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THE GREAT CONFSSIONAL: VIRGINIA WOOLF ON ILLNESS

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Introduction

The success of Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer Prize winning novel (1998) and the Academy Award winning movie (2002) *The Hours* has brought Virginia Woolf to the forefront again. Illness plagued her throughout her life. Humans possess a tendency toward repeated and protracted illness that helps define who we are. In *On Being Ill*, Virginia Woolf lays the groundwork for what we now call pathography, first person accounts of one's illness exemplified by Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1977).

Background

In the opening scene of the novel and also the movie, it's late March 1941. Virginia Woolf has just finished writing a suicide note – to her husband Leonard. (She also wrote a second note to her sister, Vanessa.) Virginia Woolf, aged fifty-nine, leaves her home around 11:30 in the morning wearing a heavy winter coat, taking her walking stick, and crosses the meadows to the nearby River Ouse. At the banks of the river, she places a large stone in one of the pockets of her coat. Then, nonchalantly, she walks into the river.

Her body was found by children three weeks later and cremated shortly thereafter. The verdict of the inquest was, "Suicide while the balance of her mind was disturbed." A finding often recorded for suicide victims by British coroners. Thus, death ended a lifetime of illnesses.

Illness is a continuing thread of Virginia Woolf's life. Breakdowns and suicide attempts throughout her lifetime are evidence of bipolar disorder that led, in the forty years of her adult writing life, to frequent bouts of illnesses, in which mental and physical symptoms intertwined (Jouve, 2000). She also suffered from fevers, faints, irregular pulse, insomnia, and headaches – signaled and accompanied by phases of agitation or depression. In her most severe cases she hardly ate and lost considerable weight. Her family saw these signs as precursors of mood illnesses.

She had her first breakdown when she was thirteen and others when she was twenty-two, twenty-eight and thirty. Between the ages of thirty-one and thirty-three, she was ill so often that permanent insanity was feared. These episodes required many weeks of medical treatment and bed rest.

During the rest of her life, she would experience milder mood swings. Yet, for nearly all this time she led an extremely active social and an exceptionally productive professional life.

Woolf was a part of the Bloomsbury group that took their name after a neighborhood of London in which several of the original members lived. This loosely defined band of friends included Virginia and her husband Leonard, as well as her sister Vanessa's husband, Clive Bell. It also included economist John Maynard Keynes, among others. Dorothy Parker quipped, *the Bloomsbury group was said to comprise of pairs who had affairs in squares*. Their relationships were complicated, promiscuous and often bisexual or gay. They wrote about themselves and their friends at inordinate length – in their diaries, correspondence, and later in life in their memoirs.

The beginning of the year 1925 was a good period for Virginia Woolf. *Mrs. Dalloway* had just been published and she was full of ideas for starting her next novel, the semi-autobiographical *To the Lighthouse*. She was also at the most intimate stage of her relationship with Vita Sackville-West, a poet, novelist, biographer, travel writer and avid gardener. Woolf had met Sackville-West at a dinner party given by Clive Bell on December 14, 1922. The next day she wrote in her diary that she had met the "lovely gifted aristocratic Sackville-West." Yet despite this success she felt "that all this time I was getting a little used up & riding on a flat tire?" (Woolf, 1980). The tire imploded in mid-Summer of that year at a party at her sister's house when she fell in a faint.

The faint was the start of months of illness, and her letters and diary for the rest of the year are full of frustration and distress. During these months, her friendships with Vita and author T. S. Eliot changed. Vita was tender and affectionate to Virginia in her illness and her friendship became more valuable with absence, when Vita's husband, Harold Nicolson, was posted to Persia by the British Foreign Office. And, even though Vita accompanied her husband to Teheran, the letters she exchanged with Virginia became increasingly more intimate. That longing for the absent Sackville-West would make its way into Woolf's novel, *To the Lighthouse*.

