

The Language of Illness: Vision, Perception, and Isolation in Virginia Woolf's Ill Characters

by

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Abstract

In Virginia Woolf's work, illness is one of the ways she explores the territory that to this day marks her as a modernist writer; moreover, illness allows Woolf to experiment with language, through vivid and evocative imagery and language; through illness she also explores human communication, a theme of major significance in her oeuvre. Woolf herself outlines this project in two essays; the first, "Modern Fiction," (1919) defines her plans as a modernist; the second, "On Being Ill," (1926) details the difficulties – and also the utter importance – of writing about illness. Though her writing about illness allows her to experiment with fictional forms, it is not an easy project, both because of her own illnesses and because of the utter difficulty of using language to describe illness, which is a phenomenon at once deeply individualized and also collectively experienced by every human at one time or another. We see the difficulty of this process when we look at the fate of three of Woolf's ill characters – though Rachel, Septimus, and Rhoda each allow Woolf to access a non-linear and imaginative way of thinking, they all die in the process of doing so.

Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), is her first exploration of illness. When Rachel falls ill with influenza near the novel's end, Woolf's writing is intense. Here she shows how language and perception are altered for the ill, but also, interestingly, for the healthy. Rachel's fiancé, Terence, is as affected by Rachel's illness as she is, though in markedly different ways.

In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Woolf creates Septimus Smith, a man traumatized by World War I. He allows Woolf to delve deeper into her project, as Septimus is a writer, meaning that Woolf is no longer the mediator between the healthy other characters (and Woolf's readers) and the ill characters – Septimus takes on that challenging role himself. His ailment is more mental and internalized than Rachel's is; as such, the language he uses in his writings is frenzied and feverish. For Septimus, "communication is key," though the question of whether he actually ever communicates effectively remains unclear until the novel's final scene.

In her late novel *The Waves* (1931), Woolf imagines a character born isolated, named Rhoda. Though her malady is never named, and Rhoda is a wisp of a character who literally vanishes from the novel, *The Waves* is another important part of Woolf's project on illness, especially if we look at the three novels examined in this thesis as part of a continuum. What language is available when a diagnosis is not? How does Rhoda challenge our ideas about illness and reality?

This thesis' conclusion will look at Isa, a writer of sorts from Woolf's last novel *Between the Acts* (1941). With Isa, Woolf thinks about a character who writes and says little bits of her poems aloud to herself in various inappropriate ways. She is Woolf's last instance of a writer, and though she is not ill or mad, she is very odd in a way that suggests that she, like the other ill characters, has a hard time communicating. But Isa also comes into Woolf's work during a time of immense personal and historical change. As a writer, Woolf's style changes significantly in her later years. Her presence, echoing the ill characters of novels past, is remarkable in a novel written after so much has changed.

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Short Titles

Pain: Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995. Print.

“Sketch”: Woolf, Virginia. "A Sketch of the Past." Ed. Jeanne Schulkind. *Moments of Being*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985. 61-159. Print.

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Introduction

Illness, though often terrifying, enables certain kinds of visions. Virginia Woolf knew this all too well. In one diary entry, Woolf writes, "...these curious intervals in life – I've had many – are the most fruitful artistically – one becomes fertilised – think of my madness at Hogarth – and all the little illnesses" (*Writer's Diary* 143). Writings like this are strewn throughout Woolf's diary entries and letters, suggesting she had a relationship with her illnesses that was alternately fearful and fruitful. It shouldn't be altogether surprising, then, that illness is a central subject in Woolf's work – she writes about it all the time, in both her diary entries and personal letters and in her fictional work and essays.

Since Woolf started writing about illness, literary critics haven't stopped talking about Woolf and illness, often in a biographical light. Many critics regularly equate "madness" with "illness," pointing to Woolf's lifelong struggle with mental illness and to her multiple breakdowns, that ended, famously, in suicide. As Peter Gay writes, "[t]here seems to be much to explore: early sexual molestation by one, perhaps both, of her half brothers; an apparently sexless marriage; a passionate lesbian affair – what could be more tempting?" (71). Indeed, critics have often been tempted, blurring the line between fiction and life.¹ Daniel Ferrer boldly announces that his study of Woolf's life will "not 'draw a distinction between the [wo]man and

¹ See Barbara Hill Rigney, *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Studies in Brontë, Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood*; Stephen Trombley, *'All That Summer She Was Mad': Virginia Woolf and Her Doctors*; Thomas Caramagno, *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf's Art and Manic-Depressive Illness*; Jane Novak, *The Razor Edge of Balance: A Study of Virginia Woolf*; and Roger Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*.

