Virginia Woolf Through Disability Studies

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the

Prerequisite for Honors

in the Department of English

April 2023
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Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible—nothing would have been possible—without Professor Rodensky, who has given me, throughout my four years at Wellesley, such generous attention and care. In Professor Rodensky’s class Modern British Novel, I first encountered Woolf’s writing and made up my mind to become an English major. Professor Rodensky has taught me not only how to read and write, but also how to stay peaceful and strong (and humorous!) when my panicked mind tells me everything is falling apart. I cannot begin to express my gratitude for her.

I would like to thank Professor Hickey, who has given me such kind love and encouragement. Her Keats seminar is the most beautiful class I have taken. I had never known the charm of words before her class. I would like to thank Professor Cain, whose warmth and passion I feel in every discussion with him. I can never forget the fascinating experience of taking Hemingway at midnight for seven weeks in such a loving and thought-provoking environment. I am deeply indebted to Professor Hodge, who leads me on a life-changing year-long journey through 19th century Russian literature with such insight, enthusiasm, and kindness. I am incredibly fortunate, grateful, and happy that they agree to serve on my thesis committee.

My thanks go also to the English Department at Wellesley—How lucky am I to have found my home here! Thank you Professor Wall-Randell, for teaching me my first ever English class with a warm and open heart and for opening my eyes to Renaissance literature. Thank you Professor Bidart and Professor Chiasson for giving me a nurturing and supportive space to write poetry. Thank you Professor González for leading my way into the fascinating world of queer literature and queer theory. I also especially want to thank professors I met in my senior year. Professor Ko gives such charismatic lectures about Shakespeare and brings Shakespeare to my life beyond the class. He also tells the best jokes and has the best gestures. I wish I had met Professor Lee sooner—her class on capitalism has not only changed the way I think about my life, but also opened my eyes to a most fascinating kind of literary research. I owe everything to the English Department. It is here that I truly have begun to learn to read and write.

I want to thank Dr. Lello, who led me onto this project two years ago in a series of supervisions I am so fortunate to undertake, Professor Haynes, who draws my attention to the rich field of disability studies, Professor Ricks, who encourages me to challenge Woolf, and Professor Fernald, who gives me many helpful suggestions.

And my friends—I cannot live without phone calls, long email exchanges, random text messages, lunchtime chats, and walks around Boston that I share with them. I am also incredibly grateful to my mum and dad, who trust my judgment and believe in my decision even when I don’t have a clue what I am doing. Their love keeps me going every day.

The thesis itself is really a private training ground rather than a public presentation. But let it serve as an occasion for me not to take for granted my most happy four years at Wellesley studying English literature with such wonderful people around me.
Introduction

This thesis reads Virginia Woolf through disability studies. What is disability? Many of us might have in mind the image of someone in a wheelchair or with a crutch—we say they are disabled because they need an external appliance or aide to function in the world. Disability is located in the person, we might think, which is why when we think of disability we imagine an isolated person with well-defined, visible medical impairments. And yet on many other occasions not involving the disabled, we might find fault with the environment rather than with the person. We say a building is ill-designed, for example, when it does not have an elevator and we have to pant our way through its multiple flights of stairs. We do not say that a person who expects an elevator in a multi-story building needs treatment, nor do we come up with a term to marginalize this person. We say an elevator is a necessary component of a building, whereas a ramp might be merely a good asset. But where do we draw the line? Many things we now might consider essential in our lives—keyboards, electric toothbrushes, and bendy straws—were originally invented for people with disabilities.

As more and more newly invented gadgets make their way into our daily life, it becomes impossible to tell where a human being ends and the environment they live in begins (though, I would argue, there is no point in history where such a distinction has made sense). If we build infrastructure while keeping in mind that some people move around by walking on their feet while others by sitting in a wheelchair, for example, then neither group will encounter impairments in their mobility. An impairment is generated by a building without a ramp, not by a person in a wheelchair. Another important reason why disability is more social than biological is that, as Ato Quayson compellingly notes, certain impairments are a direct result of being in a social class under a specific social structure, living in an area impacted by current or previous
warfare, or even being subject to a capitalist means of production (3). What we think of as “local
disabilities” result from “global capitalism” (3). Perhaps the most important and recurring insight
of disability studies is that disability is not located in a person but involves the interaction
between a person with bodily variations and the environment they find themselves in.

In this sense, disability studies is very much in conversation with other theories of
identity— theories of gender, sexuality, and race, for example—which we are more familiar with.

In “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities” Stuart Hall argues that

one of the main functions of concepts is that they give us a good night’s rest. Because
what they tell us is that there is a kind of stable, only very slowly changing ground inside
the hectic upsets, discontinuities, and ruptures of history. Around us history is constantly
breaking in unpredictable ways but we, somehow, go on being the same. (65)

Here, Hall is thinking in particular of concepts of identity which adhere to the conception of the
self as “self-sufficient” (64), a kind of Cartesian cogito which exists independently of its
environment and remains permanently of the same nature. Hall questions whether there is really
something essential about the self that withstands all changes in the environment. He concludes
that such a conception of the self is a mere illusion, a form of comfort. Later in the essay, Hall
writes that “identities are never completed, never finished […] they are always, as a subjectivity
itself is, in process” (69). The reason why identities are never completed and always in motion is
that any identity is subject to the environment it finds itself in, the particular discourse in which it
is defined, and the relevant world historical conditions.

Judith Butler expresses a similar idea in Bodies that Matter, pushing Hall’s point even
further by arguing that the environment not only affects, but also forms the subject in the first
place: “the discursive condition of social recognition precedes and conditions the formation of
the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject” (171, emphasis
Butler’s). This, I think, is also Marx’s point that society makes an individual, rather than the
other way around (though Marx’s emphasis would have been on the mode of production rather than the social discourse). To continue along this line of thinking, disability as a concept or form of identity is the result of a particular socio-linguistic discourse, which then results in someone being identified as disabled. Ironically, it is not the case, as we would think, that a biological feature marks someone as disabled. Rather, it is the case that the relevant discourse forms someone as disabled, and then looks for biological evidence which proves the already established identity. In short, the concept of disability is not as straightforward as we think—it already carries with it a set of narratives and representations which subjects are born into before they are identified in any way. In Butler’s terms, bodies are established “at the limits of available ontologies, available schemes of intelligibility” (170). When we think of an isolated person as disabled, we are already operating under an ideology—a scheme of intelligibility—unawares. Similarly, to think of the abled body as a biological concept is to ignore the by no means biological discourse which gives birth to concepts of ability and disability in the first place.

To answer the question of why read Woolf through disability studies, I think the fact that a writer creates characters with (what we would recognize as) disabilities is not the only, nor a good reason why this writer should be read through the lens of disability studies. It is not my aim in this thesis to measure Woolf’s worth as a writer against the criterion of how she treats her disabled characters (fairly, unfairly, for instance). Rather, like any theory which deals with personal identity, disability studies is not about certain biological features, but about how every one of us understands ourselves in conditions not of our own choosing. What I find a bit frustrating about current scholarship on Woolf and disability studies is precisely that scholars mostly take the approach of celebrating Woolf for representing a disabled character’s resistance to the conventional patriarchal order or criticizing Woolf for treating a disabled character
thoughtlessly (or worse). The scholarly debate is shaped by a binary distinction between the disabled (feminine and subversive) and the abled (masculine and normative). I recognize the significance of this approach, and yet I think it defines disability both too narrowly and in ways that focus on the body (a disabled character is someone who limps or who is blind or deaf). Disability studies is at its best, I think, when individuals aren’t treated as isolated biological entities but are instead situated in the environment which defines them.

To the extent I have an overarching argument it is this: I contend that disability studies can help illuminate aspects of Woolf’s writing which have been perplexing to me and other critics. Analyzing a novel through one specific theoretical framework offers a more or less incomplete reading, and yet I think we make new discoveries by seeing where one theory will take us.

In chapter 1, I begin by exploring representations of “accommodation” in Woolf’s 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. This chapter rethinks how Septimus Smith and Clarissa Dalloway are doubles, a claim often discussed in the secondary literature. Unlike other critics who bring Septimus and Clarissa together by reading Septimus’s disability out of the text, I bring these two characters together by showing that they are connected by their disability (as I define it in the chapter), though Septimus is clearly the more conventionally disabled character. I argue that Woolf represents Septimus’s mental disabilities—his hallucinations and end-of-the-world thinking—as the result not only of the battle-traumas he suffered during the war but also the responses to the trauma by the post-war London in which he lives.

Both Clarissa’s and Septimus’s disabilities, I argue, stem from not only their mental and physiological conditions (Clarissa’s weak heart and Septimus’s anxiety/paranoia brought on by war trauma), but also from the world which, in its insistence on normative behavior, both
isolates them and then forces them to adapt to the normative world or be exiled from it. In my conclusion, I offer a new reading of the novel’s quite upsetting ending, where Clarissa celebrates Septimus’s suicide. In an attempt to comfort herself, Clarissa chooses to ignore the fact that the normative pressures of the world have driven Septimus to suicide—the very same pressures that have exiled her to an attic, letting her out only to produce the party that affirms the normative world. Though Clarissa has, thus far, been better at making accommodations than Septimus, the novel ultimately leaves attentive readers with an upsetting sense of foreboding about Clarissa’s future.

Chapter 2 considers Woolf’s own relation to illness and disability by examining passages from her essays, diaries, and letters. When I began my thesis, I took at face value the by-now familiar claim that Woolf challenged conventional beliefs about illness, that she was a champion of the infirm and re-wrote illness as an often-transcendent state of being. And yet, right from the start I struggled to square this received wisdom with the blatantly offensive remarks about illness and disability in her diary. The chapter begins with two such remarks written in 1915 and 1904 respectively, and grapples with them in the context of the life of Woolf’s half-sister Laura Makepeace Stephen, a child from Leslie Stephen’s first marriage. Laura was diagnosed with “imbecility” and sent to an asylum by Leslie Stephen. Woolf refers to Laura across a large time span in her letters, each time using a somewhat distant and matter-of-fact tone. Yet, these letters show how Laura haunts Woolf’s mind and makes Woolf anxious, eager to distance herself from Laura. Though Woolf’s fears do not excuse her insensitive (or worse) remarks, they do complicate the picture—Woolf’s attack might be more inwardly than outwardly directed.

In the bulk of the chapter, I engage critics who have argued that Woolf has a subversively positive attitude toward temporary illness and a conventionally negative attitude toward
permanent disability. I cast doubt on this view by analyzing Woolf’s 1926 essay “On Being Ill,” which has been largely acknowledged as an essay that both celebrates illness and resists modernity’s obsession with progress. I argue that Woolf’s depiction of illness in the essay is problematic. Stepping back from the essay, I conclude that the only “ill” person Woolf will valorize is someone whose illness is exactly like Woolf’s. Surprisingly, Woolf presents a romanticized rewriting of illness which largely ignores the pain inherent in illness that an ordinary person suffers from in their daily life. Though at the beginning of the essay, Woolf promises to make up for the literary tradition where the mind is always prioritized over the body, nowhere in the essay does she really write about the suffering body itself. Woolf’s skillful literary recreation (which I further highlight by looking at Woolf’s 1924 essay “Thunder at Wembley”) dodges the physical reality she purportedly aims to reveal. At the end of the day, Woolf’s treatment of illness still remains troublingly evasive.

I end this chapter by looking into Woolf’s own unwillingness to identify herself as a person with illness or disability, though she suffers persistently from manic and depressive states. When she acknowledges her illnesses, she depicts them as not just temporary but also in some sense voluntary—that is to say, she claims that she makes herself ill. I interpret this unwillingness as Woolf’s insecurity about herself as a writer and a person who wishes to be taken seriously in a society still heavily influenced by conventional values. As a conclusion to this chapter—but more as another aspect worth thinking about—I characterize Woolf’s relation to disability with the help of Sigmund Freud’s concept of ambivalence, theorized in his 1899 book *The Interpretation of Dreams*. With the help of this concept, I bring out both Woolf’s appreciation of the subversive potential of disability and her awareness of the hostile social judgment which she fears being subject to.
Chapter 3 takes a different approach to disability studies by thinking of disability not as a form of identity, but as temporal and partial—not integral to a person but manifested in a specific action. Apart from the intersection with other theories of identity, theories about disability are uniquely broad and subtle—they can be about seemingly abled bodies not quite doing what they aim to do or doing so imperfectly, thereby troubling the boundary between ability and disability. The action that embodies disability in this chapter is “fumbling,” which involves using our hands and fingers clumsily, nervously, and ineffectively. I start the chapter with Woolf’s remark in her 1939 autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past” that she was made to fumble for words she did not know after her mother’s death, and her subsequent remark in the same essay that her 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* helped her get rid of her obsession with her mother. *To the Lighthouse* will serve as a thread joining various aspects of this chapter—to explore how Woolf fumbles out of her obsession—though the chapter also draws heavily from Woolf’s essays, letters, diaries and her 1931 novel *The Waves*.

In this chapter, I identify two kinds of fumbling across Woolf’s writing: “fumbling for” and “fumbling with.” “Fumbling for” involves an agitated pursuit of a specific goal, be it a word, an object, or some abstract notion. Woolf and her characters almost always fail at their fumbling—the very act involves an element of embarrassment. And yet, I argue in the chapter that Woolf remakes the struggling in the act of “fumbling for” into a new possibility. When we fumble for something, our attention is refocused somewhere else and our unthinking directness is disrupted. It might be exactly Woolf’s point that the original goal we had in mind shall not be achieved, so that we realize what we need might lie somewhere we have not expected. I draw a connection between the aesthetics of the 18th century playwright William Congreve’s comedies which Woolf thinks highly of, and those of *To the Lighthouse*, where readers are caught off
guard by obituary-like death announcements that redirect their attention. I push this point further by showing that Woolf thinks of the disability inherent in small acts like fumbling and stumbling as the natural state of things. For Woolf, to walk is to stumble, to speak is to stutter, to express oneself is to fumble for words. After all, *To the Lighthouse* is a novel about failings—almost any enterprise the characters embark on starts by being abated, beginning with James’s frustrated desire to go to the lighthouse.

I then take up the act of “fumbling with,” which involves the handling of an object aimlessly, often in a state of confusion or nervousness. I begin by looking at how Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* and Bernard in *The Waves* fumble with words casually in their mind and then become trapped into thinking or saying something they do not mean. I associate these instances of being led astray by words with Woolf’s resistance against words being forced into usefulness, theorized in her essay “Craftsmanship.” Woolf argues that a word must present a thousand possibilities rather than being pinned down to one specific meaning. Thinking with Angela Leighton, I show that Woolf makes words express a thousand possibilities by transforming words into objects which she fumbles with in her narration. I dive into *To the Lighthouse* and show how potentially clichéd words and phrases such as “nothing,” “some one had blundered,” and “we perished, each alone” shed their semantic meaning and take on a kind of paralinguistic fuzziness. By converting these words and phrases into half objects, Woolf manages to make them serve her narration without firming up into a clichéd meaning. Though Woolf does not directly employ “fumble” in these instances, the repetition of these words and phrases throughout the novel, and how they are dropped, picked up, and passed between characters, seem to me a no less potent illustration of the act of fumbling with. The purposelessness inherent in fumbling, which might be seen as confusion and ineffectiveness,
opens up for Woolf aesthetic potentialities much in line with her own conception of what language can do.