Virginia's friendship with T. S. Eliot also changed that year. Hogarth Press, founded by Virginia and her husband in their basement, had published his *Poems* in 1919. They published the seminal primogenitor of modernism in literature, *The Waste Land*. a hand-printed edition of 460 copies in 1922. Virginia commented on her feelings about this work, "I have just finished setting up the whole of Mr Eliots [sic.] poem with my own hands: You see how my hand trembles (Woolf, 1980a)."

The publishing relationship between Eliot and the Woolfs was symbiotic. After *The Wasteland* was published, Eliot, in turn, published a story of Virginia's in his magazine, the *Criterion*. Meanwhile the Hogarth Press published several of Eliot's essays. All this literary reciprocity and mutual admiration ran into difficulties when Eliot, in 1925, moved to a rival publisher and reprinted *The Waste Land* without informing them. "Tom has treated us scurvily," she wrote (Woolf, 1981).

Yet in spite of her frequent criticisms of his slyness, ruthlessness and creepy egotism, she was flattered when he commissioned an essay from her for his newly revamped journal. *On Being III* first appeared in the January 1926 *New Criterion*, the first of several outings for the essay.

Virginia's Narratives on Illness

Friends praised *On Being III* and her husband, Leonard, particularly admired it. Several months later, in April 1926, a shortened version, entitled "*Illness: An Unexploited Mine*" was published in *The Forum*, a New York magazine. Finally, in July 1930, Virginia herself typeset a new edition of 250

copies for the Hogarth Press. Her sister, Vanessa Bell, designed an appealing abstract jacket and Virginia signed each copy. For this issue Virginia made some small changes. In a letter to an unidentified correspondent, she wrote:

As one of the guilty parties I bow to your strictures upon the printing of *On Being Ill*. I agree that the colour is uneven, the letters not always clear/ the spacing inaccurate, and the word 'campion' should read 'companion.'

All I have to urge in excuse is that printing is a hobby carried on in the basement of a London house; that as amateurs all instruction in the art was denied us; that we have picked up what we know for ourselves; and that we practise printing in the intervals of lives that are otherwise engaged. In spite of all this, I believe that you can already sell your copy for more than the guinea you gave, as the edition is largely over subscribed, so that though we have not satisfied your taste, we hope that we have not robbed your purse (Woolf, 1980a).

In 2002, Paris Press again published the essay with an introduction by Hermione Lee. All references cited are to this edition.

On Being Ill reflects her wisdom and remarkable humor related to her own illness and the subject in general. The title of the essay echoes William Hazlitt's 1822 essay, *On Going a Journey* (1951).

Similar to most of her writing, *On Being Ill* is characterized by Virginia's elliptical style and page-long paragraphs.

Pathography

In today's world there is considerable writing about illness. In fact, Anne Hawkins (1993) describes and discusses a new literary genre that she calls *pathography* that has become extraordinarily popular in the last 30 years. The body is perhaps our oldest and most reliable metaphor. It can symbolize a totality, as in 'the student body' or 'the diplomatic corps,' and its various parts denote distinct functions, hence 'the head of state' 'the heart of the matter' and the 'informational artery'. We commune with 'the body of Christ'.

As the most basic vehicle of human experience, it is a system we know intimately well and a tool through which we are able to interact with the world at large. Although many try to downplay the physical dimensions of human existence, favoring the spiritual or intellectual, the fact is we are not abstract beings; we are very much incarnate.

And it's the 'daily drama of the ill body' that becomes the protagonist of this essay. Virginia begins her essay by offering exaggerated versions of the existing categories of the 'healthy' and 'sick.' The body "must go through the whole unending procession of changes, heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness, until there comes the inevitable catastrophe; the body smashes itself to smithereens" (Woolf, 2002, p. 5).

Her opening sentence is seemingly a cascade of loosely connected thoughts; yet, her prose is in fact tightly knit, strongly patterned, and purposeful:

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 annihilation 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 this, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature (p. 3-4).

