts, you report dislocation as you “come to the surface” (OBI 3) in the dentist’s chair, and wonder why “illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature” (OBI 3-4).

Surely you know Mann’s and Dumas’s protagonists, who take the cure in mountain air or languish abed, their illness romanticized rather than depicted as isolating, debilitating scourge. You rightly claim “the assault of fever or the on come of melancholia, are neglected” (OBI 5) and note the distractions authors use to deny, disavow, or distance themselves from the “hieroglyphic of misery” (OBI 9). The male novelists you know scarcely mention bodies amidst discussions of politics, philosophy, love, and war.

You wonder if writing the “daily drama of the body” (OBI 5) will be critiqued as plotless and loveless and cite the English language as a hindrance to describing states of illness. Sixty years hence, women scholars will not be “ignoring the body in the philosopher’s turret” (OBI 5). They will “look at […] relations between pain and language” (qtd. in Jurecic 55) and concur with your idea that the “poverty of language” (OBI 6) and “nothing ready made” (7) hinders sufferers’ attempts to share experience. Elaine Scarry believes that a dearth of personal reports stems from pain’s ability to unmake the world and, thus, makes descriptions of pain impossible. Nonetheless, your writing counters the theory that pain negates language’s ability to convey subjective states. I read, “[…] a vulture sat on a bough above my head, threatening to descend and peck at my spine” in a letter to Vita Sackville-West (16 November 1925) (qtd. in Lee xvii) and sense your interest in personal accounts rooted in human bodies.

Trying to rally writers brave enough to join you in writing about illness, you send an S.O.S to Americans who, according to you, are good at coining words and able to “take liberties with the language” (OBI 7). You believe Americans do not follow rules, certainly not grammatical rules pertaining to the King’s English. You call for voices to tell the body’s pain. Unfortunately your invitation to write the physical body and its limits, will not receive its due response in your lifetime. Only in the late twentieth century, around the time compatriot Ann Hunsaker Hawkins coins the word pathography, will a wave of illness narratives swell. Lucy Grealy will write of childhood cancer, surgical pain, and facial deformity; Stephen Kuusisto will describe what partial blindness, due to premature birth, allows and disallows him; Jean-Dominique Bauby will blink out an account of his body locked-in by a cerebral vascular accident. You ask not only for stories of major illness backed by physical findings and sanctioned with a diagnosis but also for putting fever, insomnia, and sciatica on the page. You claim no particular malady but count yourself among rank and file invalids in “barracks of pain and discipline” (OBI 9) and suggest exaggerated social consequences if sympathy be extended to the sick: “buildings would cease to rise; roads would peter out into grassy tracks; there would be an end of music and painting” (OBI 9). Your readers know that a world stripped of music, painting, and writing would be no world at all.

As you write your essay, some women shed their corsets, shorten their skirts, bob their hair, and dance the Charleston. They declare themselves modern women. Still you hear the silencing of bodies and souls, especially if they suggest weakness, pain, or sorrow. You desert “the army of the upright” (OBI 12) and call for a “new language […] a new hierarchy of the passions” (OBI 7) in which to let the body speak.

Embodied in headache, “that odd amphibious life” (Woolf, *Writer’s Diary* 80), you move between sickroom and garden, report sensations of shivering and melting like wax, register the hum of bees and the sound of a merry-go-round across a far field, as you contemplate earth and sky, body and soul. Like your heart, your mind jumps as you watch clouds buffet and “unself” themselves and observe a rose, “still and steady” (OBI 14) loosen a single petal. Composing sentences and glorious images, you compose yourself and settle into convalescence, seemingly happy with the cinema of the sky and indifferent kiss of a falling petal before—for all your protests of needing neither company nor sympathy—your need for the company of writers surfaces.

After rejecting a round of visits by Gibbons, Flaubert, and James, you peruse important holdings in your “inner library” (see Frank 54): Coleridge, Donne, Hardy, Lamb, Mallarmé, Milton, Pope, Rimbaud,
and Shakespeare—not a woman among them. Charlotte Gilman Perkins is not a major writer but you do not confine yourself to the canon, as the reader learns shortly on in your essay. Placed on inactive duty—deployed to a “regime of restraint,” as you are (Lee xv), Ms. Perkins engages in what Arthur Frank calls “enactments of resistance” (77) and protests Dr. S. Weir Mitchell’s prescriptive ‘rest cure’ for women. She might serve as an ally in your campaign to include personal accounts of illness on the page. Or, perhaps, you have read Ms. Perkins and are disappointed that she fails to locate the narrator in her body but, rather, locates her in a room with yellow wallpaper, where she is left to stare at “a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside-down” (Gilman 649).