Having sketched the outline of each chapter, I wish to say a few words about why I end up challenging Woolf in the first two chapters, and what I have learned in the process. In the composition of this thesis, I have often struggled to communicate what I appreciate most about Woolf. Some of Woolf’s sentences in To the Lighthouse and Mrs. Dalloway still remain among the most beautiful and revealing sentences I have ever read, and yet my thesis gives little space to them. To the Lighthouse and Mrs. Dalloway are among my favorite novels. And yet, at the same time, I have come to feel that it is perhaps Woolf’s lyrical genius that has kept readers from examining closely, carefully what her novels and essays affirm. Is it really so wonderful that Septimus Smith jumps out of a window? Is illness a transcendent state? In a sense, my thesis is very much a resistance to the way Woolf’s writing manipulates readers into overlooking what should not be overlooked, and is a commitment to taking moments in Woolf’s writing seriously and revealing what she has not really thought through. Woolf often deploys an arch tone in her writing, which some readers have interpreted as her smart humor, and yet in the composition of this thesis I have come to realize that such a tone is more often than not a disguise which masks Woolf’s unwillingness to deal with painful problems. As she laughs at readers who clumsily go too far in their interpretation, she also exposes her own insecurity about having treated the subject skillfully, cleverly, but in the end dishonestly. I feel Woolf’s insincerity most distinctly in Mrs. Dalloway and “On Being Ill.” I think that even without a disability studies lens, the insincerity (or thoughtlessness) in these two pieces of writing is still very much noticeable. Disability studies is therefore not a new criterion of assessment, but a way to bring out more subtleties in Woolf’s writing.
Works Cited


When we first meet Septimus Smith, we find him asking himself a terrifying question: “The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?” (12). The question, for him, is not a rhetorical one. It soon becomes clear that the precariousness of the world obsesses him: “The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames” (12). More often than not, we find him staring into space, anticipating some horror that he believes is bound to happen. Readers cannot help but feel not just that something is “wrong,” but, more specifically, something is “wrong” with him. Compared with Septimus, the Clarissa Dalloway who greets us on the novel’s first page seems to embody a complex but recognizably stable and functional self. She is organizing a party and is able to go out alone on her morning errands—buying gloves and flowers, feeling refreshed by the London streets. Yet we soon learn that “she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day” (7). This sense of danger is redolent of the feelings which mark Septimus’s madness. Right from the start of the novel, Clarissa and Septimus are connected, though they (famously) never meet. Many critics have written about the connections between Septimus and Clarissa, but not through the lens of disability or disability studies. In the following analysis, I make the case that Woolf deploys Septimus’s explicit disability (and the world’s responses to it) to make Clarissa’s disabilities more visible to readers and to critique the culture that insists that both Septimus and Clarissa make accommodations (the former unsuccessfully and the later successfully) to adapt to the culture’s normative, ableist expectations. And yet, while so much of the novel interrogates ableism, the ending ironically affirms it.

Before proceeding with my analysis, I want to pause to consider what “disability” means. Needless to say, there are readily available definitions. Disability studies scholars have turned to
dictionary definitions to demonstrate their inadequacies. Where in common usage, we understand a disability as “a physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities” (“Disability”), disability studies scholars identify this as a specifically medical model of disability, which constructs disability as an illness requiring medical intervention (Couser 106). In this model, the emphasis is put solely on the person, whose impairment (whether physical or mental) requires fixing in one way or another. Most disability studies scholars reject this model and endorse instead a social model of disability, according to which disability is an interaction between people with impairments and environmental barriers which hinder their full participation in society (Adams, Reiss, and Serlin 8). In short, this model sees disability as the joint product of individual conditions and social barriers. The coupling of biological and social factors produces a more fluid concept. A condition might be a disability in one culture—where barriers prevent an individual’s participation—but not in another. And, as importantly, the society itself is part of what produces the disability. To the extent something needs changing, it isn’t just the disabled person. In seeing Septimus and Clarissa as disabled characters, I emphasize the social/environmental barriers which not only lead to but also constitute their disabilities. Both characters have conditions expressible in medical terms and both receive medical treatment, but their illnesses are not in and of themselves what make them disabled. It is Woolf’s depiction of their social exclusion—their limited participation—which marks their disabilities. In showing the parallel between Septimus and Clarissa, a character who has very seldom been associated with disability in the secondary literature, I wish to challenge the entrenched binary between the abled and the disabled and illuminate how a disabling social environment potentially affects everyone.
I understand ableism as the perception of the world from the exclusive perspective of the able-bodied and able-minded, disregarding the existence and needs of people with disabilities. Like racism and sexism which involve false, essentialist, biased understandings of race, gender, and sexual orientation, ableism is a form of discrimination deeply rooted in the problematic binary between ability and disability, assuming a rigid—more often than not biological—definition of disability. Given that “ableism” is a term first used in the 1980s in activist literature (“Ableism”), five decades after the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1925, one might question the appropriateness of applying this term—and its associated disability terminology—to Woolf’s text. Yet the depiction of disabled characters in literary texts has played a relevant part in disability studies, tracing back, for example, to Homer’s depiction of the blind Demodoc in *Odyssey* and the medieval and renaissance depiction of mentally disabled court jesters (Mitchel and Snyder 127). The analysis of these “disability narratives,” as they are called in disability studies literature, aims to trace the change in our understanding of disability rather than laying claims on the ideology of their authors.

In literary criticism, elements of disability in modernist texts have also been analyzed with an awareness of their historical background. Maren Tova Linett in her book *Bodies of Modernism*, for example, exposes problematic depictions of disabled characters in modernist texts, such as the romantic depiction of blindness in D.H. Lawrence’s story “The Blind Man” (Linett 80), and the insistence on oralism and the preclusion of deafness in Carson McCullers’ novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (Linett 98). Linett’s analysis of the disabled characters sheds light on modernist aesthetics and conceptions of reality. As a form of personal identity, disability helps us understand literary characters more deeply, which might shape our reading of the
literary text as a whole. Contemporary disability terminology makes us see certain aspects of these characters otherwise overlooked, which are there even in the absence of well fleshed-out descriptions. Disability in literary texts has too often been associated with limping feet or slanted shoulders, but these apparent physical impairments are far from the only manifestations of disability. Exploring the rich, subtle subjective experiences of characters with disabilities can only enrich our readings of texts and our understanding of the human condition more generally. I wish to explore these subtleties in my reading of *Mrs. Dalloway* with a special focus on the identities of Septimus and Clarissa most closely associated with disability.

Septimus becomes mentally ill after returning from the war, where he has lost his close friend Evans. Death has haunted him since the war, either in the form of the world threatening to burst into flames (12) or of Evans coming back to him from the dead (50). Clarissa, in turn, has experienced death even more intimately. She is recovering from a serious heart condition. Peter Walsh pictures her “falling where she stood, in her drawing room” (36), as if she had had a stroke. While it is not clear in the passage whether this sequence is only Peter’s imagination, or he has learned about it in a letter, we can still feel the intensity of the sudden attack associated with Clarissa’s heart condition. It exists, if not in reality, at least in anticipation. Peter Walsh recalls—or imagines—in particular “the sudden loudness of the final stroke tolled for death that surprised in the midst of life” (36). This keen awareness of death “in the midst of life”—the sense that life can in any moment be snapped away from her—dominates Clarissa’s mind. When she learns that she is not invited to Lady Bruton’s lunch party (an exclusion I take up below), she feels immediately “the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced; how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing” (23). In other words, she feels her time running out. Suddenly, she feels “shrivelled, aged, breathless” (23). Near the
end of the novel, Clarissa’s fear of death is formulated more elaborately: “there was the terror; the overwhelming incapacity, one’s parents giving it into one’s hand, this life, to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely; there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear” (130). Clarissa finds it impossible to live her life “serenely” as if death were not waiting for her at the other end.

The horror of death so much on Septimus’s and Clarissa’s mind stems not only from their specific obsessions but also from the social world they inhabit. Indeed, from the very beginning of the novel, Woolf affirms Clarissa’s sense of a precarious world when she responds to a motor car backfiring in Bond Street. As Clarissa is enjoying shopping at a florist’s, the loud sound intrudes upon her thoughts “oh! A pistol shot in the street outside!” (11). “The violent explosion” makes her “jump” (11). Septimus also hears the backfiring car, and he, too, is terrified: “some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames” (12). Although passers-by gossip over the identity of the passenger in the motor car, which makes the incident seem as mundane as anything else, Woolf shows how disturbed they really are: “in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire” (14). The motor car backfire, in its resemblance to an actual pistol shot, reminds them of World War I. Through the incident, Woolf shows that the shadow of the war and its destruction lurks not only in Septimus’s and Clarissa’s mind, but also on the mind of everyone in London. As she writes, “the surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed something very profound” (14).

The motor car backfire is followed immediately by another alarming incident—“the sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd” (16). As Sarah Cole notes,
“the airplane had already, by the 1920s, established itself as a major technological legacy of war” (Cole 249). When the airplane in the novel “drop[s] dead down” and “soar[s] straight up” of its own accord (16), concern about an aerial bombardment is very much on on-lookers’ mind. As it turns out, the airplane serves commercial purposes—possibly promoting the sales of toffee. Like the motor car incident, agitation and anxiety give way to curiosity and amusement, as passers-by jointly look up at the sky, trying to identify letters carved out by the plane. Yet as Cole notes, this seemingly innocent incident shows how “the reality of killing and death” still lurks in everyday objects, implicitly affirming Septimus’s vision that his dead friend Evans still hides in fibers of trees (Cole 252). Moreover, Paul Saint-Amour points out that the power of this false alarm lies “in its capacity to [...] shatter the citizenry’s peace of mind” through “suspended, future-conditional violence” (Saint-Amour 140, 142). In this sense, Septimus’s anxious anticipation of where the whip of the world will descend—far from a mere mad hallucination—lingers potently in the air of London. Though the others suppress their anxiety, Septimus enacts it.

In both the motor car and airplane scenes, passers-by are left in bafflement, knowing only that “greatness was passing” in the car (14) and that the plane is on “a mission of the greatest importance” (16). The two scenes in direct proximity to each other reveal how consequential the power disparity is between the “empire” which brings war to the city and the civilians at the mercy of decisions in which they play no part. Such is the reality that Septimus and Clarissa find themselves in: they inhabit a world that not only has no interest in their participation in it but also makes such participation difficult if not impossible. As Christine Froula notes, “Septimus’s experience of his society’s disavowed violence is labeled madness” (Froula 127). Enacting his memories of war, Septimus becomes a problem for this world now eager to get rid of him. There
is no denying that war has changed him, but his post-war disability is a product of both his mental challenges and his world’s response to them. He is penalized, in Froula’s words, for “bring[ing] the war home in his very person” (Froula 146). Yet even on the edge of society, Septimus still embodies (as does Clarissa) the fear haunting everyone living in a post-war society, as the motor car and airplane scenes show.

While it seems that Clarissa’s fear of death and sense of danger are effectively absorbed and therefore neutralized by her daily undertakings, only coming to the surface harmlessly in certain moments of vulnerability, Woolf suggests that her fear—like Septimus’s madness—is rooted in the way she perceives the world around her. And, what’s more, she must manage her fear in order to navigate that world. While Clarissa is walking on the street, her mind circles back to the idea of death; she asks herself, “did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her” (8). She comes up with a theory, which, as Peter remembers, she has developed as a young girl (108): she could survive “on the ebb and flow of things,” “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, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself” (8). Uncannily, Septimus has a very similar feeling as he sits at the park staring at the world around him: “the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock” (49). Both Clarissa and Septimus feel themselves being acted upon by some force that lays them down or spreads them out, so that they have no fixed shape: a “mist” for Clarissa and a “veil” for Septimus. In other words, they anticipate being vaporized or made transparent. I see this as a form of exclusion from the world, an exclusion which dissolves the self so that their very existence in the world—to the extent one can so call it—becomes barely visible.
Yet even though Clarissa’s mist and Septimus’s veil both convey a recognizably Woolfian idea of self-dissolution that creates near-invisibility (e.g. Rachel Vinrace’s desire to merge with the sea and the sky in *The Voyage Out*; Mrs. Ramsay’s erasure of her personality as “a wedge-shaped core of darkness” in *To the Lighthouse*), the two images have strikingly different undertones. Clarissa’s is romantic and poetical: her friends lift her as tree branches lift the mist on fine summer early mornings, whereas Septimus conjures the disturbingly gruesome: flesh melts off and something—who knows what?—macerates his body into fibers, evoking his war trauma. Septimus imagines himself surviving as nerve fibers meshed into a veil, the residue of a series of tortures, with the “nerve” presumably still transmitting pain. As Anne Fernald observes, here Septimus alludes to Book Five of the *Odyssey*, on which Woolf, very much aware of its violence, comments in her notebook “at last he was dashed against rocks; a very odd image comes—his skin was torn off by the rocks” (Fernald 251). Woolf implicitly sets the serenity and freedom of the mist against the world’s brutality that dissolves (“macerate” suggests the dissolution in some liquid) flesh into nothing but a transparency. What seems at first serene disappearance from the world, when Clarissa describes it, becomes very much its opposite when Septimus reimagines it. In short, the brutality which her double Septimus embodies when he imagines being disembodied troubles the figuration of Clarissa’s absence as a form of beautiful and loving support: friends lifting one up and spreading one out. Her exclusion from daily life turns out to be better for Clarissa and better for the world. Not so Septimus. Like Odysseus, he lives in exile, though his exile is permanent, and, worse still, he remains alive to the tortures of being present in the form determined for him.

Woolf first brings out Septimus’s placelessness—his exclusion from the world’s activities—when she situates him on a bench at a public park gazing in front of him in the middle
of the day. Rather than taking a rest between obligations, he is sitting because he has nowhere else to go, no job, no important business, no house chores for a stable home. Septimus’s suffering makes him an object of speculation and distrust for other park dwellers, but no one cares or dares to approach him. Peter Walsh correctly observes that both Septimus and Rezia “look so desperate,” a desperation which he mistakes for an insignificant, even “amusing” lovers’ quarrel (51). In the eyes of the young Maisie Johnson, new to London, who asks Rezia for directions, “both seemed queer [...] the man—he seemed awfully odd” (20). Septimus’s oddness is then compared to that of “invalids most of them in Bath chairs” (20). Maisie knows “something is up”—“that young man on the seat had given her quite a turn”—and walks away (20). The scene is charged with a sense of shock: “Horror! horror! she wanted to cry” (20). As Janet Lyon observes, Septimus’s “unbuffered, unanticipated appearance in public” shows people’s shared idea that mental disability “‘certainly’ ought to have remained secret and private” (Lyon 568).

Nevertheless, Septimus finds his own ways to make life bearable for himself. He chooses to notice ordinary things around him and experiences joy in doing so: “wherever he looked at the houses, at the railings, at the antelopes stretching over the palings, beauty sprang instantly. To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy” (50). Importantly, Woolf shows how Septimus’s appreciation of the ordinary things is his only way of imagining a welcoming world which gives him a place in it. Looking in momentary ecstasy at houses and trees, Septimus reflects: “we welcome, the world seemed to say; we accept; we create” (50). The “we” Septimus imagines suggests inclusivity: Septimus “creates” an accepting world around him, a world filled with the vitality of life—traces of able-minded and able-bodied people participating in life in their “houses” around their “railings.” Yet Septimus’s imaginary inclusion in the world is only
possible through observation rather than participation. As it turns out, even this compromised form of accommodation (his accommodation of the world—never the world’s accommodation of him) fails as the novel progresses.

Similarly, Clarissa feels the need to create a world around her, suggesting that she, like Septimus, cannot find a place for herself in the world as it is, unless she makes it up herself. As Clarissa steps out of her house on a June morning, she experiences a moment of ecstasy connected to simple, ordinary life, the kinds of details that attract Septimus: “in people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging, brass bands; barrel organs” (4). She then ponders, “Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh” (4). As many readers have noticed, Woolf positions Clarissa as the artist who can create art out of the business of ordinary life. I agree, but I also want to complicate this reading by reconsidering these acts of creation as Clarissa’s responses to her exclusion from life. Significantly, Woolf already tells us—from the point of view of Clarissa’s neighbor Scrope Purvis—that she has been ill: “grown very white since her illness” (3). Standing on the curb, Clarissa “stiffen[s]” as Durtnall’s van passes, as if needing to muster her strength to withstand all the activity (3). Even the “hush” that Clarissa registers, waiting for Big Ben to strike, might in fact be “her heart, affected, they said, by influenza” (4). She aligns herself not only with the “veriest frumps,” but also with the alcoholics on the steps, who likewise engage in such acts of creation, which is why, she explains, they “cannot be dealt with by Acts of Parliament” (4).