In this poignant and often humorous work, Virginia observes that illness, which is so common a human experience, has never before been the subject of literature. She wonders why illness has not taken a more prominent place among the prime themes of literature. Why does literature always separate the mind from the body? Contrary to the path that literature has taken, the body, says Virginia, is unavoidable as a topic of literary speculation.

Yet, Virginia herself did write about illness most of her life – in her prose, diaries and letters. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the character Septimus Warren Smith provides a harrowing portrait of the symptoms of mental illness that include terror, loneliness, paranoia, psychosis, grandiosity and hallucinations leading ultimately to his suicide.

But why write about illness, she asks? Simple. After all, illness is a consuming personal experience that brings about great 'spiritual change'. Why do we write only about the mind and ideas? Why not the body? After all, the body wages a great war with "the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia (p. 5)." The fleeting reference to melancholia is the only evidence that shows that Virginia includes mental health when referring to illness.

In *On Being Ill*, Virginia portrays how illness often takes on the disguise of love, wreathing the faces of the absent with new significance and creating "a childish outspokenness (p. 11)." In illness, an adult can recapture the language of the young child, when the sensory qualities of words are more vivid. When healthy, a "genial pretence must be kept up" (p. 12).

In Virginia's essay the villain is played by "sleeplessness" and the hero is "a white liquid with a sweet taste – that mighty Prince with the moth's eyes and the feathered feet/ one of whose name is Chloral"(p. 8). Chloral hydrate, a substance with a long history of use as a sedative, was regularly prescribed to Woolf as a sleeping aid along with digitalis and veronal. (Parenthetically, a solution of chloral hydrate and alcohol constitutes the famous knockout drops called a *Mickey Finn*.)

Contrary to what we might expect, Virginia suggests that we should not seek sympathy when we are ill. "Sympathy we cannot have. Wisest Fate says no." After all, today sympathy "is dispensed chiefly by laggards and failures, women for the most part... who have dropped out of the race, [and] have time to spend upon fantastic and unprofitable excursions" (p. 10).

Lacking sympathy, we tend to isolate and distant ourselves, which Virginia sees as an advantage of illness. "The whole landscape of life lies remote and fair, like the shore seen from a ship far out at sea" (p. 8). Illness contradicts the illusion that human beings are linked together, for in each person is a "virgin forest" of isolation that is only reached in illness. Sickness enables fresh perceptions. The ill seemingly enter a slow-motion parallel world, where the afflicted have time to watch the sky or carefully observe a rose. And, interestingly enough, we find sympathy when examining a rose. The rose "preserves a demeanour of perfect dignity and self-possession" (p. 14). It is the rose's indifference to us that Virginia finds comforting.

Once we enter this parallel world, illness becomes an altered state that grants significant revelations. Illness alters our consciousness in a way similar to love. Yet, the English language lacks power of expression equal to the experience of being sick. The body, she writes, wages a great war with the mind. "[T]his monster, the body, this miracle, its pain, will soon make us taper into... the raptures of transcendentalism" (p. 6).

There is a poverty of language that is an important element of illness. We can't quote Shakespeare to describe a headache. We must, Virginia says, invent new words and language to describe the pain of a headache. "English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache" (p. 6). Thus, we are forced to coin words taking "pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the people of Babel once did in the beginning of time), so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out" (p. 6).

Thus, the need for a new language to express illness. A need for a new language that is "more primitive, more sensual, more obscene (p. 7)." Perhaps, she suggests "the Americans, whose genius is so much happier in the making of new words than in the disposition of the old, will come to our help" (p. 7).

Indeed, we can see this invitation accepted in a poem by Emily Dickinson (Poem #650, 1961) that portrays pain as something nameless that has neither an origin nor a destination:

Pain – has an element of Blank –
It cannot recollect
When it begun – or if there were
A time when it was not,

It has no future – but itself –
Its Infinite contain
Its Past – enlightened to perceive
New Periods – of Pain.