On Being Ill seems to promise that you will make illness a character. Instead you flit from person to place to thing before settling (with apology) on Augustus Hare’s subjects: two noble women. Lady Canning is a lady-in-waiting in the court of Queen Victoria; Lady Waterford is married to an Irish lord. In some respects, the lives of these highborn sisters mirror Vanessa and you, who were “highborn” to intellectual circles and began your adult lives as ladies-in-waiting at the court of Bloomsbury. Like Louisa you are the younger sister and are “dumped down” (OBI 26) not in Ireland but in illness in a way that sometimes isolates you from family and friends. You are interested enough in the lives of these sisters to grant them a full fifth of the space on paper.

Your essay leads not to the point where Louisa’s adventure-seeking husband, who “rode stately as a crusader” (OBI 27), dies in a hunting accident but, rather, to the image of his widow standing steady as a rose at the library window. Watching his body borne away to burial, she grasps the window’s heavy curtain and crushes the velvet plush with such intensity that hours later Sir John Leslie ‘reads’ “traces left in the window-blind” as “writing in the folds caused by her squeeze that told more than words could” (Hare Loc 306).

You tell us, “We do not know […] the souls of others” (11). I agree. What we know of the moment with Lady Waterford at the window “standing to see the hearse depart” (OBI 28), we know because Sir John, after witnessing the young widow’s pale, calm countenance and a crush of curtain fabric, was moved to represent in words what he saw as intense suffering. Augustus Hare—sufficiently moved by Leslie’s journal entry—included the scene in his biography of the two noblewomen. You, who know pain held in the body, pain expressed in action or illness, end your essay with that arresting image of silent grief.

It is not new to speculate on the role that grief, at the early loss of your mother, plays in your fevers and faints, malaise and melancholia. Hermione Lee reminds us that “longing for the absent loved one, and the expression of grief there at the window as she ‘stuck to her post’ (OBI 26) and remained upright. As you prepare to write To the Lighthouse, how can you not want the company and “benignant lustre” (OBI 23) of a woman who endures her passions and stays stalwart as a rose?

Lynne Mijangos
Columbia University
Masters Program in Narrative Medicine

Works Cited


“Directly I stop working I feel that I am sinking down, down.
And as usual, I feel that if I sink further I shall reach the truth.”

Virginia Woolf, Diary 3, pg 235

A fumbling of buttoned cloth;
a sort of sinking into stardust
For one knows that the envelope of darkness
Comes not sudden. One first objects,
Obfuscates, remaining
Upright while the body has its way and the
Spirit secretly
Rejoices in its own complicity.
Somewhere the world stops for a while. Is
That not the promise?

The stars themselves are not that easy to
navigate,
one ceases to work and dust gathers.
The sky dances first before stars come into
focus
And often the revelation never comes or
comes filtered,
Sneaks in on feathered feet with eyes of
moths
And so seems unreal, or unrevealed, or
both.
One searches for the side of the triangle
that allows entry
But none comes; first the negotiation,
Borders crossed, the beaded curtain of
intuition pulled aside,
The mind, the mind, pinned always close to
the breast
Mystically finds its way north on winding
paths
Wrapped about with an undergrowth of green and
Ivy platitudes
Which one hears muffled,
And then not at all.

A recumbent slacker recognizes always that
moment of being:
Listening no longer required, silence,
truth,
A flotilla of knowing, nosing about
among the shells and bones

Then healing
And again the doubt.

Sandra Inskeep-Fox
Independent Scholar and Poet

A List of Some of the Works on
Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury
Published in 2016

• James Acheson, ed. Virginia Woolf, Palgrave
  Macmillan.
• Jessica Berman, ed. A Companion to Virginia Woolf.
  Wiley-Blackwell.
• Julia Cameron, Roger Fry and Virginia Woolf. Julia
  Margaret Cameron. London: Pallas Athene.
• Madelyn Detloff, The Value of Virginia Woolf,
  Cambridge University Press.
• Amanda Golden, Annotating Modernism: Marginalia
  and Pedagogy from Virginia Woolf to the Confessional
  Poets, Taylor & Francis.
• Kathleen Heininge, Reflections: Virginia Woolf and her
  Quaker Aunt, Caroline Stephen, Peter Lang.
• Clara Jones. Virginia Woolf: Ambivalent Activist.
  Edinburgh University Press.
• Barbara Lounsberry, Virginia Woolf’s Modernist
  Path: Her Middle Diaries and the Diaries She Read,
  University Press of Florida.
• Ira Bruce Nadel, Virginia Woolf, Reaktion Books.
• Hilary Newman, Virginia Woolf and Dorothy
  Richardson: Contemporary Writers, Cecil Woolf
  Publishing.
• Chandler O’Leary and Jessica Spring, Dead Feminists:
  Historic Heroines in Living Color, Sasquatch Books.
• Frances Spalding. Vanessa Bell, Portrait of a
  Bloomsbury Artist, Tauris Parke Paperbacks.