But what does that mean, exactly? That the alcoholics are outside the reach of the law—cannot be rehabilitated in an institution—because they can build the world the way Clarissa
does? The world does not accommodate the sick and the addicted; instead, they must navigate
the world by creating one they can live in and hope that society does not harm them. The
evocation of the political world here also suggests the exclusion of the disabled from that world.
Neither Septimus nor Clarissa can find their place in the political world where promising, able-
bodied young and middle-aged men are supposed to take posts, so they both create a world
around them, stripped of its grand narratives and made up of ordinary things, as their attempt to
accommodate themselves in a world indifferent to their needs. Whereas Septimus’s exclusion
from the world, as an explicitly mentally disabled character, seems obvious, it might be
counterintuitive at first to attribute exclusion—and the need for self-accommodation—to
Clarissa. If Septimus’s place of isolation is the bench at the public park, then Clarissa’s place of
isolation is the attic in her house.

We first have a glimpse of the attic Clarissa sleeps in when she retreats to that space—her
private room—after having learned that Lady Bruton has invited her husband, not her, to her
lunch party. In some sense, this exclusion begets a further exclusion. The first time we see the
attic it is associated with isolation and loneliness: “There was an emptiness about the heart of
life; an attic room” (23). Clarissa no longer participates in her married life, but rather reads at
night as an observer of “the retreat from Moscow” depicted in Baron Marbot’s Memoirs (23),
which, as Elizabeth Abel notes, is tellingly “a victory achieved by icy withdrawal” (Abel 37).
Clarissa’s retreat from life to her attic has an equally icy undertone. The emptiness of her life is
tied to the condition of her heart (an apt organ which connects the physical disease with the
mental strain which people hereafter deem too much for her). We learn that “the House sat so
long that Richard insisted, after her illness, that she must sleep undisturbed” (23). Here we have
a quintessential containment of the sick woman: being ordered to rest alone in an isolated room
by someone who cares about them. (Woolf herself was ordered to rest and not engage in activities deemed too “exacting” for her.) Richard fears that his late return from work would disturb his wife, given how she needs to rest. Yet we know that Clarissa sleeps badly anyway, downstairs or up; she is always still awake when Richard returns home from work (24). Later in the novel, Woolf gives us another glimpse into Clarissa’s restless nights, telling us that she sometimes stays wide awake until three o’clock, reading and wandering between random thoughts (96).

While Richard is far from a threatening figure in the novel, he is a man who immerses himself in and conforms to social structures. Through him, Woolf implies the consequences of not following doctor’s orders: He insisted that she must sleep undisturbed. The command to rest is connected to the separate attic space, a place away from the able-bodied. What’s more, Clarissa’s attic room is where “women must put off their rich apparel. At midday they must disrobe” (23). Just as the necessity for women to disrobe is dictated by societal conventions and cannot be easily overruled, Richard’s proposal also operates as an imperative that the sick must rest in isolation. The insistence on rest then becomes a method of erasure: “narrower and narrower would her bed be” (23), she thinks to herself. No longer able to be a sexual partner for her husband, she has no place in the marital bed, or perhaps any bed. Abel sees Clarissa’s bed as associated with “a grave” promising death (Abel 37). Removed from the marital bedroom, Clarissa now occupies a “special” space just for her—one that threatens to eliminate her entirely. It is tempting to see the attic space as a haven, a place where Clarissa can escape from the pressures of marital/heteronormative sex and her domestic duties, but no sooner has such an idea settled in our mind than Woolf disrupts the image by summing it up in an ominous way: “So the room was an attic; the bed narrow; and lying there reading, for she slept badly, she could not
dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet” (23). The attic is not a room for the able-bodied; the bed is not comfortable; the sleep is not sound; the virginity is at once suffocating and unnatural.

Woolf shows this link between disability and exclusion most explicitly in Septimus’s doctor appointments, especially in his conference with Sir William Bradshaw, who realizes the gravity of Septimus’s situation but who, instead of hearing him out, orders him to rest in one of his “homes” for six months without the company of his relatives (70). The brutal logic behind this order is to exclude the disabled from the world so that others do not need to worry about them, and to allow them back into the world if, during their time of exclusion, the medical world can “cure” them and they, in their turn, can figure out some way to accommodate themselves to the able-bodied world. As Woolf explains through the mind of Rezia, “order rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months’ rest; until a man who went in weighing seven stone six comes out weighing twelve” (71). The disabled must either be “converted” into the abled or else “secluded” (71). In Ravit Reichman’s words, Sir William Bradshaw endorses “the exacting, measured division of the world” into “useful categories: healthy and ill,” which the novel resists (Reichman 57-8).

Since this reading of Sir William Bradshaw has been aptly explored in the secondary literature, I do not wish to reiterate it here, but will, instead, focus on other more frequently overlooked aspects in Septimus’s interaction with his doctors. As oppressive as Sir William’s order of exclusion is, this order is not what bothers Septimus the most (though it is what bothers Rezia the most). Even before Sir William’s order, Septimus has already found his doctor appointments intolerable, and his feelings of resistance are most often directed towards Dr. Holmes, his general practitioner, rather than Sir William. Contrary to Sir William, Dr. Holmes
does not think there is anything wrong with Septimus and does not wish to exclude him from the world. Dr. Holmes says repeatedly that “there was nothing whatever the matter with him” (66) and that he only needs to pull himself together and engage in some activities, such as cricket (19). Yet this denial of his mental disability—and the suggestion of an easy, self-evident self-accommodation—oppresses Septimus. He feels that Dr. Holmes is “on” him and that he needs to “escape, without letting Holmes know” (66). Consequently, when Septimus kills himself, it is because Dr. Holmes, not Sir William, is coming up stairs to “get him” (105).

I emphasize the importance of Dr. Holmes because I think this character reveals similarities between Septimus’s and Clarissa’s conditions. Indeed, Clarissa does not face a threat (as Septimus does) of becoming completely excluded from the world for six months in one of Sir William’s homes, but nor is this threat the determining—or rather the only—force that drives Septimus out of the world. Septimus recognizes that Sir William and Dr. Holmes are “different in their verdicts” but that they are both “judges,” who “saw nothing clear, yet ruled, yet inflicted. ‘Must’ they said” (105). In other words, it does not matter what his doctors order him to do; what Septimus cannot stand are ableist doctors who press upon him and who torture him by the simple act of speaking with him. “Bradshaw said, he must be taught to rest. Bradshaw said they must be separated. ‘Must,’ ‘must,’ why ‘must’?” Septimus demands (104). The authority of “must”—an authority which cannot be questioned—reminds us of Richard’s authority over Clarissa. Richard, as the doctor’s mouthpiece, commands that she must sleep undisturbed. When, during her party, Clarissa learns of Septimus’s death, she articulates what Septimus feels about Sir William: the doctors make life “intolerable” by “impress[ing]” their patients with their “power” (130). Through such threatening power, we see that a harmless order of goodwill (such as Richard’s) very easily tips over into a suffocating threat of death.
We find an ambiguous moment between Clarissa and Richard which I think invites a darker reading of him than has been previously presented. Richard has gone out to one of his committee meetings but he suddenly remembers that the doctor has ordered for Clarissa “an hour’s complete rest after luncheon” (85). He returns home briefly before setting out again and repeating the doctor’s order word-by-word, brings Clarissa a pillow and a quilt (85). Clarissa does what he tells her to do: “since he had brought the pillows, she would lie down…” (86). It would be unfair to read Richard’s actions as oppressive especially given that Clarissa thinks amusedly about it: “How like him! He would go on saying ‘An hour’s complete rest after luncheon’ to the end of time, because a doctor had ordered it once. It was like him to take what doctors said literally; part of his adorable, divine simplicity, which no one had to the same extent” (85). There is no question that Richard is a considerate character quite unlike Sir William or Dr. Holmes. Yet given that Woolf weaves together Septimus’s illness and Clarissa’s, a line from a doctor (evoking the image of Sir William, who demands similar precision in his instructions) which is faithfully reproduced and obeyed haunts this sequence.

Even more significantly, Woolf gives us access to some seemingly random thoughts in Richard’s mind which make us suspicious of him. When Clarissa tells him how she does not wish to invite Ellie Henderson to her party but still has to, Richard thinks to himself, “if she worried about these parties he would not let her give them” (85). Later this thought is made more explicit: “Richard merely thought it foolish of her to like excitement when she knew it was bad for her heart” (86). Richard’s idea of removing Clarissa from social life is based on the assumption that she cannot bear it. It is, as one might say, “for her own good,” thus echoing Dr. Holmes and Sir William’s claim that “excitement was the worst thing” for Septimus (99). Both Clarissa and Septimus are instructed—commanded—time and time again that they cannot get too
excited or can only participate in life as others deem wise (cricket for Septimus is fine, but not reading Shakespeare). Their disabilities are pretexts for control and exclusion.

While I argue that Clarissa and Septimus both face the same ultimatum—accommodate the world as it is or be banished from it—they obviously do not experience the same fate. Their quite different fates depend in large measure on who can protect them—on, I would argue, the social status of their spouses. The spouses transmit the doctor’s orders to the patients: Richard repeats the doctor’s words that Clarissa must rest after luncheon, just as Rezia reminds Septimus that Dr. Holmes says he needs to take up some hobby and not get overly excited. In this sense, Richard and Rezia serve as buffers between their disabled spouses and the ableist doctors. Richard is a British man with an important government post and considerable wealth. He has at least the same authority as the doctors, so that he can turn potentially threatening medical conferences into friendly chats. Rezia, however, is an Italian immigrant in Britain, a young, poor, working-class woman, who is on the margins of society.

Woolf depicts Dr. Holmes’s misogynistic attitude towards Rezia explicitly: Dr. Holmes thinks of Rezia as “quite a girl, a foreigner” (66), exposing both her marginalized place in a foreign country and her vulnerability as an object of male desire. More alarmingly, in one of his house visits, Dr. Holmes thinks to himself “really he had to give that charming little lady, Mrs. Smith, a friendly push before he could get past her into her husband’s bedroom” (66). As it turns out, the push is more of an assault than a gentle nudge. In this sequence, Rezia is protecting Septimus from Dr. Holmes, not allowing him to enter Septimus’s bedroom, but, not surprisingly, she fails. Given the power disparity, how could she do otherwise? This sequence anticipates what happens right before Septimus’s suicide, when Rezia stands on the staircase facing Dr. Holmes, “like a little hen, with her wings spread barring his passage” (105). Rezia, once again, is depicted
as “little,” and this resistance has no chance when up against Holmes. We learn that Dr. Holmes “put[s] her aside (Holmes was a powerfully built man)” (105). The friendly push quickly escalates into the offensive act of lifting someone up and putting them down—like an object—in a place deemed suitable for them. This scene is telling of what goes far beyond a mere difference in size and strength.

If, then, we see disability in the novel not as just “Clarissa Dalloway’s heart condition” or “Septimus Smith’s Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” but rather as the joint product of the individuals, their conditions and the socially-constructed barriers that undermine their participation in the world, then we can both recognize more fully the similarities between the characters and understand why Clarissa survives and Septimus does not. Septimus has optical and auditory illusions and intermittent panics that become visible and audible to others in ways that they will not accommodate and he cannot control. Neither Septimus nor Rezia have any capital—social or otherwise—and are powerless when faced with the authority of the able-bodied world (and who more able-bodied than Holmes as he charges up the stairs?). Clarissa’s heart, unlike Septimus’s mind, manifests its incapacities less visibly. More tellingly, she can adapt to the world by both accepting what it commands (going up to the attic, being excluded from luncheons) and creating her own world to inhabit. The essence of the problem Woolf imagines and leaves unresolved is that the ableist world does not accommodate Clarissa and Septimus but insists that they accommodate it.

When we finally get to Clarissa’s party, she is leaving it because she hears of Septimus’s suicide. One escape from an ableist world thus leads to another. Hearing of his death, she sees the return of her own fears of death, but she soothes them with the imagery of herself spreading out against the sky (130). But since Woolf has already connected this image to Septimus’s
gruesome one from the *Odyssey* (his nerves like a veil on the rocks), Clarissa’s attempt to transform her feelings of exclusion into a romantic ideal of transcendent presence, a mist in the trees, strikes us as a way to deny the brutality of their world. Septimus has “flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer’s area railings” (106). He is “horribly mangled” (106). The gruesome imagery in the earlier pages of the novel now finds the blood it anticipates. The “railings” that Septimus earlier on included in his recreation of the world (“wherever he looked at the houses, at the railings, at the antelopes stretching over the palings, beauty sprang instantly”) now become the instrument of his death.

And here I will go one step further and argue that the parallel I have been building between Clarissa and Septimus exposes Woolf’s ill-considered treatment of this suicide. If Clarissa’s moment of serenity by the window is romantic, it is only falsely so, and yet Woolf unambiguously celebrates Clarissa Dalloway at the end of the novel. Woolf’s celebratory tone has led critics often to read the ending as uplifting. Sabine Sautter-Leger, for example, comments that Septimus’s death is neither depressing nor in vain since Clarissa gains “redeeming insight” from it that “life is good” (Sautter-Leger 21). Jane de Gay, in turn, sees the ending as an affirmation not only that Septimus has “preserved himself from corruption” (de Gay 91) but also that Clarissa’s way of life (and her reading of Shakespeare) is admirable and subversive (de Gay 89). Yet the claims that Clarissa bestows on Septimus cannot hide the frustrating fact that Woolf has abandoned him after his suicide (Rezia is not even granted a momentary appearance at the party). When Clarissa first learns of Septimus’s death, she immediately romanticizes it, perhaps in order to make herself feel better: “Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate. […] There was an embrace in death” (130). Yet Septimus does not communicate through his death. His voice is silenced. Nor is death a defiance. Septimus very explicitly sees his death as
conforming to his doctors’ expectations, their obsessions with the patients’ tragedy, where the patients eradicate themselves from the world and thereby ease the burden on society as a whole: “It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia’s (for she was with him). Holmes and Bradshaw like that sort of thing” (105). Septimus does not embrace death. We know that “he did not want to die” (105) but feels that he has to because the world is driving him out by forcing him to fit into it.

Clarissa, like Dr. Holmes, ignores Septimus’s mental disability in her celebration of his suicide as if it is a decision made voluntarily and in a clear state of mind. Emphasizing the “corruption” (130) in the world, Clarissa “felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away” (131). She embraces the ableist idea that affirms the exclusion of the disabled from the world, though she frames her rationale for that exclusion in terms that seem to elevate the disabled: they disappear because the world is not worthy of them—they are far more superior than the world. This idea is no less problematic than Sir William’s idea that the disabled are not worthy of the world. Both ways of thinking refuse to imagine that the world plays a part in disabling Septimus. No matter how romantic the words are, the result is the same: the disabled are left to sit on doorsteps, in attics, in asylums—or to destroy themselves. In an even more troubling claim, Clarissa thinks to herself that “he made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun” (131). The agony and struggle of Septimus’s final moments before his death are rewritten by Clarissa’s romantic associations with beauty and fun. While it might be argued that Clarissa’s response cannot represent Woolf’s attitude, I think Woolf does not make an attempt to undercut it in the novel. She never asks readers to question Clarissa’s act of recreation. Instead, right after Woolf lets Clarissa return to the party, the novel proceeds from Peter’s perspective, and we are immersed in the conversation between him and Sally, as if there were no need to ponder
Clarissa’s interpretation of Septimus’s death. Peter’s celebration of Clarissa which brings the novel to an end marks ultimately, I think, Woolf’s affirmation of Clarissa and her response. Clarissa fills Peter with “extraordinary excitement” (137).