In a similar way, Virginia takes us through the experience of lying in bed ill. In illness, "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. (p. 17). The world looks different, feels different, and is different. "It is only the recumbent who know what, after all, Nature is at no pains to conceal... that she in the end will conquer" (p. 16).

Virginia teaches eloquently the concept that the ill actually live in a different world from the well. "Now, lying recumbent, staring straight up, the sky is discovered to be something so different from this that really it is a little shocking" (p. 13).

In search for a new vocabulary of illness we must turn to literature and change our reading habits, Virginia writes. When ill, we should read poetry rather than prose. "Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia; lyrics to toothache" (p. 4). In fact, writing a mere seven years after the great influenza pandemic of 1918, very few writers had evoked that epidemic in literature. Some of the select few include the poet Edgar Lee Masters, Southern writer Thomas Wolfe and Dorothy Parker.

And, although illness enhances our perceptions, Virginia observes that it also reduces self-consciousness; it is "the great confessional." She discusses the cultural taboos associated with

illness and explores how illness changes the way we read. She observes that poems clarify and astonish; Shakespeare exudes new brilliance and so does melodramatic fiction!

"Illness makes us disinclined for the long reading campaigns that prose exacts." Books such as *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, *The Golden Bowl* and *Madame Bovary* are not the books to read when ill. But rather we must turn to the poets for reading material. The poets 'imagine for us.' When we are bed-ridden we rifle the poets. "We break off a line or two and let them open in the depths of the mind" (p. 18).

In June 1926, while suffering a 'nerve exhaustion headache,' she writes (Woolf, 1980a):

One's back seems to be made of a membrane, like a bat's wing: this should be stretched tight, in order to deal adequately with the flight of existence; but suddenly it flops, and becomes (I imagine) like a veil (do you remember the veils of our youth?) which has fallen into a cup of tea. So I am lying on the sofa, in my nightgown, picking at a book or two, and dropping them on to the floor. I see nobody partly because I have nothing to say except oh! Shall I ever have anything to say except oh!

In illness the words of the poet seem to "possess a mystic quality. (p 21). As in poetry, we grasp for the meaning of illness looking beyond their surface meaning – a sound, a color, a stress, a pause displayed by meager words. The words have sensual meaning. It is not necessary to understand them. "Foreigners, to whom the tongue is strange, have us at a disadvantage. The Chinese must know the sound of *Anthony and Cleopatra* better than we do" (p. 22). Yet there are some prose writers who can be read as poets. In the sick state we can "grasp what is beyond their surface meaning" of words (p 21).

The end of the essay reflects the reading Virginia did when she was considering writing a book to be called *Lives of the Obscure*. In fact, it is this section that was cut from the version that appeared in *The Forum* (Woolf, 2002). At this junction she moves from Shakespeare to Augustus Hare, stating that when ill we appreciate only the finest or the worst literature. Hare, "that the author of *The Story of Two Noble Lives* is not the peer of Boswell (p. 23). Indeed, the book she says, "is mediocrity that is hateful" (p. 23).

Conclusion

Today, writers no longer shy away in discussing the details of their illnesses. Since the publication of *On Being Ill* there has been an absolute reversal in literary sensibilities. Today, authors write about illness and health as subjects in themselves. Indeed, novelist Jonathan Franzen has recently observed that "Health ... is a topic of such importance to the culture that every book now published, including novels, could arguably be shelved there" (2002).

Even venerable medical journals now feature poetry and literature related to health and medicine – *JAMA*, the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, *The Lancet* and the *BMJ* all regularly publish such subjective personal material.

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Dr. Berry-Cabán, when not teaching epidemiology or conducting research, writes poetry. His interest in Virginia Woolf was spearheaded by the fact that he had never read anything by Ms Woolf and thought it was about time. Since reading *On Being Ill* he has also read *To the Lighthouse*.

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