Here Ends Issue 90, Fall 2016.
array of essays to sell from their Bloomsbury Heritage Monograph Series and also spoke to the crowd at the banquet on Saturday evening.

Events also included a pre-conference trip to Haworth Parsonage, home of the Brontë sisters, where attendees were treated to a private talk on the Brontë family as well as Virginia Woolf’s visit to the Parsonage in 1904. We even got to see and touch the visitors’ guestbook Woolf signed at the time, and then had the opportunity to stroll through the peaceful village and take a long walk over those famous moors.

I could of course go on and on about Jane’s wonderful conference, where everything was beautifully planned down to the very last detail: the comfortable and easily maneuverable venue, the coffee and tea breaks replete with the most amazing cakes you’ve ever had; a marvelous array of vendors selling books and an assortment of Woolfiana; the reunions among friends and colleagues; the laughter and conversation between panels; and above all the stellar presentations on Woolf and heritage.

Many, many thanks to Jane, Tom, and Anne!

The 2017 Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf, Virginia Woolf and the World of Books will be held at University of Reading (June 29-July 2). The organizing committee members are Dr Nicola Wilson (Reading); Dr Bethany Layne (Reading); Dr Maddi Davies (Reading); Dr Claire Battershill (Simon Fraser University); Dr Alice Staveley (Stanford); Dr Helen Southworth (Oregon); Dr Elizabeth Willson Gordon (King’s College, Edmonton), and Dr Vara Neverow (Southern Connecticut State University). For more information, see page 4 of this Miscellany or go to https://woolf2017.com/. The 2018 conference, Virginia Woolf, Europe and Peace, will be organized by Derek Ryan, Ariane Mildenberg, Peter Adkins, and Patricia Novillo-Corvalán and will be hosted by University of Kent. While none of these conferences are associated directly with the IVWS in any way, a significant number of the attendees are members of our Society.

And best wishes to all of you for a Happy New Year! May we strive for peace, understanding, critical thinking, good reading, and thoughtful stewardship of the environment in 2017 and throughout all our days.

Looking forward to seeing many of you at MLA in Philly!

Kristin Czarnecki
President, IVWS
The Virginia Woolf Society

I hope this new issue of the Virginia Woolf Miscellany finds everyone well—having enjoyed their academic year and reading, teaching, researching, writing about, and reveling in the life and writings of Virginia Woolf!

We had our own bit of revelry as the International Virginia Woolf Society sponsored two fantastic panels at MLA in January 2016 in Austin, Texas. Our guaranteed panel was Mark Hussey’s “Textual Woolf,” which addressed two facets of our twenty-first-century literary world: how Woolf scholarship might benefit from today’s digital tools and from new scholarly editions of her works, and how to respond when our students download unreliable electronic texts of Woolf—some of which are purposely riddled with typos and nonsense words and phrases in order to avoid copyright infringement.

The first panelist in Austin was John Young of Marshall University, whose paper “How Should One Read a Draft? Virginia Woolf and Moments of Publication” explored Woolf’s propensity to revise her drafts extensively the closer they moved toward publication. Thus John presents a “newly detailed way of understanding the act of publication in Woolf’s career.” Next, Benjamin Hagen of the University of South Dakota presented “Kindling Taste, or How I Tried Going Paperless and (Finally) Became a Common Reader.” A long commute by rail to and from work in his recent past inspired Benjamin to begin reading Woolf on his iPhone 6’s Kindle application. Focusing on electronic variants of “Kew Gardens,” his paper reflected on his experience of reading on the move “to highlight a tension between the scholarly mission of producing expensive academic editions of Woolf’s writings […] and a 21st-century activity of common e-reading.” In “Macroanalyzing Woolf,” Jana Miller Usiskin of the University of Victoria, Canada, discussed her findings upon analyzing Woolf’s novels “algorithmically by using word correlation, weight, and frequency to find textual similarities and differences across Woolf’s corpus of texts.” Via such machine learning methods along with historical analysis, Jana and her colleague were able to track the ebb and flow of Woolf’s most pressing concerns in her novels, including space, war, and gender.