I am not alone in finding fault with Woolf’s affirmation of Clarissa’s response to Septimus’s death. Matt Franks, for one, criticizes Woolf for sacrificing Septimus to provide “a vehicle for Clarissa’s modernist epiphany about death” (Franks 63). He argues that Septimus merely serves as a plot device rather than a fully realized character (Franks 62). Yet, as I have argued, Woolf does ask us to invest in Septimus by representing his experiences in rich and complex ways. So it is all the more frustrating when his perspective is eliminated from the novel soon after his suicide. Building on Franks’s criticism, I think what makes the ending of Mrs. Dalloway hard to bear is that the character celebrated for her “modernist epiphany” affirms the conditions which force Septimus to end his life. Famously ending with “there she was” (137), the novel cannot but make one think “there he wasn’t.” What’s more, Clarissa’s capacity to continue in the world despite her fear of death and her heart condition depends on her willingness to sleep in an attic, rest, and, when allowed, attempt to create spaces in which she can be included. If she refuses to accommodate the world, a young man mangled on his neighbor’s railings makes the alternative all too clear.

When Clarissa realizes that “she felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself” (131), she is recognizing the similar ways in which the world feels intolerable to her and Septimus, which makes the act of throwing everything away appealing. Yet Woolf—quite cruelly I think—turns Clarissa against herself so that she unconsciously conspires in the logic of the ableist world. The reason that Clarissa can survive in the world is that she has found ways to accommodate herself. Septimus, in contrast, has to die because he cannot do the same.
And yet, the difference in their fate cannot mask the fact that both are subject to the same disabling conditions of a world which does not accommodate them. When Clarissa celebrates Septimus’s death, she unconsciously also celebrates the disabling conditions which threaten to exclude herself from the world should she in the future fail to accommodate herself. In this sense, Clarissa’s celebration turns against herself—all the more cruelly, in a party atmosphere which is supposed to be joyful and uplifting. That Clarissa can understand some aspects of Septimus’s life without ever having met him feels poetic and uncanny, and, as Reichman points out, the tie between Clarissa and Septimus is cemented when Clarissa leaves her party and goes to a separate room to “feel for this strange, dead man” (Reichman 60-1). Yet the close connection between them stems largely from the social conditions which disable them both, conditions which Clarissa ignores. Ultimately, as it seems to me, Woolf wants Clarissa not only to lay full claim on Septimus’s life, but also to appropriate it in the name of a worldview which finds comfort in the fact that a person whom the culture wanted to exclude has done the “brave” act of beating them to the punch.

In the end, it is deeply disturbing that Clarissa and Septimus are left on their own, even though we might admire them in their attempts to make life tolerable for themselves.
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“Disability.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2022,


“I Have Set up My Standard as an Invalid”: Woolf’s Relation to Illness and Disability

One particular diary entry haunts Woolf scholars exploring Woolf’s treatment of disability. It’s an entry she wrote in January 1915, when she was 33 years old:

On the towpath we met & had to pass a long line of imbeciles. The first was a very tall young man, just queer enough to look twice at, but no more; the second shuffled, & looked aside; & then one realised that every one in that long line was a miserable ineffective shuffling idiotic creature, with no forehead, or no chin, & an imbecile grin, or a wild suspicious stare. It was perfectly horrible. They should certainly be killed. (Diary I 13)

She sets the scene visually: walking on the towpath by the river, they meet not just a group but a “long line” and not just a long line of individuals but “a long line of imbeciles.” They must be passed (because they are walking slowly? because they are walking in different directions? Woolf doesn’t say. But either way, they must be passed). The passing means that Woolf looks at each one in the line: first the young man, whose “queerness” moves Woolf to do a double-take. Woolf registers the tall young man’s difference and it’s that difference that requires her evaluation. She seems to say after that second glance that he’s an “imbecile.” What further sends a chill down readers’ spines is Woolf’s labeling of the line of people as “idiotic creatures,” subhuman at best. Then comes the famous statement which has been quoted time and again in essays exploring Woolf and eugenics: they should certainly be killed. Not only can we find such disturbing statements about people with mental disability in Woolf’s writing, but provocative statements about people with physical disability also abound. In Woolf’s 1904 letter to Emma Vaughan, written when she was 22 years old, Woolf relates her experience in Italy:

There never was a beastlier nation than this in its railways, its streets, its shops, its beggars, and many of its habits. My dear Toad, where is a decent woman to look sometimes? We went to Prato today and it poured all the time, and we saw the only thing worth seeing, and were set upon in the streets by innumerable small boys, and cripples. We walked faster than the cripples, but one devil of a small boy had the diabolic idea of following us wherever we went; and finally promised to leave us for 2 soldi. We didn’t pay him, and he cursed us and went. Was there ever such a nation? (Letters I 139)
Woolf elaborates on the alleged “beastliness” of Italy as a nation by referring to the “cripples” she sees on the street, associating disability stereotypically with animality. Though Woolf does not directly interact with the “cripples,” her hostility toward the “innumerable small boys” (innumerable because, for Woolf, there are too many of them) is transferred onto the “cripples,” who are grouped with these boys in Woolf’s impatient glance. Once again, Woolf emphasizes the authority of her gaze: a decent woman should not be made to look at these disabilities on the street. While we might register a certain irony here—by this time Woolf is challenging the late Victorian conventions her parents represented—she nevertheless reports her attempts to flee the scene as quickly as possible. A couple lines later in the same diary entry, Woolf describes Italy as a “degenerate” country and goes on to label Germans as “brutes:” “there is a strange race that haunts Hotels—gnome like women, who are like creatures that come out in the dark.” Women with dwarfism are singled out as making up their own race; they are, like the line of people Woolf encounters on the streets, only “creatures.” Another remark in Woolf’s 1918 diary entry is ambivalent enough to be interpreted in a most horrible way: “It’s unfortunate that civilisation always lights up the dwarfs, cripples, & sexless people first. And Hampstead alone provides them” (Diary I 110).

I begin my chapter with this recitation of Woolf’s most provocative remarks not because I want to make the case that Woolf endorses eugenics and then proceed to condemn her. I am aware, as I compile this list, that I am reading unfiltered passages Woolf wrote for herself and close friends, and that Woolf might not have the slightest idea of them ever being published. I bring them up because I want to get the nasty things out first and let them serve as starting points for my exploration. These remarks have disturbed, troubled, shocked, and perplexed me, to the extent that I am not willing to roll my eyes at them as evidence of a much older generation’s
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appalling prejudices and simply move on. I want to know what they reveal about Woolf as a writer and as a creator of sympathetic characters with disabilities, both mental (such as Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*) and physical (such as Sara Pargiter in *The Years* and St John Hirst in *The Voyage Out*). In undertaking this analysis, I will first offer relevant biographical information about the Stephen family, then look closely at three of Woolf’s essays, “On Being Ill,” “Thunder at Wembley,” and “Street Haunting.” In the end, I build on Sigmund Freud’s theory of ambivalence to suggest that Woolf’s treatment of illness still remains troublingly evasive, notwithstanding scholarly attempts to make her a “champion of the ill.” I conclude this chapter with an analysis of passages that demonstrate Woolf’s own unwillingness to identify herself as a person with an illness or as disabled, though she suffers persistently from manic and depressive states.

As Woolf scholars grapple with some of the provocative remarks that I begin this chapter with, most of them raise the possibility that Woolf’s cruelty toward the people she encountered on the towpath stems largely from her own struggle with mental instability. Janet Lyon writes that “this kind of shock, for someone like Woolf, must surely extend to her own tenuous mental sovereignty” (559). She reminds us that Woolf was banished from London to the suburbs after a bout of suicidal depression, which had begun in August 1913 (557). The towpath diary entry was written from a rented room in Richmond, where Woolf was still recovering. Similarly, Hermione Lee writes in her authoritative Woolf biography that “this violent endorsement of an extreme theory of eugenics, written between two very severe breakdowns, must be understood as expressing her dread and horror of what she thought of as her own loss of control” (184). Neither Lyon nor Lee apologize for Woolf’s remarks, but they do give important context for them. In fact, apart from Woolf’s own mental illness, her childhood environment might also have had a
part to play in the towpath remark. Woolf’s half-sister, Laura Makepeace Stephen, was a person with mental disability. As Katerina Koutsantoni and Madeleine Oakley note, Laura was diagnosed with “imbecility” (4), the same term Woolf uses to label the line of people she sees on the towpath. Laura Stephen lived with Woolf in the same house until 1893, when Laura was placed in the “Earlswood Asylum for Idiots.” She was discharged in January 1897 and lived in the care of professionals until the end of her life in 1945 (Koutsantoni and Oakley 2). Woolf reflects on that time and on Laura specifically in her autobiographical essay “Old Bloomsbury”:

It was a house of innumerable small oddly shaped rooms built to accommodate not one family but three. For besides the three Duckworths and the four Stephens there was also Thackeray’s grand-daughter, a vacant-eyed girl whose idiocy was becoming daily more obvious, who could hardly read, who would throw the scissors into the fire, who was tongue-tied and stammered and yet had to appear at table with the rest of us. (Moments of Being 160)

What might first strike us about the entry is Woolf’s intentional distancing from Laura. Though Laura is a Stephen, Woolf describes her as “Thackeray’s grand-daughter,” a naming that not only illuminates the perversity of the situation (an illiterate Thakeray seems unthinkable) but also takes her out of the Stephen hereditary line that would connect the half-sisters. Woolf registers both her discomfort with having Laura at the table and Laura’s, but she describes symptoms of her “idiocy” rather nonchalantly, without investing much emotion. Yet Woolf’s awareness of Laura’s struggle is apparent across her writings. As early as 1904, Woolf writes to Violet Dickinson about her parents’ letters that had been sent to Leslie’s Stephen’s first biographer Frederic Maitland: “The history of Laura is really the most tragic thing in his [Leslie Stephen’s] life I think; and one that one can hardly describe in the life. The letters are full of her” (Letters I 164). In 1921, Woolf writes to her sister Vanessa Bell about a report she has heard of Laura: “she [Kate] told me about Laura; who is the same as ever, and never stops talking, and occasionally says, “I told him to go away” or “Put it down, then”, quite sensibly; but the rest is unintelligible”
(Letters II 492). In 1934, Laura’s name unexpectedly appears at the end of the letter Woolf writes to Vanessa, as Woolf finds herself in anxious anticipation of war: “Leonard says Laura is the one we could have spared” (Letters V 300). Whenever Woolf mentions Laura in her writing, she never goes beyond a mere report of her conditions, and we never know what Woolf thinks and feels about Laura. Yet the very fact that Laura appears in Woolf’s writing across large spans of time shows that Laura has always been on Woolf’s mind. Woolf’s attempt to distance herself from Laura, either by excluding her from the Stephen children, or by refraining from remarking on her condition, might be read as Woolf’s insecurity about her own mental state.

Leslie Stephen himself writes troubling remarks about his daughter Laura: “All in all she was extremely disturbing and extremely pathetic” (Lee 100). He writes, at the peak of his irritation and frustration with Laura, that “I long to shake the little wretch” (Lee 101). Living in the family environment where grown-ups are frustrated and at a loss about what to do with Laura, Woolf might have formed her early, rather distorted, ideas about people with mental disability. I agree with Koutsantoni and Oakley that the younger Stephen children from Leslie’s second marriage, Woolf included, may have picked up their father’s attitude towards Laura (13). While I wish to refrain from arriving at a definite conclusion about how Woolf’s early experience with Laura has informed her later towpath remark, I would like to acknowledge this formative experience which complicates the towpath remark—a lot more might have been on Woolf’s mind than the line of people who walked past her.

Woolf’s towpath remark is such a shock to readers in no small part because in Woolf’s writing we constantly sense her suspicion of the “normal,” the healthy, the conventional, and the efficient. In one of Woolf’s famously subversive essays, “On Being ill,” for example, Woolf leads us to see how illness grants us a unique vision of life. The disparity between Woolf’s
celebratory attitude toward illness and her pejorative tone toward disability has led Elizabeth Outka to conclude in her contribution to *the Oxford Handbook of Virginia Woolf* that Woolf defines temporary illness as strength but refuses to do the same for permanent disability (510-2). I agree with Outka in part, but I also think that it is often difficult to distinguish illness and disability: the terms overlap in important ways. In Woolf’s own case, her bouts of depression were temporary but chronic, always threatening to return. Such a chronic, intermittent illness troubles the boundary between a temporary illness and a permanent disability. In fact, I see Woolf’s inadequate treatment of disability in her writing as stemming from her inadequate treatment of illness.

Looking at “On Being Ill” closely, I realize that Woolf has not really rewritten illness as strength, at least not in the way we often credit her for. One of the main advantages of being ill, Woolf argues in the essay, is that there is “a childish outspokenness in illness” (104). This phrase itself is provocative in that it reminds us of Woolf’s depiction of her father Leslie Stephen. In “A Sketch of the Past,” for example, Woolf writes of her father that “he would say exactly what he thought, however inconvenient” and that “he had a godlike, yet childlike, standing in the family” (*Moments of Being* 111). In Woolf’s portrayal of her father, she attributes childish outspokenness to him—his “gush”—which Woolf had a hard time dealing with (*Moments of Being* 109). In *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay, a character based on Leslie Stephen, also repulses his children with his impulsive outbursts. He would say “straight out before everyone,” for example, “we perish, each alone” (*To the Lighthouse* 140) or “someone had blundered” (*To the Lighthouse* 19). Mrs. Ramsay at the dinner table or Cam and James in the boat would so dread him blurting out words on a whim, thereby ruining the occasion. The association with Woolf’s father gives this seemingly honorific depiction of illness an ambivalent undertone. In “On Being Ill,” Woolf goes
on to elaborate on her attitude toward the outspokenness: “things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals” (104). Curiously, “saying” and “blurting,” the two verbs here that Woolf uses to describe what the ill do, are in the passive voice, whereas the “respectability of health,” an inanimate, abstract concept, serves as the subject doing the act of concealing. Denying agency to the ill, Woolf conveys the sense that the ill are in fact not in control of themselves but are rather controlled by the impulse to speak, further calling into question how much Woolf considers their outspokenness a positive force, a subversive force that would upset the status quo.

Perhaps more problematically, Woolf in “On Being Ill” is defining the single experience of illness for everyone, as if her own state of being ill were representative of the various unique experiences. In the beginning pages of the essay, Woolf declares that she is concerned with “the invalid” (Selected Essays 103). The earliest record of “invalid” is dated 1709, meaning “a person made weak or disabled by illness or injury” (OED “invalid”). Yet as we read on, we realize that Woolf deploys a much narrower meaning of the word. When Woolf praises the invalid and celebrates their “great experience” (Selected Essays 103), she excludes a large group of people who are also considered invalid but who do not happen to have the same kind of experience she depicts. A main argument Woolf makes in the essay is that the ill can appreciate poetry better than the healthy, because they can feel the language rather than getting entangled by words. She explains in particular that when one is ill, one can only read poetry because one does not have enough energy to follow the logic of prose. Yet this whole claim already makes many assumptions about the people who become ill. These assumptions become evident in passages such as this one:

With responsibility shelved and reason in the abeyance—for who is going to exact criticism from an invalid or sound sense from the bed-ridden?—other tastes assert
themselves; sudden, fitful, intense. We rifle the poets of their flowers. We break off a line or two and let them open in the depths of the mind. (107)

Woolf often deploys an arch tone when she is trying to prove a point while simultaneously implying that, after all, she is not serious about it. “Shelved” is a rather provocative term to use here, suggesting, as does “in abeyance,” something temporarily inactive while “other tastes assert themselves.” What one might find telling here is that the “recumbent” (as Woolf calls the ill person) retains their critical acuity even in sickness. It is not just that certain critical capacities might return but that, in fact, they never left. And yet, to argue, as Woolf does here, that the ill person reads poetry more evocatively than prose only makes sense if the reader is Virginia Woolf herself. Illness puts us at an advantage, Woolf seems to say, when the specific illness is exactly like that depicted by Woolf, the kind of illness where you are too sick to be held responsible for what you say but not so sick that you cannot enact the right kind of outspokenness, where you are too sick for prose but not sick enough for poetry. “On Being Ill” really only addresses a limited group of people—maybe a sick Virginia Woolf or a sick E. M. Forster, but not a sick Mrs. McNab, or a sick Rezia Smith. And even so, the arch tone in Woolf’s rhetorical question “who is going to exact [...] sound sense from the bed-ridden?” still makes us uncomfortable, given how much Woolf herself insists on being taken seriously and regarded as a writer and reader with sound sense, ill or not ill. We cannot but wonder whether Woolf means what she says. One could argue that she deploys irony here—as many great writers do—to have it both ways. She can elevate the recumbent—the “we” who can “rifle the poets of their flowers”—but she is also the writer who can produce these lines whose very control belies the praise of illness they seem to offer.