[her] work” (6).² Peter Dally, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, argues that Woolf was manic-depressive and proceeds to read her work and life through that lens.³ Dally isn’t alone in this practice, which, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, was influenced by a psychoanalytical subtext. Perhaps most notable is Elizabeth Abel’s *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*, which attempts to stay away from “the question of Woolf’s relation to psychoanalysis [as it] has usually been posed as either a question of her response to Freud or of her anticipation of a mother-based theory” (xvii). Abel argues that there’s a history of “encounter not only between Woolf and psychoanalysis but also between literature and psychoanalysis as criticism habitually couples them” (xviii).⁴ But, as Maud Ellmann notes, though “Freudian ideas were ‘in the air’ at the time,” Woolf did not “set out to write psychoanalytic fictions” (10).

² Ferrer also argues that “[w]ithout getting into psychopathology, or giving yet another offering to the old myth of the link between genius and mental illness, one cannot deny that there is a certain relationship between madness and writing, for Virginia Woolf as writer as well as for us as readers” (7). Ferrer argues that we can’t help but read Woolf this way, just as we can’t avoid our “knowledge that, for instance, Heidegger was a ‘Nazi’, Pound a ‘fascist’, Theresa of Avila a ‘saint’” (7). This knowledge “affects the way we read their works, [and] whether we wish it or not... the knowledge that Virginia Woolf was ‘mad’ (her word for it) and committed suicide plays an important part in the ‘author function’ that we place under that name” (7).

³ Even in those critics whose approach isn’t so heavily saturated by psychoanalysis’ influence, Woolf’s “madness” is often a key word. In Stephen Trombley’s *All That Summer She Was Mad*, he points out that we should judge an author’s life no differently than anyone else’s. In this vein, we can’t let Quentin Bell’s biography or Leonard Woolf’s memoir define who Woolf was for us. Ultimately Trombley falls into a cause and effect type analysis: Woolf had a life filled with trauma, hence the breakdowns and the madness in her literature. While many of his ideas are powerful, on the whole his way of approaching the problem is one I’ll avoid in this thesis. And even critics who disagree about the specifics of Woolf’s madness, like Thomas Szasz, spend entire books studying it. Szasz argues that madness is only interesting because “we mystify it” (12). Though ultimately Szasz’s argument falls flat – he argues that Woolf “used the concept of madness... to manipulate” her life, he points out a key detail in the process – to mystify madness is to misrepresent it (12).

⁴ Abel also points out that Woolf “claims to have avoided reading Freud until 1939, a deferral that must have required some effort, since from 1924... the Woolfs’ own Hogarth Press published the English translation of every text Freud wrote” (14).

Still, the critical impulse to read Woolf as mad, and then to mystify that madness, leaves residues that are still visible in today's readings of Woolf's work. In "What's Woolf Got to Do with It?" Brenda Silver points to Quentin Bell's biography, published in 1972, as one of the major influences on Woolf's reputation to this day. Bell's biography was not "literary," nor did it "explore her writing" (Silver 14). Instead, Bell's biography helped to focus "popular attention almost totally on Woolf's personality and her personal life, in particular her 'madness,' her suicide, and her sexuality" (Silver 14). Given Bell's "insider's view," as Woolf's nephew, most reviewers credited his biography with "revealing 'the truth,'" and this truth "helped create an image of Woolf as twentieth-century madwoman with a bedroom of her own – witty and malicious, yes, and productive, but again, all of the above: delicate, ethereal, asexual, apolitical, and so on – and this image still has a great deal of currency, at least in the nonacademic world, today" (Silver 14).

Woolf's more recent biographer, Hermione Lee, is conscious of the retrospective power of biography. In her account of Woolf's life, she approaches the subject of Woolf's illness with caution, as evidenced from the very title of her chapter about Woolf's illness – Lee calls it "Madness," in quotations, calling to question from the very beginning what exactly "madness" means when it comes to Virginia Woolf. In the chapter, Lee writes, "[i]llness is at the mercy of language, and can only be identified and 'treated' (in a clinical and a literary sense) by being named. To choose a language for Virginia Woolf's illness is at once – from the very moment of calling it an illness – to rewrite and represent it, perhaps to misrepresent it" (172). In keeping with Lee's careful approach, I'll examine Woolf's own accounts in her diaries of the mysterious, terrible, and sometimes fruitful powers of her illnesses, but this I'll keep my distance from biographical readings. In looking at what illness brings to Woolf's work, this thesis will look at

her language, using illness as a lens through which Woolf explores experimental language. As a subject matter, illness allows Woolf to experiment with new ways of writing. This thesis will approach illness in Woolf's novels as her risky, fruitful, and sometimes costly way of achieving, through writing, a new kind of perception in her fiction. Not simply a physical or mental malaise, illness in Woolf is also a sort of general disposition towards the world. It's an existential feeling of being sensitive. Illness, in Woolf's work, is a way of being.