Maren Linett presided over Woolf and Disability, the IVWS’s joint panel with the Committee on Disability Issues in the Profession. The panel began with Louise Hornby from UCLA presenting “On Being Still: Woolf, Illness, and Immobility,” which examined moments in Woolf’s oeuvre, such as “On Being Ill,” when lying prone and still becomes an act of resistance and a means of achieving greater objectivity. “Woolf casts the inability to move,” Louise states, “[…] as an epistemological position that dismantles traditional modes of embodied subjectivity.” In his paper “Labor Pains: Disability, Work, and Reproduction in To the Lighthouse,” Matt Frank of the University of West Georgia explored the intersection of disability with race, class, and gender in the novel, noting that the mental and physical disabilities of Mrs. McNab, who labors to render the Ramsays’ summer home fit for visitors, “are all materially and aesthetically productive.”

Because one of her panelists had to bow out, Maren presented on the panel as well. In “Deformity in Virginia Woolf’s The Years,” part of a larger project on disability in Woolf, Maren argues that two types of deformity arise in the novel: “a spiritual deformity that comes from participating too eagerly in patriarchal capitalist culture, and an artistic deformity that characterizes late modernism.” She finds the character Sara, with a spinal curvature leaving one shoulder higher than the other, “dissociated from the former, paradoxically because her disability casts her out of the mainstream of that culture; but . . . associated with the latter, indeed serving as the fulcrum around which Woolf explores and critiques modernism’s compromises with history as Europe marches back toward war.”

On Saturday, January 9th, a group of Woolfians gathered for a lively Society dinner in Austin at Fonda San Miguel, a fabulous venue consistently named one of the best Mexican restaurants in the United States. Sixteen of us enjoyed conversation, laughter, and, of course margaritas, tacos, enchiladas, and never-ending bowls of chips and salsa while surrounded by colorful art and décor.

We head to Philadelphia in early January for this year’s MLA. Pamela Caughie from Loyola University, Chicago, will preside over the IVWS’s guaranteed panel, “Virginia Woolf Scholars Come to Their Senses,” on Saturday, January 7, from 1:45-3:00 in Room 112A in the Pennsylvania Convention Center. In addition, our dinner gathering will be at the Saloon Restaurant on Friday, January 6, at 7:00 p.m. Those who are planning to attend should have confirmed their seats in November.

MLA 2018 is scheduled for New York City from January 4-7. Thais Rutledge from Texas State University will preside over our guaranteed panel, “Woolf’s Spaces.” Her call for papers reads: Following the “spatial turn” in literary studies, we invite papers that consider the concepts of space, place, and mapping in Woolf’s life and work. Please send a 250-word abstract and vita to t_r129@txstate.edu by March 8, 2017.

We have happily celebrated Woolfian events in the spring, including the second annual Angelica Garnett Essay Prize for Undergraduates (see page). Essays can be on any topic pertaining to the writings of Virginia Woolf; between 2,000 and 2,500 words in length, including notes and works cited, with an original title of the entrant’s choosing. Essays are judged by the officers of the International Virginia Woolf Society: Kristin Czarnecki, President; Ann Martin, Vice-President; Alice Keane, Secretary-Treasurer; and Drew Shannon, Historian-Bibliographer. The winner receives $200 and has the essay published in the Virginia Woolf Miscellany.

We are pleased to announce the 2016 winner: “Feeling the Glory, Feeling the Lack: Virginia Woolf, Terrence Malick and the Soldier’s Sublime,” by Allen Fulgham, a May 2016 graduate of New York University. You can enjoy reading the full essay in Issue 90 of the Virginia Woolf Miscellany. Congratulations, Allen!

For the 2017 contest, please send essays to Kristin Czarnecki, kristin_czarnecki@georgetowncollege.edu, in the latest version of Word. All entries must be received by June 5th, 2017. To receive an entry form, please also contact Kristin.

Of course, the biggest, most wonderful event this summer for Woolfians was the 26th Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf at Leeds Trinity University in Leeds, England, from June 16-19, hosted by Reverend Dr. Jane de Gay and co-organizers Tom Breckin and Anne Reus. With the theme of Virginia Woolf and Heritage, the conference drew together hundreds of students, scholars, teachers, and common readers of Virginia Woolf from around the world for four days of presentations, keynote addresses, round-table discussions, and pre- and post-conference excursions. Plenary speakers included Laura Marcus, Suzanne Raitt, Marion Dell and Jean Mills, and David Bradshaw. Dr. Bradshaw’s talk at the conference was his last public lecture as sadly, he passed away on September 13, 2016. Attendees also enjoyed the presence of Cecil Woolf and Jean Moorcroft Wilson, who brought an

(The Society Column continues in the second column on page 67.)