Indeed, some critics have concluded that in “On Being Ill” Woolf elevates the invalid as a truer seer, an artist finally freed from the conventional. Louise Hornby, for one, articulates the
subversion she sees in “On Being Ill” particularly convincingly. She writes that illness in Woolf’s writing “eschews recovery” (223). Woolf’s subversion, according to Hornby, lies not only in her appreciation of the benefits of illness, but also, more strongly, in her prioritizing illness over health, in “the desire to remain uncured” (213). Hornby sees Woolf’s resistance to treatment and full recovery as Woolf’s challenge to the upright society and their associated conventional values (220). Yet I cannot but question the sincerity of Woolf’s attachment to the sick bed. To start with, she couldn’t tolerate—and nor could her sister Vanessa—her father’s uncontrolled outbursts, his continual “blurting” of his pain particularly after his wife’s death. When Woolf praises the ill person’s outspokenness, therefore, she must be aware that she herself found it unendurable. In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf is clearly troubled by her father’s violent outbursts, attributing it to the fact that “he was spoilt as a child” (Moments of Being 109) and annoyed by how he “took it for granted” that those around him would tolerate him and accept his subsequent apologies (Moments of Being 110). There is a curious echo to “On Being Ill” when Woolf writes rather bitterly that

> it never struck my father, I believe, that there was any harm in being ill to live with. I think he said unconsciously as he worked himself up into one of those violent outbursts: “This is a sign of my genius,” and he called in Carlyle to confirm him, and let himself fly. (Moments of Being 110)

From this passage we infer that Woolf thinks her father could and should have controlled his outbursts (he worked himself up into them and let himself fly). What’s more, the ill person inflicts actual harm on those he lives with. Woolf’s celebration of outspokenness as a unique approach to life and poetry is here undercut by her rejection of the idea that his outbursts were a sign of his genius. It is exactly this illusion of genius, Woolf seems to say, that gives her father an excuse to indulge his violent temper. While in “On Being Ill,” Woolf champions the moments when “things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals,” in
“Moments of Being,” she not only challenges the idea that the ill person cannot control themselves but also champions the decency that would keep the ill person from harming the healthy.

If we believe that Woolf elevates the “recumbent” over the “upright” (as Hornby has argued), it is because she never directly engages with the visceral suffering of illness, the kind of suffering that might turn the mind to pain or to nothingness rather than to art. We are thereby made complicit in Woolf’s fabrication of illness. At the start of the essay, Woolf points out how writers often overlook the body and instead put the whole emphasis on the mind: “literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, negligible and nonexistent” (Selected Essays 101). As a result, a sufferer cannot even find the language to describe their own pain. Yet when Woolf attempts to return to the body later in the essay, almost all the upsides of illness are those that belong to the intellect: being able to think and speak freely, being closer to Shakespeare and poetry, and being more sensitive to words. Woolf does not devote her essay to the body, as the beginning paragraphs promise us. Without recognizing the physical and mental suffering of illness, Woolf’s essay remains detached from the lived experience of being ill. In fact, Woolf is very much aware of the pain involved in illness, as not only she herself suffered from intense migraines but she also witnessed friends and family members being struck with illness. In a diary entry written in 1915, for example, Woolf describes Janet Case sick in bed without any celebratory language:

She is in bed, & will have to stay in bed for weeks. Her nerves are thoroughly wrong. She can’t read, or do anything—I can guess what she feels like—& how miserable she must be very often—especially since she is growing old, & Emphie must be wearisome with her repetitions, & general enthusiastic vagueness. (Diary I 11)
The invalid’s sensitivity to words and in particular to Shakespeare, so articulately argued for in “On Being Ill,” is here undone by Woolf’s matter-of-fact statement “she can’t read, or do anything.” The outspokenness so celebrated in the essay is here replaced with “her repetitions” and “general enthusiastic vagueness.” This diary entry conveys for me Woolf’s honest humility in face of real suffering. Woolf acknowledges that there is a part of illness she cannot write about eloquently, the part that is solely about sitting at the edge of a friend’s bed and listening to their moaning while remaining at a loss, the part that cannot be recreated or rewritten with a writer’s pen. Woolf writes “I can guess what she feels like,” suggesting that she has gone through similar pains. However well that experience can be retrospectively depicted, the moment as it is seems doomed to escape from any attempt at reframing.

Woolf escapes from the visceral experience of suffering through her skillful literary recreation of it. Style substitutes for an authentic engagement with chronic pain. While Woolf’s recreation in “On Being Ill” feels insincere—perhaps even dishonest—“Thunder at Wembley,” an essay not explicitly about illness or disability, shows particularly well Woolf’s mastery of handling these themes abstractly. This short essay discusses an exhibition at Wembley which displayed various objects misappropriated by the British Empire. Woolf is keenly aware of the disturbing feature of the exhibition, and yet nowhere in the essay does she explicitly refer to it. Instead, she puts nature at the center, a corrective to human calculation and greed, both so present in the exhibition showcasing imperial might. Nature is “the ruin of Wembley” (*Selected Essays* 169), she argues in the essay’s opening line. And fascinatingly, nature is represented among others by the invalid: “nature asserts herself where one would least look to find her—in clergymen, school children, girls, young men, invalids in bath chairs” (*Selected Essays* 169-170). Here Woolf does not single out invalids but rather acknowledges them as part of life that nature
creates—“they reveal themselves simply as human beings, creatures of leisure, civilization, and dignity” (170). Uniting the vitality of ordinary people living their ordinary lives with nature, Woolf depicts a thunderstorm which deconstructs the exhibition. The supposed glory of the civilization melts into citizens escaping chaotically from the rain: “from every quarter human beings come flying—clergymen, school children, invalids in bath-chairs” (171). Empire’s calculations prove unequal to nature’s power, just as the onset of illness disturbs our own endeavors. Here human beings do submit to nature, but not in the merely insincere way depicted in “On Being Ill,” nor in an exaggerated, humiliating way, but in a most realistic and lively way of running chaotically around—and without any distinction between those on their feet and those in their bath-chairs. In “Thunder at Wembley,” not only are the invalids integrated into the everyday, but they are also aligned with the subversive and deconstructive power of the sky, of nature, of what reminds us of the body.

Yet when Woolf tries to depict a specific person with disability, her problematic understanding of the body again comes to the fore. In her often-analyzed essay “Street Haunting: A London Adventure,” Woolf follows a woman with dwarfism closely along the London streets and subjects the woman to her unfairly judgmental glance. This essay has predominantly been read as a celebration of the female flaneur and digressive writing (see, for example, Tracy Seeley, Agnieszka Pantuchowicz, Jessica Kim). When critics talk about the little woman under this framework, it is mostly to analyze her role in Woolf’s impressive artistry—how she guides Woolf’s vision and aesthetics. The most convincing reading of the essay for me is written by Janet Lyon, who, while recognizing Woolf’s “supercilious tone” and “touch of malice” (562), argues that the little woman brings out Woolf’s “self-generating aesthetic” and “complex form of perception” (561). I don’t want to challenge any of the above readings of the essay, but I think
the particular scene of the little woman, when seen through the lens of disability studies, yields a different yet equally illuminating insight into the essay. To start with, the way Woolf introduces the little woman is troubling. After describing pleasant scenes in the London streets, Woolf writes that “after a prolonged diet of this simple, sugary fare, of beauty pure and uncomposed, we become conscious of satiety” (*Selected Essays* 179). Then in the next sentence we hear Woolf’s question: “what, then, is it like to be a dwarf?” (*Selected Essays* 179). In other words, Woolf turns her attention to the little woman because she becomes bored with what she calls the beauty on the street—“for the eye has this strange property: it rests only on beauty; like a butterfly it seeks color and basks in warmth” (179). Woolf pushes the little woman to the other side of beauty, color, and warmth. As Woolf devours the London streets for her own pleasure, she devours the little woman as well for a change of taste. She implies that this human being asserts the “oddities and sufferings and sordidities” of all human beings (179). Even before she introduces the little woman, Woolf determines how her audience will interpret her. Woolf, in short, identifies the role, or function, she will perform for Woolf and for us. The little woman offers a change of taste, and nothing more.

That Woolf appropriates the little woman in this way speaks to a longer history in which writers have appropriated the disabled to serve their own purposes. In *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder coin the term “narrative prosthesis” which marks how “disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (49). In other words, when narration finds itself inadequate, it employs elements of disability not because it is concerned with the topic, but because disability can serve as a tool that enables the narration’s smooth progression. In Woolf’s case, the little woman
serves as such a crutch: she offers something refreshing to Woolf’s narration. Woolf points her out triumphantly to her readers, confirming the success of her narration. As Mitchell and Snyder realize, “the artifice of disability binds disabled characters to a programmatic (even deterministic) identity” (50). The little woman is to counter the excess of beauty in Woolf’s narration, as Woolf makes clear even before her entrance.

Woolf sets the stage by describing the two women escorting the little woman as “benevolent giants” who are “of normal size,” thereby depicting the little woman as abnormal and at the mercy and subject to the sympathy of her company (*Selected Essays* 179). The disturbing language of normalcy intensifies when Woolf describes the woman’s “shapely, perfectly proportioned foot,” contrasting it with the woman’s not so “perfectly proportioned” height (*Selected Essays* 179). Woolf then appropriates her body more commandingly by imagining her pride when she gets to show off her normal feet: “her manner became full of self-confidence” (180). Woolf seems able to penetrate into the woman’s mind: “Seeing nothing but her feet, she imagined perhaps that the rest of her body was of a piece with those beautiful feet” (180). Entering and revealing a character’s mind is typical of Woolf’s literary method and Woolf already theorizes about it in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (*Selected Essays* 35). She compares the ideal character—Mrs. Brown—to “a dancing light, an illumination gliding up the wall and out of the window” (*Selected Essays* 35). The freedom Woolf gives Mrs. Brown to develop herself on the page is in stark contrast with Woolf’s domineering treatment of the little woman, especially given Woolf’s obsession with judging elements of her body. Under Woolf’s judgmental gaze, the woman’s feet are not “of a piece” with the rest of her body. But what does it mean exactly? Isn’t the very existence of the woman proof that her body and her feet are already of a piece? Her body does not have the conventional height that society expects its
members to have, but her feet do, and it is this societal convention that Woolf uses to judge whether the woman is “of a piece” with herself. This judgment is especially frustrating when it comes from a writer known for her resistance to societal conventions. While Mrs. Brown “changes the shape, shifts the accent, of every scene in which she plays her part” (Selected Essays 36), the little woman enters and exits the scene at Woolf’s command and serves the function predetermined for her. There, Mrs. Brown imposes herself on Woolf; here, Woolf imposes herself on the little woman. Before the little woman disappears from view, Woolf imagines that the little woman’s own flight of fancy—her ecstatic vision of normalcy—peters out: “by the time she had reached the street again she had become a dwarf” (180). Reducing the woman to her disability, Woolf shows that the woman is indeed, in Mitchell and Snyder’s terminology, her crutch rather than the kind of character suddenly alive and thriving that Woolf describes in “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown.”

We have seen that Woolf’s inadequate treatment of illness in “On Being Ill” largely stems from the absence of body and its visceral experience in the essay. Similarly, Woolf’s troubling treatment of disability in “Street Haunting” arises out of her problematic understanding of the body. The role that the body plays in disability studies is, I think, best explained by Mitchell, Antebi, and Snyder. In their attempt to rebuild the social model of disability, Mitchell, Antebi, and Snyder refocus our attention on the body without returning to the medical model of disability. In my previous chapter, I introduced the social model of disability which argues that bodily variations only become impairments through interaction with the environment. Disability, in turn, is constituted both by physical and mental variations and by socially constructed environmental barriers. Socio-historical environment “writes” the body so that it can be read accordingly by others. In disability studies, this means a body only becomes disabled in a
linguistic and cultural context. Without overthrowing the social model, Mitchell, Antebi, and Snyder attempt to account for the role of the body in its interaction with the environment using their posthumanist disability approach. Within the social model, the body is passive, waiting to be defined by its surrounding environment. The body’s interaction with the environment is in this sense a one-way street: the environment determines its level of disability, whereas the body cannot rewrite or resist its assigned feature. Mitchell, Antebi, and Snyder realize that “bodies actively participate in their own shapings and the shaping of the world of which they are a part” (4). In other words, their meaning not only is culturally and socially constructed but also has a material essence of its own. In fact, many bodily mutations recognized as impairments are initially responses to conditions far more deleterious (6). Without these mutations, the organism cannot survive and develop into a human being in the first place. Returning to the materiality of the body itself therefore reminds us of our dynamic body in constant movement and mutation, the body which engages in copulation, pregnancy, defecation, and decay—which interacts with the environment it finds itself in.

Unable and unwilling to accept the various forms that bodies take up, Woolf either engages all too abstractly with bodies with disabilities, or overreacts to and over interprets bodily variations which are simply inherent in the randomness of the human body. In her essay “Russian Point of View,” Woolf writes in admiration of writers who confront the soul in their writings—“the vessel of this perplexed liquid, this cloudy, yeasty, precious stuff” (Essays I 244). Yet Woolf herself seems hesitant to confront the body, equally precious, unpredictable, and varying. On this point, Woolf’s reading notes on Ulysses in 1918 are especially revealing. She criticizes Joyce for his “indifference to public opinion—desire to shock—need of dwelling so much on indecency” (Scott 643). Woolf’s conception of indecency is rooted in the body: “we
believe that we can say more about people’s mind and feelings. Well then it becomes less necessary to dwell upon their bodies. (At any rate… why not in fact leave out bodies?)” (Scott 644). Yet keeping her distance from the body, Woolf also misses a great part of life. The gaze she refuses to fix on the people who she encounters on the towpath becomes the places her writing cannot reach.

As Woolf continues her walk along London streets in “Street Haunting”, having abandoned the little woman, she imagines the eye itself—her eye—engaging in an act of creation:

the eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances. Standing out in the street, one may build up all the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one’s will with sofa, table, carpet… But, having built and furnished the house, one is happily under no obligation to possess it; one can dismantle it in the twinkling of an eye, and build and furnish another house with other chairs and other glasses. (181-182)

This joyful, productive act of imagining and creating takes on a different tone when we realize its connection to Woolf’s depiction of the little woman. As Outka notes, “house seems to stand in for the body” (515). Just as Woolf conjures up an imaginary house, she conjures up a person with a disability. Just as Woolf furnishes the house, she lays claims on this person’s thoughts and feelings. Just as Woolf dismantles the house, she discards the person without having done them justice. The little woman is under Woolf’s control in ways that Woolf explicitly rejects in other essays, “Character in Fiction” most profoundly. The low stakes of an imagined house cannot possibly compare with the high stakes of an imagined person. Outka recognizes on the one hand the “unsettling sense of erasure” in this passage, where the little woman simply vanishes when Woolf deems it “discordant with her sense of beauty” (515), on the other hand that Woolf’s language “potentially speaks to the power of redefinition, the power to redefine the body ‘at one’s will,’ unhampered by the limits of the culture” (515). In other words, Outka registers
Woolf’s effort to redefine bodies with disability in resistance to societal conventions—just as Woolf rewrites illness as strength in “On Being Ill.”

While I agree with Outka on Woolf’s power of redefinition, I am hesitant about what the power entails. The capacity to redefine is potentially subversive, but it also involves overlooking the specific body. Woolf does redefine illness in “On Being Ill,” but nowhere in the essay does she really engage with the lived experience of being ill, with the bodily pain and suffering, with what she hints at in her diary entry on Janet Case. At the end of “Street Haunting,” Woolf’s self-consciousness returns to her, and she reflects briefly on her London adventure:

Walking home through the desolation one could tell oneself the story of the dwarf, of the blind men, of the party in the Mayfair mansion, of the quarrel in the stationer’s ship. Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others. (Selected Essays 187)

Woolf recognizes that “the story of the dwarf” is only an “illusion,” which makes her feel less confined to her own self. One can only “tell oneself” the story, further suggesting that the sole value of the story is that it is comforting. Here, Woolf acknowledges the hollowness of her redefinition—it does not even concern the specific body of the little woman or the blindness of the blind man.