Since illness is such an essential aspect of Woolf's work, it in turn affects all other aspects of her characters' lives, including communication, another major theme in Woolf's work. As such, this thesis will explore what illness does to communication. Effective communication in general is never guaranteed in Woolf's work, but during illness, this is even more the case, and the stakes are much higher. After all, illness is one of the times a character most needs to be understood by those around her. For it is only through language that understanding can be reached – “this is how I feel.” “I am in pain.” “I need help.” But, as this introduction will discuss, accurate language about illness is immensely difficult to capture and then convey. This is especially the case for Woolf, since illness brings such experimental language to her work. Here a major paradox emerges: though illness allows Woolf and her ill characters access to wild, experimental, new language, that language is often indecipherable to the healthy characters, creating a major divide between what the ill characters say and what the healthy characters understand. Attempting to bridge that critical divide is an often futile, frustrating process, but it remains the essential other half of Woolf's project on illness, for experimental language – like language of any kind – cannot exist without being expressed to another human being.

The four novels I'll study in this thesis tell a story about illness in Woolf's work. This story begins with Rachel Vinrace in Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915). Her illness is a

fatal fever. Next I'll study Septimus Warren Smith from *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) who, as a veteran of World War I, suffers from shellshock (or as it's now called, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Then there's Rhoda, from Woolf's later novel, *The Waves* (1931), a woman who, though not technically ill, is profoundly troubled. The three ill characters – Rachel, Septimus, and then Rhoda – are on a spectrum of illness. Rachel's physical illness allows Woolf to experiment with dreamy fever visions. By the time Woolf gets to Septimus, the malaise is mental, the visions more encompassing. With Rhoda, Woolf moves away from definable illness. Rhoda's condition of life is that she's ill and therefore always open to the perceptions that first Rachel and then Septimus are occasionally open to. Over the course of these three novels, Woolf moves from plot-based illness to perception-based illness. In all, the ill characters enable Woolf to explore a wild new territory in her writing, allowing her access to non-linear ways of thinking as well as figures of immense isolation.

Near the end of her life, in the onslaught of a second world war, Woolf creates Isa Oliver in *Between the Acts* (1941), a character who calls the ill characters' experiments with language to account. Though Isa is not ill, she is a final echo of the ill characters in Woolf's last novel, when Woolf's style as a writer has changed significantly since the earlier novels. Like the ill characters, Isa has trouble communicating, and often turns to words and writing as a means of comfort. Though the response she finds in them is not as powerful for Isa as it is for the ill characters, Isa's presence at all in a novel when Woolf's writing style has changed so dramatically is noteworthy. Isa is a final gesture towards the ill characters, and ultimately, she fails to connect with them.

I. The Establishing Essays

In “Modern Fiction,” (1919) Woolf argues against an older generation of writers, often called the materialists or the Edwardians, who “are concerned not with the spirit but with the body” (209).⁵ After reading the materialists, a few questions always remain for Woolf: “how do the[ir characters] live, and what do they live for?” (209). In “Modern Fiction,” as Susan Gorsky points out, Woolf’s answer to this question is “to suggest an alternative method that will more fully suit the new concept of the complex nature of man” (221). This alternative method involves moving past the materialists’ approach to writing about life, which is reliant on capturing reality; it’s also a recognition that, though the materialists “spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring,” they fail to capture what they’re really after (210). From the materialists’ novels, “[l]ife escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worthwhile” (211). To move forward, the modern writer must acknowledge that “[w]hether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide” (211). The modern writer must dismiss the “unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love, interest, and an air of probability” (211-2). Only then can the writer capture the essence of an ordinary day, when the “mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel” (212). And so Woolf calls to her fellow writers: “[l]et us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which

⁵ James Harker says that “[t]he essays pit a generation of novelists including Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett, whom she calls the Edwardians in one essay and materialists in the other, against a succeeding generation, the Georgians or the moderns, including Forster, Joyce, Eliot and presumably Woolf herself” (3). This thesis will call them the “materialists,” as that’s what they’re called in “Modern Fiction,” but the term Edwardians also applies.

they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness” (213). For the modern novelist, this means that “everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss” (218).

There are natural ties to illness in this new approach to writing. As Woolf writes a few years later in “On Being Ill” (1926), illness has often been ignored as a subject matter in literature, much like the mind’s “myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel” (“Modern” 212). Woolf begins “On Being Ill” by pointing out that, “[c]onsidering how common illness is... it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love, battle, and jealousy among the prime themes of literature. Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia, lyrics to toothache” (317). This epic of influenza sounds an awful lot like the new novels Woolf calls for in “Modern Fiction,” those that follow “the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness” (“Modern” 213). But, as was the case with the materialists’ restrictions on the proper stuff of fiction, the limitations literature places on subject matter are far-reaching and powerful: “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” (“Ill” 317). In “Modern Fiction,” Woolf reminds us that life isn’t always like what we read in novels, and she does something similar in “On Being Ill” by reminding us that illness is an essential part of life, something that almost everyone experiences at one point or another.