When it comes to describing her own physical and mental conditions in her diaries and letters, Woolf exhibits a curious tension between the open playfulness with which she talks about her temporary illnesses (migraines, fidgets, and nerves) and her reserved silence about what is now considered long-term disabilities: her manic and depressive states. In his diary, Leonard Woolf reports that Woolf “refused to believe that she was ill and insisted that her condition was due to her own guilt” (Lee 174). By rewriting her potential illness and disability as guilt, Woolf seems to be insisting on her own control over her body, transferring bodily variations to
intellectual inclinations: she has not fallen sick; she has only chosen to feel guilty. This idea that illness and disability are matters of choice is illustrated more distinctly in Woolf’s diary entry in 1927:

This diary shall batten on the leanness of my social life. Never have I spent so quiet a London summer. It is perfectly easy to slip out of the crush unobserved. I have set up my standard as an invalid and no one bothers me. No one asks me to do anything. Vainly, I have the feeling that this is of my choice, not theirs; and there is a luxury in being quiet in the heart of chaos. Directly I talk and exert my wits in talk I get a dull damp rather headachy day. Quiet brings me cool clear quick mornings, in which I dispose of a good deal of work and toss my brain into the air when I take a walk. I shall feel some triumph if I skirt a headache this summer. (Diary III 140-141)

Woolf sets up her standard as an invalid—she proclaims herself invalid so that she can enjoy a quiet summer in London without being disturbed by visitors. Woolf mainly backs up her invalid status with her headaches, which, like her maniac states, she depicts as intellectual rather than physical—headaches are a result of Woolf exerting her wits. Woolf writes that she will feel “triumph”—rather than relief or consolation—if she can “skirt” a headache. She chooses here words expressing agency and control. She is combating her headaches, manipulating them by changing her social life, so that she can actively “skirt” them and triumph over them. The slightly playful tone of this passage belies Woolf’s fear of losing control of her own body. Her setting herself up as an invalid is proof that she is not an invalid. She is quick to declare herself the status of an invalid so that other people cannot lay that same claim on her.

But why does Woolf care so much about defining her own illnesses as both temporary and self-willed? I think Woolf’s attitude has to do with her own feeling of insecurity. While temporary illness will eventually be cured and does not form a part of a person’s identity, people with long-term disability are subject to the same judgments Woolf herself passes on those she deems “beyond cure.” And Woolf cannot bear being judged in this way. Whereas Woolf can celebrate temporary illness without reservation, her aversion to socially defined “weakness”
undermines her original judgment about bodily or mental variations when it comes to long-term
disability. Woolf often manifests her eagerness to distance from others deemed weak, even
though, contradictorily, Woolf also challenges the status quo. This point, I think, is shown subtly
in a passage from “Women and Fiction,” where Woolf discusses the writing of people with more
or less marginalized identities:

In *Middlemarch* and in *Jane Eyre* we are conscious of the character of Charles Dickens,
but we are conscious of a woman’s presence—of someone resenting the treatment of her
sex and pleading for its rights. This brings into women’s writing an element which is
entirely absent from a man’s, unless, indeed, he happens to be a working-man, a negro, or
one who for some other reason is conscious of disability. It introduces a distortion and is
frequently the cause of weakness. The desire to plead some personal cause or to make a
character the mouthpiece of some personal discontent or grievance always has a
distressing effect, as if the spot at which the reader’s attention is directed were suddenly
twofold instead of single. (*Essays II* 144)

Here Woolf pejoratively makes disability stand for a kind of socially proclaimed weakness, and
although Woolf’s explicit argument is that an insistence on one’s own personal circumstances
and hardships could distort the art one creates, I sense Woolf’s excessive consciousness of a
person’s identity, and her readiness to distance herself from even those with similar backgrounds
as her. Extending the scope of this passage to disabilities, I feel that Woolf is only comfortable
theorizing about disability as a “healthy” and “normal” critic but is not totally willing to align
herself with the disabled. She is not subversive enough to challenge what society deems as
weakness, especially when it concerns her own identity and how she is likely to be judged as a
result.

Looking back on the provocative passages that I start this chapter with, I find it
impossible to come to a definite response to the offensive, unfeeling remarks found there. The
reason is that Woolf herself does not have a clear attitude toward illness and disability. As I’ve
explored in the bulk of this chapter, different factors contribute to Woolf’s depiction of her own
and other people’s disabilities. To articulate what I think is Woolf’s relation to disability, I find it most apt to borrow from Freud’s concept of ambivalence. In Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he brings our attention to our “very intense and often contradictory emotional attitudes” (466) so that he can explain our most absurd dreams, such as those depicting the death of the people we are most fond of. A son attending his father at his deathbed, for example, might feel both the desire for his father’s death—so that his agony can end sooner—and the desire for his father to live—as is our usual attitude toward people we love. Freud terms such emotional attitudes “ambivalence” (467). Ambivalence also plays a big part in Freud’s interpretation of the plays *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* (292-300). The child harbors both love and hatred toward their parents as a result of their troubled sexual desire toward the parent of their opposite sex in Freud’s heteronormative model. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the validity of Freud’s theoretical framework, I find Freud’s resistance to pinning down one specific feeling or thought toward an object particularly convincing. Categories of mental states often delineate an arbitrary boundary which distorts the real reactions themselves, as Freud says in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: “in unconscious thinking itself every train of thought is yoked with its contradictory opposite” (505)—conflicting psychical forces are constantly at play in our mind and it is often hard to tell them apart from each other.

In fact, Woolf’s Hogarth Press published many of Freud’s writings, and for a period of time toward the end of Woolf’s life, Woolf read Freud intensively. In her autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past,” written in 1937, Woolf refers to ambivalence to articulate her “violently disturbing” feelings toward her father: “it was only the other day when I read Freud for the first time, that I discovered that this violently disturbing conflict of love and hate is a common feeling; and is called ambivalence” (*Moments of Being* 108). In one of her diary entries in 1939,
Woolf writes about her ambivalent attitude toward shopping with a lively sentence about how she voraciously reads Freud: “Shopping—tempted to buy jerseys & so on. I dislike this excitement, yet enjoy it. Ambivalence as Freud calls it. (I’m gulping up Freud)” (Diary V 249). Woolf’s attitude toward disability is, I think, also best described as ambivalent. A passage from A Room of One’s Own captures Woolf’s convoluted relation to disability, though here disability takes up a different meaning:

Lately my diet has become a trifle monotonous; history is too much about wars; biography too much about great men; poetry has shown, I think, a tendency to sterility, and fiction—but I have sufficiently exposed my disabilities as a critic of modern fiction and will say no more about it. (Room 112-113)

Here disability is once again taken pejoratively to signify weakness—but only superficially. Upon closer examination we realize that it is Woolf’s “disabilities” which grant her insight into what goes wrong in contemporary writing. Disability in this passage stands for the unwillingness to conform to what the general audience deem as good literature, and the capacity to adopt a more sensitive and thoughtful literary taste. Woolf’s “disabilities” allow her to discern the monotony in contemporary writing, which exposes Woolf’s false humility in her usage of the word here. Yet apart from her carefully hidden pride, Woolf’s “disabilities” also show Woolf’s insecurity as a commentator on contemporary writing. After all, she refrains from drawing any definite conclusion about contemporary fiction. Instead, she withdraws with an apology. Disability here helps Woolf fend off criticism before any attack at her can be attempted.

Woolf’s own attitude toward physical and mental disability has a similar pattern. On the one hand, she is well aware of the subversive potential of disability, which shows us various ways of living out the human experience and challenges our entrenched understanding of ourselves. On the other hand, she is conscious of the troubling societal judgment of disability, and so she still keeps her own distance from it. Woolf’s relation to disability involves various
factors: her appreciation for challenging and subverting conventions, her insecurity as a writer, her childhood experience of living with Laura, her often failed attempt at self-control, her self-consciousness of her identity, her fear for the dynamic, varying human body, and her struggle with her own mental disability. Another Freudian concept I find particularly apt here is distortion, the idea that since some of our feelings and thoughts have been repressed by us, the ultimate dream—or in Woolf’s case, piece of writing—presents itself in a distorted form. With distortion in mind, Freud does not take words, images, thoughts and even feelings at their face value. He points out time and again in *The Interpretation of Dreams* how our mind tricks us into thinking or feeling something when something completely different is going on inside us. Going back to Woolf’s offensive towpath remarks, we might wonder whether they are more about Woolf’s own anxieties and insecurities than about the group of people Woolf encounters on the towpath—if we take Woolf’s own experiences and fears that have been explored in this chapter seriously. I do not wish to defend Woolf, but I hope the remarks that I start this chapter with open things up rather than close them down.
Works Cited


“The Shuffling of Feet on the Pavement:” Woolf’s Fumblings in *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf’s mother Julia Stephen died when she was thirteen years old. In 1939, 44 years after her mother’s death, Woolf comes to reflect on how she felt at that time in her memoir “Sketch of the Past”:

> the tragedy of her death was not that it made one, now and then and very intensely, unhappy. It was that it made her unreal; and us solemn, and self-conscious. We were made to act parts that we did not feel; to fumble for words that we did not know. It obscured, it dulled. It made one hypocritical and immeshed in the conventions of sorrow. (*Moments of Being* 105)

What pains Woolf the most about her mother’s death is not the grief she experiences, but the inauthentic expression of her grief: she has to “fumble for words that [she] did not know.” This chapter is inspired by “fumble.” It is a word that does not explicitly relate to disability, which I focus on elsewhere in this thesis, but I do not think disability or the state of being disabled is only a form of identity that a person either is or is not, but rather that disability is often present in small physical actions that every one of us does—small actions that are done somewhat embarrassingly and confusedly, actions that make us uneasy about our so-called “abled body.”

Here, Woolf mirrors the “acting of parts” with the “fumbling for words,” as if the act of fumbling is just another hollow public performance she resists. Yet, fumbling and acting are two very distinct physical behaviors. The latter suggests that Woolf was forced to follow a script written for her, while the former suggests not only that she hadn’t memorized her lines but also that she was searching for other, unscripted words that could not, would not be said. Such words would have embodied authentic grief but did not as yet exist and perhaps could never exist. The process of fumbling embodies Woolf’s resistance to the right word in the face of an event for which there could be no right word.
Indeed, fumble itself is a word very hard to pin down, a word whose meaning Woolf constantly rewrites across her writing. We fumble when we search for things we have lost. Woolf’s characters fumble “vaguely among the papers” (Voyage Out 188), “in a drawer for certain designs” (Night and Day 308), “for his card and pencil” (Mrs. Dalloway 49), “for his glasses” (The Years 123). We fumble little objects we find close at hand unconsciously or as a pastime. Woolf’s characters fumble “her fingers in her lap” (Voyage Out 57), “the petals of roses” (To the Lighthouse 121), and fumble with “the handle,” “his chess-men,” “her purse,” “the switch,” “the toothpick” (The Years 15, 161, 363, 372, 431). We hear fumbling when something stirs and does not settle. Woolf’s characters hear fumbling “at the door” (Voyage Out 22), “at the sideboard” (To the Lighthouse 89), “at his throat” (Flush 95). Most importantly, Woolf’s characters fumble for words, as if words might just as well be lost and misplaced, within reach yet resisting command. They are found “fumbling with various phrases” (Night and Day 497), “fumbling to find the exact words” (The Years 25), “fumbling in his mind for something to say” (Between the Acts 44). Fumble, as we have seen, is both transitive and intransitive, both physical and verbal. In Samuel Johnson’s A Grammar of the English Tongue, which includes many pages from John Wallis on the suggestiveness of sound, we find an apt description of the letter combinations making up the word “fumble”:

If there be an l, as in jingle, tingle, tinkle, mingle, sprinkle, twinkle, there is implied a frequency, or iteration of small acts […] at the same time the close u implies something obscure or obtunded; and a congeries of consonants mbl, denotes a confused kind of rolling or tumbling. (Of Derivation)

In this chapter, I explore how this confused repetition of small actions, this act of fumbling, is at work in To the Lighthouse, the novel which helps Woolf get rid of her obsession with her mother’s death. As Woolf writes in “A Sketch of the Past”: “when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her” (Moments of Being 81). The
definitiveness of Woolf’s proclamation seems at odds with “fumbling” so much associated with reiterative acts and confusion. And yet, this counterintuitive connection serves as an occasion for us to explore the hidden potentialities of fumbling.

This chapter will draw extensively from Woolf’s essays, diaries, and letters, so it might be more appropriate to say that To the Lighthouse serves as a thread which holds this chapter together. Across Woolf’s writing, she focuses on two kinds of fumbling: “fumbling for” and “fumbling with.” “Fumbling for” involves an anxious and awkward pursuit toward a definitive goal, which is almost always hampered, frustrated, and failed. “Fumbling with” involves an aimless, unconscious, and confused playing around with words and objects, which is vulnerable to being led astray by some outside force. I will start by looking into the act of “fumbling for.” I show that Woolf turns the negative connotation of this act around by rewriting its embarrassment as a refocusing of attention and a directness interrupted. Connecting “fumbling for” with “stumbling,” I argue that both mundane acts bring out Woolf’s idea that an element of disability is inherent in the natural state of things. I will then move on to the act of “fumbling with.” There, I engage with more implicit fumbling, where Woolf often does not employ the word “fumble.” And yet, moments when characters play with words or phrases in their mind, or when Woolf repeats a word or a phrase multiple times in the novel seem to me to involve a no less obvious act of fumbling. I start by showing that when characters fumble with words casually in their mind, their thoughts are in danger of firming up into some definite meaning they do not intend. Drawing on Angela Leighton’s analysis of Woolf’s language, I argue that Woolf prevents words and phrases from such stiff firming up by turning them into objects which she and her characters fumble with, so that meaning does not settle and language goes beyond the semantic realm.
In various instances throughout her writing, Woolf depicts the agitated way of “fumbling for” always somewhat disapprovingly. In Night and Day, she writes satirically that when Mr. Rodney “found himself possessed of a coherent passage, he shook it at his audience almost aggressively, and then fumbled for another.” His fumbling for words is then described as “a distressing search,” “repeated attacks,” “contortions,” or “[sitting] down impulsively in the middle of a sentence” (Night and Day 48). Mr. Rodney uses words as weapons which torture both the speaker and their audience. Woolf writes in her diary mockingly of her acquaintance Gerald: “He can for ever return & fumble over his books; looking, poor man, with those obstinate little eyes, for the right word” (Diary of Virginia Woolf IV 330). Fumbling for words is here seen as desperate stubbornness, constantly trying yet forever failing. The eagerness to find the exact word is distasteful for Woolf, as she writes in her diary on December 29, 1930: “I don’t fumble for words. Could let my mind fly, am not as I prove now, used up by an hour’s exercise” (Diary of Virginia Woolf III 342). Fumbling hampers Woolf’s imagination and only makes her feel worn out. Indeed, fumbling does not aim, always misses, and is a kind of failing. Even in Woolf’s writing where the thing being fumbled for is implicit, we can still sense a failed attempt of one kind or another. Woolf writes of Arthur Studd, a family friend and painter, coming back to grieve Stella Duckworth: “He had loved her, in his fumbling ineffective way […] he could not do anything” (Diary of Virginia Woolf III 261). She writes in her diary on December 17, 1933, that a guest of hers, the critic Walter Sickert, “sat & sat, propounding rather fumbling questions about literature” (Diary of Virginia Woolf IV 194). More formally in The Common Reader, Woolf talks about “the fumbling which shook her hand” when George Eliot attempts to draw the portrait of a man (The Common Reader 169); discussing Jane Austen’s stiffness in conjuring an atmosphere, she writes, “here she fumbles; here she keeps us waiting” (The Common Reader
Arthur fumbles for a way to express his love for his mother; Sickert fumbles for an apt understanding of literature; Eliot and Austen fumble for a proper depiction of a character or an atmosphere. Woolf catches their inadequacy—fumbling is ineffective, perplexed, stiff.

Yet, in an essay on the genius of the Restoration dramatist William Congreve’s comedies, Woolf turns the failing of fumbling around, and shows us how a timely failing reveals something much more interesting:

The dramatist is in action from the very first word on the very first page. There are no preliminaries, no introductions; the curtain rises and they are in the thick of it. Never was any prose so quick. Miraculously pat, on the spot, each speaker caps the last, without fumbling or hesitation; their minds are full charged; it seems as if they had to rein themselves in, bursting with energy as they are, alive and alert to their finger tips. It is we who fumble, make irrelevant observations, notice the chocolate or the cinnamon, the sword or the muslin, until the illusion takes hold of us, and what with the rhythm of the speech and the indescribable air of tension, of high breeding that pervades it, the world of the stage becomes the real world and the other, outside the play, but the husk and cast-off clothing. (The Essays of Virginia Woolf VI 116)

This passage starts with a similarly negative connotation of fumbling. Woolf is impressed by Congreve’s swiftness and burst of energy, emphasizing he does not fumble. Woolf observes that the audience fumbles, overwhelmed by rich imageries and sharp-cut words. Yet the connotation is soon reversed when Woolf notes that only in this fumbling state of mind can the illusion of a real, dramatic world take hold of the audience, thanks to their “irrelevant observations.” Fumbling makes it impossible for the audience to “distinguish the elements,” so that they feel a depth not graspable in words, culminating in Congreve himself losing his control and feeling “the ground tremble beneath him” (The Essays of Virginia Woolf VI 116). Here, Congreve’s audience practice a different form of attention through fumbling, first caught off guard, then entering a new realm of perception.
This illuminating effect of fumbling is reminiscent of a frequently quoted sequence in *To the Lighthouse*, where Mrs. Ramsay’s death is nonchalantly announced in square brackets, taking readers by surprise:

[Mr. Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arm out. They remained empty] (128).

A few pages later we learn of Prue Ramsay’s death:

[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said. They said nobody deserved happiness more] (132),

a few paragraphs later of Andrew Ramsay’s death:

[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous] (133).

Readers, like Congreve’s audience, are taken aback by the rapidness of horrific events happening in the proximity of a few seconds of reading. Without depicting the war in any explicit manner, Woolf condenses the horror of war and her own grief into a few obituary-like announcements of death. The sheer intensity in these few pages leaves us fumbling, at a loss about how to take it all in. Through her artful handling of words, Woolf manages to convey to us “the blow of death” which “struck” her, “tremulous, filmy eyed” (*Moments of Being* 130), without inviting any kind of sentimentality or hypocrisy. The announcements of death in square brackets are indeed like bombs dropping on her pages, invading her narrative, and creating an instantaneous moment of shock.

Another small word catches our attention in the announcement of Mrs. Ramsay’s death: “stumble.” Mr. Ramsay stumbles along a passage one night, either meaning the physical act of tripping over, or the verbal act of not grasping words. Woolf writes in her diary that she “stumbles after her own voice” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* IV 10). Stumbling interrupts any
sense of directness. The square brackets which wrap the three deaths are visually like bricks which trip readers, so that they stumble as their eyes bump into the square brackets unexpectedly. Although Woolf does not give us space to pause over the deaths, she creates these little breaks where we miss our footing. Stumbling is a mundane act immersed in the ebb and flow of life, just as in the three pieces of obituary, it is the mundane tone that calls us up short. In each, we register the voice of the everyday in the adverbs (“rather,” “indeed,” “mercifully”). Behind the emotionally draining deaths there is the sense that life goes on. John Wilkinson writes in *The Lyric Touch* that the “misarticulation [of stumbling] predicts its own righting, an almost-failing resolved into the step forward, the words stabilising as the speaker gets his mouth into gear” (254). Indeed, having stumbled across the three deaths, Lily goes on a journey of elegiac recovery in the second half of the novel. Seeking consolation for Percival’s death in a trip around the globe, Rhoda says, “we stumble up—we stumble on” (*The Waves* 164). In her essay “Half of Thomas Hardy,” Woolf writes that Hardy “fumbled about with architecture” and “without the illusions or the hot-headedness of the born novelist he stumbled into a calling” (*Essays of Virginia Woolf* IV 569-70). Stumbling, in its slow recovery from a loss of footing and its awkward movement to regain stability, invites clear-mindedness and a peaceful state of mind.

Like “fumble,” “stumble” resists unthinking directness: our busy errands are interrupted by the loss of a key; our assertive pace is broken by a stumble upon a stone. In the little failings of stumbling and fumbling, we are humbled. We no longer feel arrogant and able-bodied but learn to grow cautious and modest. We find, perhaps rather disappointingly, that our errand does not carry that much importance as we think, that our self-assurance is based on shaky foundations. The awkward and anxious acts of “fumbling for” so prevalent in Woolf’s writing are meaningful precisely because they lead to failure—it is because we fail that we learn to
rethink our undertaking and redirect our attention. For Woolf, an element of disability is in the natural state of things. She speaks through Bernard in *The Waves*:

> like children we tell each other stories, and to decorate them we make up these ridiculous, flamboyant, beautiful phrases. How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground! Also, how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of note-paper. I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement. (191)

When feet shuffle, they are dragged awkwardly on the ground, and the walker loses control. When feet come down beautifully on the ground, they are no longer progressing forward, but remain pretentiously static. For Woolf, to walk is to stumble, and to speak one’s own words is to fumble for them. In *The Common Reader*, Woolf once again stresses the artificiality of eloquence and self-assertion:

> But the pen is a rigid instrument; it can say very little; it has all kinds of habits and ceremonies of its own. It is dictatorial too: it is always making ordinary men into prophets, and changing the natural stumbling trip of human speech into the solemn and stately march of pens. (59)

We find a similar metaphor here between the marching of feet and the clichéd words and phrases, between the stumbling loss of footing and the natural way of speaking. Woolf sees the need for us, as marchers of our civilization and speakers of our language, to be constantly cut down so that we break away from conventions which bound us in our actions and our speech. We must fail, realize our incapacities, and feel our helplessness.

> In *A Room of One’s Own*, as Woolf imagines how a female writer Mary Carmichael would differ from masculine writers in her epoch, she draws a fascinating connection between stately phrases and ungrounded feelings of self-importance:

> For whenever I was about to feel the usual things in the usual places, about love, about death, the annoying creature twitched me away, as if the important point were just a little further on. And thus she made it impossible for me to roll out my sonorous phrases about “elementary feelings,” “the common stuff of humanity,” “the depths of the human heart,”
Zhu 70

and all those other phrases which support us in our belief that, however clever we may be on top, we are very serious, very profound and very humane underneath. She made me feel, on the contrary, that instead of being serious and profound and humane, one might be—and the thought was far less seductive—merely lazy minded and conventional into the bargain. (138)

This passage anticipates Lily’s repetitive failings at finding the right word after Mrs. Ramsay’s death, which we will look at more closely later in the chapter. There, Lily feels “words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low” (178) as she tries to cook up phrases about life and death to say to Mr. Carmichael. In fact, To the Lighthouse is a novel of failings: the Ramsays cannot go to the lighthouse because the weather is not fine; the beginning of Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party is filled with embarrassment and hostility; Minta loses her brooch at the beach and cannot find it anywhere; the house is collapsing during the war; Lily cannot mourn for Mrs. Ramsay and takes more than ten years to finish her painting… Yet Woolf affirms these failings. Frustrated desires and unfulfilled projects scatter around the novel to jointly resist any lazy-mindedness and conventional bargains, which trap us when we are unhampered in our endeavors. In “A Sketch of the Past,” when Woolf comes to reflect on the deaths of her own family members in her adolescence, she finds herself very torn:

Without those deaths, to hark back to an earlier thought, it is true that he [Thoby Stephen] would not have been so genuinely, though dumbly, bound to us. If there is any good (I doubt it) in these mutilations, it is that it sensitises. If to be aware of the insecurity of life, to remember something gone, to feel now and then, overwhelmingly, as I felt for father when he made no claim to it, a passionate fumbling fellowship—if it is a good thing to be aware of all this at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, by fits and starts—if, if, if—. (Moments of Being 141)

To have a passionate fumbling fellowship is to be aware of the precariousness of life, where anything can be lost and gone. Though Woolf openly doubts whether it is “any good,” speaking only in the hypothetical, the phrase she coins has a different connotation. In previous sentences she writes that the deaths sensitise, and the word “sensitise” takes on a dark meaning with the
preceding gruesome word “mutilations.” The word “passionate,” however, is much more hopeful, almost an embracing of life. The most interesting word choice is “fellowship,” indicating how Woolf is close to, bound by, even fond of the sentiment. We feel in this phrase that there is something uplifting in the dangerous, mundane failings.

If “fumbling for” involves a frustrated attempt to reach a goal, then “fumbling with” involves a frustrated attempt to even set up the goal. In September 5, 1935, Woolf suggests her way of fumbling with words when she feels “absolutely floored” and unable to “pump up a word”:

I feel I’ve only got to fumble and find the end of the ball of string—some start off place, someone to look at perhaps—no, I don’t know—and my head would fill and the tiredness go. *(Diary of Virginia Woolf IV 338)*

Woolf seems unsure about what to fumble for (“perhaps” some start off place, someone to look at; “no, I don’t know”). She only fumbles with words and things in her mind, not as a hunt but as an exploration. With fumbling, Woolf does not aim to find the key to a door lock, but rather only “the end of the ball of string.” Her way of “fumbling with” lacks either intention or control. Her tone in this passage is uncertain—she is waiting for some idea to come to her instead of her actively seizing something to serve her.

For Woolf, such an aimless act of “fumbling with” involves a possibility of being led somewhere one does not want to go. In *To the Lighthouse*, we find this way of fumbling first embodied by Mrs. Ramsay, as she finds herself finally alone (for once) and in this moment of solitude she experiences a Woolfian moment of being: she becomes “the wedge-shaped core of darkness” whose horizon becomes “limitless” (62). And at this moment, Mrs. Ramsay lets go of the need to do things (the fret, the hurry) and gives herself up to “this peace, this rest, this eternity” (63) which then leads her to become one with the last steady stroke of the light from the
lighthouse. The rhythm of Woolf’s prose—“Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking” (63)—enacts the rhythm of Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts, which merge with the lighthouse beam and lifts up into her mind:

some little phrase or other which had been lying in her mind like that—“Children don’t forget, children don’t forget”—which she would repeat and begin adding to it. It will end, It will end, she said. It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord. But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean. (63)

Although Woolf does not use “fumble” here to describe Mrs. Ramsay’s thinking, it is suggested in the way she is trying to get hold of a phrase in her mind, and as one phrase becomes another. “Children don’t forget”—that “little phrase” among so many others only moves into her conscious mind because the light comes upon it. There is no effort here to force the words to do anything, and though we know where the phrase comes from (Mrs. Ramsay worrying over the idea that James will remember his father’s cruelty), the rhythmic repetition seems to empty the phrase of its original, simpler meaning and put it into harmony with a natural rhythm. The chanting moves her to add phrases, likewise “little” and even more ambiguous—“it will end…“it will come.” But what do these phrases mean? The “end” might take us back up to the end of the story of the fisherman and his wife, which Mrs. Ramsay has just finished reading to James in the novel’s previous section—“and that’s the end” (61)—or it could take us back up into an earlier moment when Mrs. Ramsay, hearing the waves as a sort of background sound track to her life, repeats other phrases—“I am your support” (16)—a moment that turns unexpectedly into a moment of terror as the same rhythm suggests the inevitability of death. Little though the phrases are, they elude a single meaning, until Mrs. Ramsay adds “suddenly” a Christian message which she does not believe in: “We are in the hands of the Lord.” This cliché that fills her mind confuses and annoys her, but she is “trapped” into saying it. She knows that she has said it, but
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asks “who had said it?”, as if she recognizes that she is parroting something she has heard elsewhere—someone else had said this and now she has fallen into the trap of this phrase.

This sequence suggests that minds fumbling for words might become vulnerable. Not knowing what to say (think back to Woolf ruing the way she was forced to act someone else’s script after her mother’s death) means that someone else might put words into your mouth. There is a similar sequence in *The Waves*, where Bernard, fumbling with words (though, again, Woolf does not deploy that word) in the similar way as Mrs. Ramsay does, catches himself being led astray by them. On a late afternoon when the sun is setting and casting its colors on the sea and the beach, Bernard thinks back on a day when he feels keenly the passing of time as he shaves himself:

> All through the day’s work, at intervals, my mind went to an empty place, saying, “What is lost? What is over?” And “Over and done with,” I muttered, “over and done with,” solacing myself with words. People noticed the vacuity of my face and the aimlessness of my conversation. The last words of my sentence tailed away. And as I buttoned on my coat to go home I said more dramatically, “I have lost my youth.” It is curious how, at every crisis, some phrase which does not fit insists upon coming to the rescue—the penalty of living in an old civilization with a notebook. This drop falling has nothing to do with losing my youth. (147)

At first, Bernard’s thoughts flow freely and naturally. Phrases loosely connected to each other bounce up and down in his mind without taking up any particular meaning. They even start to “tail away” of their own accord, dropping off and vanishing. Yet then introduced by this apt word “dramatically,” “I have lost my youth” comes out of nowhere. We have here yet again a cliché which firms up the natural indirectness of our protagonist’s thoughts. Bernard notes that this cliché is handed down to him by “an old civilization.” There is a vivid tension between our predecessors forcing words into usefulness by coming up with clichés, and these clichés then getting back at us by seducing us to say things we don’t mean. What clichés like “I have lost my youth” and “we are in the hands of the Lord” have in common is that we are under the illusion
that they carry a clear-cut meaning that serves our purpose: after all, these phrases have been repeated many times. However, these clichés do not allow us to properly express ourselves because they are essentially hollow. It is solely our illusion that keeps them alive. We do not know what it means for someone to lose their youth, nor what being in the hands of the Lord entails.

Woolf theorizes in detail about the tension between a kind of verbal aimlessness and verbal exactitude in “Craftsmanship,” which she originally wrote for a BBC aired broadcast on April 29, 1937:

If we insist on forcing them against their nature to be useful, we see to our cost how they mislead us, how they fool us, how they land us a crack on the head. We have been so often fooled in this way by words, they have so often proved that they hate being useful, that it is their nature not to express one simple statement but a thousand possibilities… (Selected Essays 86)

The danger we are put in when we force words to serve a clear purpose and convey a single message, which is on Woolf’s mind in the late 30s, is more than linguistic and aesthetic. By 1937 a fully-fledged Fascist propaganda campaign was underway not just in Germany but also across Europe. Although Woolf seldom writes about Fascist propaganda, one casual entry in her diary written in 1935 gives us a window into the situation in England: “In London yesterday. Writings chalked up all over the walls. ‘Don’t fight for foreigners. Briton should mind her own business.’ Then a circle with a symbol in it. Fascist propaganda, L. said” (The Diary of Virginia Woolf IV 337). The two scrawled sentences express not a thousand possibilities but one simple statement. Although Woolf does not comment on this Fascist language, her BBC broadcast shows her anxiety about language-made-useful as German aggression looms. The cliché which uninvitedly breaks its way into Mrs. Ramsay’s and Bernard’s consciousness here escalates into propagandic
language. The violence that Woolf conjures—“a crack on the head”—seems less a quaint turn of phrase than a premonition.

But how do words express a thousand possibilities? How to resist clichéd words or phrases which land on our mind uninvited? Angela Leighton suggests in *On Form* that Woolf often turns words into objects which no longer convey a particular meaning:

words, for Woolf, can have the poetic tangibility of solid objects. Her prose turns them over and over, till they ring unfamiliarly in the ear. She can thus, through repetition, make a word sound resistant and palpable, not a clear opening to sense which allows a meaning to pass, but thick with its own shape. (125)

Leighton’s passage suggests that the solution to the problem that “fumbling with” conjures (we find ourselves bound to some definitive, worn-out language) lies in the act of “fumbling with” itself. By using the same word in different contexts (fumbling with it), Woolf converts its linguistic meaning into a kind of paralinguistic fuzziness. When we fumble with a key in our pocket, for example, the key no longer serves the single purpose of opening up a lock but becomes a vague object in our hand with its own solid shape. Words, especially big words with a dangerously clichéd meaning, similarly are defamiliarized by Woolf—in the very act of fumbling with them.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf’s narrator considers Mrs. Ramsay’s looks as she stands measuring the stocking she has knitted against James: “But was it nothing but looks, people said? What was there behind it—her beauty and splendour? […] Or was there nothing? nothing but an incomparable beauty which she lived behind, and could do nothing to disturb?” (28). There is something impenetrable about Mrs. Ramsay’s beauty, and yet what resounds in our mind after reading this passage is the word “nothing.” We know there is something behind Mrs. Ramsay’s appearance, but that something, inexpressible as it is, is transformed into this word “nothing” which has its own texture and sound but no definite meaning. As Lily Briscoe leans against Mrs.
Ramsay in a moment of intimacy, she again exclaims: “Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing! as she leant her head against Mrs. Ramsay’s knee. And yet, she knew knowledge and wisdom were stored up in Mrs. Ramsay’s heart” (51). The very sentence after Lily’s exclamations negates the literal meaning of “nothing,” and renders it obscure. Lily cannot express in words the feeling she experiences when leaning on Mrs. Ramsay’s knees, and yet the repetitions of “nothing” convey the intensity of her emotions paralinguistically. Lily does not know Mrs. Ramsay in the way she desires to know her, but she knows her in her own ways.

After Mrs. Ramsay’s death, Lily finds herself unable to express her grief. The third section of To the Lighthouse begins with Lily repeating a phrase hollow-mindedly:

What does it mean then, what can it all mean? Lily Briscoe asked herself, wondering whether, since she had been left alone, it behoved her to go to the kitchen to fetch another cup of coffee or wait here. What does it mean? —a catchword that was, caught up from some book, fitting her thought loosely, for she could not, this first morning with the Ramsays, contract her feelings, could only make a phrase resound to cover the blankness of her mind until these vapours had shrunk. For really, what did she feel, come back after all these years and Mrs. Ramsay dead? Nothing, nothing—nothing that she could express at all. (145)

“She could not contract her feelings”—one knows, sort of, what Lily communicates, and yet what does it mean to contract one’s feelings? Several meanings fit in the context, but none fits perfectly. Contract could mean acquire here, although we would expect feelings to arise automatically in one’s mind without the intentional action of taking them on. To contract is also to concentrate, indicating that Lily is overwhelmed by feelings of all sorts but cannot settle on one. But we wonder why Lily feels the need to pin down her feeling. Finally, contract is often used in conjunction with a disease, as if Lily is waiting to be infected with a feeling from elsewhere, feelings mourners usually have or claim to have in the conventions of sorrow.

Through this word, Woolf shows us that the artificiality and stiffness of mourning leaves it vulnerable to being misled by conventional words and phrases. Unable to process her grief and
mourning for Mrs. Ramsay, Lily fumbles with a phrase, “a catchword,” from elsewhere, but keeps her distance from it. The paralinguistic properties of “what does it mean” are foregrounded as its semantic content disappears, so that it only echoes in Lily’s mind to cover up her emptiness. “Nothing,” once again, resounds here too. Yet this word, throughout its journey in the novel, now carries with it the scene of Mrs. Ramsay measuring the stocking against James as her mind wanders around, and of Lily leaning on Mrs. Ramsay’s knees and trying to become one with her. The shape of this word, through Woolf’s repetition of it, has already been forming in the novel. A word with a meaning of emptiness now becomes filled up with an inexpressible sense. When later in the novel Lily exclaims to herself “Mrs. Ramsay!” but “nothing happened” (180), we cannot help but read this sentence paralinguistically, the Woolfian shape of the word “nothing” appearing in front of us.

The word “nothing” connects not only Lily with Mrs. Ramsay, but also another character in the novel who has a keen instinct for words: Mr. Carmichael. When Mrs. Ramsay asks him what he wants from her, “stamps, writing-paper, tobacco?”, he always replies “no, he wanted nothing”; “no, nothing, he murmured” (10; 195). The reply “nothing” takes on a deeper connotation than its literal meaning. Mr. Carmichael knows he has replied unkindly, and yet Mrs. Ramsay’s repetitive offer of repetitive things represents a conventional way of living that is far from Mr. Carmichael’s. Mr. Carmichael must run out of writing-paper at some time, and yet Mrs. Ramsay never gets to buy it for him. Mr. Carmichael needs something, but Mrs. Ramsay’s question somehow can only be answered with “nothing.” “Nothing” closes off any potential encounter, but the word itself seems to express more than if actual encounter were to take place. When Lily feels the urge to share her feelings with Mr. Carmichael, she finds herself unable to do so:
she wanted to say not one thing, but everything. Little words that broke up the thought and dismembered it said nothing. “About life, about death; about Mrs. Ramsay”—no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low [...] For how could one express in words these emotions of the body? express that emptiness there? (178)

One could say nothing, and yet without saying anything feelings open up to more possibilities of meaning. Words cannot strike the object accurately, so that words are transformed into objects to carry the emotions of the body directly. Woolf hollows out the original meaning of the word and fills it up with sensations of the body scattered around in the novel, so that we understand the word without it conveying any specific message. In a climactic moment in the novel when Mr. Ramsay finally reaches the lighthouse, unsurprisingly, “he said nothing” (207).

Indeed, Mr. Ramsay could have said a number of things when he reaches the lighthouse. Throughout the novel, Woolf has Mr. Ramsay blurt out many phrases repeatedly. In the beginning pages of the novel, as Mr. Ramsay is pacing up and down the terrace (16), Lily Briscoe and William Bankes coincidentally hear him saying “some one had blundered” (18). Mr. Ramsay has picked up a clichéd phrase from a book and blurted it out without meaning it. Woolf becomes interested in this phrase, and yet she prevents the words making up this phrase from being forced into usefulness by weaving them into the rhythm of the novel. Mrs. Ramsay is depicted as “hearing something rhythmical, half said, half chanted” (16), as Mr. Ramsay’s inarticulate mumblings reach her ears. The phrase becomes isolated from its semantic meaning. Later in the novel, when Jasper shots down birds from the sky, Mr. Ramsay seizes upon this opportunity to perform his phrase. He “boomed tragically” again coincidentally at Lily Briscoe and William Banks, “some one had blundered!” (25). The melodramatic sense of charge, which Mr. Ramsay only fabricates in order to give vent to his own emotions, makes Mr. Ramsay feel
“ashamed” of himself (25). Both Lily and William know that the phrase is not meant to be taken seriously, and yet the rhythm of the phrase has already started to resound in the novel.

Measuring the pair of stockings against James’ legs, Mrs. Ramsay takes up the phrase in her own consciousness. She asks herself “what had happened” (30) and replies casually with “some one had blundered” (30). We are told that “starting from her musing she gave meaning to words which she had held meaningless in her mind for a long stretch of time” (30). Yet the meaning Mrs. Ramsay gives this phrase soon hollows out, as she repeats the phrase for two more times in her mind: “some one had blundered. But she could not for the life of her think what” (30). The last time Mr. Ramsay bursts out the phrase, Mrs. Ramsay smilingly grasps its meaning:

“Some one had blundered,” he said again, striding off, up and down the terrace. But how extraordinarily his note had changed! It was like the cuckoo; “in June he gets out of tune;” as if he were trying over, tentatively seeking, some phrase for a new mood, and having only this at hand, used it, cracked though it was. But it sounded ridiculous—“some one had blundered”—said like that, almost as a question, without any conviction, melodiously. Mrs. Ramsay could not help smiling, and soon, sure enough, walking up and down, he hummed it, dropped it, fell silent. (33)

The rhythmic nature of the phrase is reinforced as Mr. Ramsay is again found repeating this phrase while walking up and down the terrace, itself a rhythmic movement. Mr. Ramsay is fumbling with the phrase, testing it out, saying it, asking it (“almost as a question”), hesitating over it (“without any conviction”), singing it (“hummed it;” “melodiously”), and then letting it go (“dropped it”). The phrase “some one had blundered” has thereby become a little object—like a ball—which characters pass between themselves. Lily and William are hit unexpectedly by it; Mr. Ramsay picks it up; Mrs. Ramsay finds it in her hand, plays with it a bit, and returns it to Mr. Ramsay; Mr. Ramsay then once again tumbles it until he becomes bored and drops it for good. In this way, Woolf prevents the phrase from settling on a clichéd meaning and ruining the
atmosphere of the novel. Each time it reappears in the first section of the novel, its semantic meaning only becomes more and more hollowed out.

In the third section of the novel, “The Lighthouse,” after the war has been fought and several family members have died, Mr. Ramsay is again bursting out phrases uncontrollably to himself. The phrase most frequently repeated in the section is “we perished, each alone.” The first time Mr. Ramsay utters this phrase he is on a boat with Cam and James on their way to the lighthouse: “he cried aloud. ‘We perished,’ and then again, ‘each alone’” (165). What is curious about this utterance is that it is not said when Mr. Ramsay feels sentimental. He is not reminded of the wife, daughter, and son he has lost. He utters this phrase because “the breeze bred in Mr. Ramsay too the same excitement” (165). Mr. Ramsay merely feels an excess of emotion which he needs to give vent to, and he cries out this tragic, once again clichéd phrase only to show his power over it. The more tragic the message, the more applaudable his heroism. Mr. Ramsay is depicted as immediately regretting it, feeling “his usual spasm of repentance or shyness” (165). Yet at this point in the novel, the phrase means something to the readers. We have just been told the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Andrew, and Prue, and they die very much alone, one in illness, one in war trenches, one in childbirth. In fact, readers have been waiting for a place in the novel to mourn for these characters, for a sentimental phrase just like “we perished, each alone.” But Woolf will not grant us such an occasion for mourning. She makes Lily hesitant, makes her stutter, makes her mute. Then she thrusts a mourning phrase into Mr. Ramsay’s mouth, only to make us see how insincere and artificial this phrase is, uttered in a moment when Mr. Ramsay is in his highest spirits and not thinking about the dead at all. The phrase does not have any semantic significance here—Mr. Ramsay might well have said “some one had blundered” or “but I beneath a rougher sea” and it would not have made any difference. Here Woolf is, I think,
actively resisting the conventions of sorrow by hollowing out the semantic meaning of “we perished each alone,” just as she did with other well-wrought phrases and big words in the first section of the novel.

Yet Woolf does not give this phrase up; she reshapes it, providing it with a paralinguistic significance. Fascinatingly, Mr. Ramsay is never again in the novel depicted uttering this phrase. The phrase lands on Cam’s consciousness, now that Mrs. Ramsay has passed away:

She was thinking how all those paths and the lawn, thick and knotted with the lives they had lived there, were gone: were rubbed out; were past; were unreal, and now this was real; the boat and the sail with its patch; Macalister with his earrings; the noise of the waves—all this was real. Thinking this, she was murmuring to herself, “we perished, each alone,” for her father’s words broke and broke again in her mind, when her father, seeing her gazing so vaguely, began to tease her. (167)

Cam is letting her mind wander around in this passage. Yet we know she is thinking about the dead who belong to the past and have been left behind. Her impression that those paths and lawns “were unreal” is reminiscent of Woolf’s remark about her mother in “A Sketch of the Past” with which I started this chapter: “the tragedy of her death […] was that it made her unreal.” What is real is trivial details that Cam experiences in the moment. Through Cam, Woolf expresses how impossible mourning is. When the phrase “we perished, each alone” enters Cam’s mind, she is half mourning, but half simply lazy-mindedly letting her father’s phrase, as Woolf puts it, break into her mind. Cam cannot cling onto her feelings, which, as her gaze, are “vague,” but she fumbles with the phrase in her hand, though it does not do anything for her. Nevertheless, the phrase has already started to take on a mourning connotation for Woolf, as she passes it between her characters. It is to be repeated for three more times in the novel, most notably when Cam is dozing off on the boat. “About here, she thought, dabbling her fingers in the water, a ship had sunk, and she murmured, dreamily half asleep, how we perished, each alone” (191). The semantic meaning of the phrase fits here, almost perfectly, but since we know Cam is once again
repeating it from her father, we are cautious to attribute to it the sentimentality it otherwise would take on. The paralinguistic significance of the phrase connects Cam’s absent-minded mourning for the shipwreck to her mourning for her dead mother and siblings which is impossible for her to perform. Yet the intimacy Cam develops with her father, reflected in her attachment to her father’s phrase, makes evident the painful absence of her mother. Like Lily, Cam and Mr. Ramsay never manage to mourn in the novel, but Woolf makes phrases in the conventions of sorrow serve them in her own ingenious ways—she turns clichéd words and phrases into objects which she fumbles with in the novel.

Leighton comments on the form of elegy that “elegy, after all, is writing bereft of its object, form missing its content. [...] The dead are far off, out of reach, absent, and thus leave language feeling its formal purposelessness, its failed relevance” (126). Perhaps it is exactly Woolf’s point that this formal purposelessness offers us a new—or, as literary critics might say, a Modernist perspective from which to experience life—and not just when we are composing an elegy. When things around us are shattered and we feel confused, we see and build connections awkwardly. To give up on the perfect phrase might be the beginning of imagining a world in which those who lose their footing enable us to go forward after all.
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Epilogue

In the second semester of my first year at Wellesley, I was sent home in the middle of my Modern British Novel class. We were then halfway through Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist*. When we finally got to Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, I had just come back home after a two-week quarantine. The experience of reading *To the Lighthouse* under those conditions was challenging, to say the least. And yet, Woolf’s novel was, in its way, a great novel to read during a pandemic. After all, the world emerges from World War I, very much different, but still a world with possibilities. Now, as I finish this thesis on Woolf’s work, I am thinking about what’s possible, what’s next.

Having focused entirely on Woolf’s work here, I see opportunities for comparative work on modernism and disability. Current scholarship in this area includes Maren Tova Linett’s 2016 *Bodies of Modernism* and Michael Davidson’s 2019 *Invalid Modernism*. Both Linett and Davidson identify characters with disabilities in modernist texts and analyze modernist writers’ depictions of disabilities. Building on their work, I see promise in approaches to modernist texts which do not start from the explicitly disabled. Thinking in particular of David Mitchell, Susan Antebi, and Sharon Snyder’s posthumanist approach to disability which focuses on the dynamic body in constant movement and mutation, I would like to explore the depiction of the body in modernist texts, especially texts which put detailed description of bodily functions and processes on display, such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Disability draws our attention back to the body, which we often ignore and take for granted in our daily life, and challenges our conception of the self. I see here a connection to Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque body, as he writes in *Rabelais and His World*:

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its
own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. (26)

Not only does the grotesque body challenge the classic image of the cleansed, completed, abled man, almost a soul without a body, as Mitchell, Antebi, and Snyder argue, but the grotesque body also affirms the interconnectedness of the self and its environment, though from a material rather than a discursive perspective. I see the body as a new and promising starting point from which to explore disability in modernism.

Another possibility I see in exploring modernism and disability studies is to focus even more intensely on small acts that border on physical incompetencies, such as the act of fumbling. This small act plays a prevalent, almost poetical role in modernist texts, from T. S. Eliot’s line “I fumbled to the window to experience the world,” a later-crossed-out insertion within “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” titled “Prufrock’s Pervigilium” (44), to Samuel Beckett’s line in Molloy “for how could I drag myself over that vast moor, where my crutches would fumble in vain” (123)¹. I find small words related to fumbling equally fascinating, words such as stumbling, fidgeting, balking, stuttering, and tripping. These acts make us see that disability is not necessarily integral to a person but is always present in the natural state of things. What appears awkward, confused, and incompetent, often lands us somewhere unexpected, refreshing, and subversive. I look forward to my own awkward shufflings as I continue with this work.

¹ I am indebted to Christopher Ricks for these lines.
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