In “On Being Ill,” one of Woolf’s problems is that the body and the mind are so often kept separated, as if they are two disparate things. But to Woolf, they’re not; in the essay she

points out that “[a]ll day, all night the body intervenes,” with the mind (318). This isn’t just when one’s ill either; part of being human is recognizing that “the creature within can only gaze through the pane – smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body” (318). Part of Woolf’s work in both essays is to establish that there’s more to life – and to literature – than what is currently being written. In order to truly capture that life, a writer must focus on any meaningful perceptions, no matter how small or how trivial. As the birthplace for many such perceptions, illness is a natural subject for any modernist writer, and it is here that Woolf stakes her territory.

Woolf’s focus on the pairing of language and illness in “On Being Ill” is one of the clearest ties to “Modern Fiction,” or, as Stella McNichol calls it, her “Modernist manifesto” (xii). In “Modern Fiction,” McNichol also points out that Woolf commits herself to “an inward-looking fiction, [that] recognizes the potential of the stream of consciousness technique... and sees that it is necessary to invent new narrative structures to reflect new insights into life” (xii). In illness, a similar kind of invention must take place, for when writing about illness, a writer must deal with “the poverty of the language. English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache” (“Ill” 318). This sentiment – that no language currently in use can really capture illness – echoes Woolf’s argument, in “Modern Fiction,” that modern life includes “the crudity and the coarseness of...human beings” (“Modern” 210). For there is perhaps no time when humans are more crude and more coarse than in illness.

In both essays, Woolf argues that the scope of the writer must be widened. In “Modern Fiction,” as in “On Being Ill,” steps must be taken to correct the failings of current fiction, especially when illness is the subject matter, as “[t]here is, let us confess it (and illness is the great confessional) a childish outspokenness in illness; things are said, truths blurted out, which

the cautious respectability of health conceals” (“Ill” 320). Moreover, in illness “words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other – a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause” (“Ill” 324). Because of the “mystic quality” words take on when one is ill, Woolf wants writers to search for “a new language... primitive, subtle, sensual, obscene” (“Ill” 319). Again, this search for a new language sounds an awful lot like Woolf’s quest for a new kind of novel in “Modern Fiction,” a novel that will recognize “this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit” that is modern life (“Modern” 213). The obvious overlap between these two projects – of modernist writing and writing about illness – reveals a significant, often-overlooked depth to Woolf’s oeuvre.

But in any attempts to find new language for illness, a writer comes up against a major human failing: our misplaced sympathy. Woolf argues that we lack the sympathy to truly understand those who are ill, that “the experience cannot be imparted and, as is always the way with these dumb things, [the ill person’s] own suffering serves but to wake memories in his friends’ minds of *their* influenzas, *their* aches and pains which went unwept last February, and now cry out, desperately, clamorously, for the divine relief of sympathy” (“Ill” 319). Woolf’s reminder about people’s tendency to direct sympathy back on themselves rather than on the ill reminds us that communication is at stake in writing about illness, too. The modernist writer would be remiss if she didn’t realize that illness brings more than just the potential to experiment with new kinds of language – illness brings an essential and often unavoidable part of life to fiction. Woolf keeps this tie to the healthy in mind throughout her lifelong project on illness, trying again and again to bridge the divide between the sick and the well, reminding us that capturing modern life is not enough if this rendering doesn’t acknowledge that the “individual [is] part of a larger whole” (Gorsky 222).

At the end of “On Being Ill,” Woolf makes a remarkable first attempt to provide an image of illness that is both expressive and communicable: a noblewoman stands at her curtained window each night, waiting until she sees her husband’s safe return. One night, he doesn’t come back: “[h]is horse stumbled. He was killed” (327). His death is accidental, but the woman’s anguish remains. The day her husband is buried, she stands at the window, as usual. A servant watches her, and he can’t shake the image of the room “when he came back again, how the curtain, heavy, Mid-Victorian, plush perhaps, was all crushed together where she had grasped it in her agony” (327). The woman’s handprint still clutched in the curtain’s thick folds – this image is a powerful, memorable one that can be charted as an intense illness image in Woolf’s work. Though not technically an ill character, the woman at the curtain is still experiencing the effects of illness – the emotional distress she feels is a direct result of her husband’s pain. Woolf’s writing about the ill is as much about those around the ill – the healthy ones, the caregivers – as it is about the ill themselves. For the woman at the curtain does not die, and her anguish continues long after the essay ends. The after-image of the handprint serves as our way of understanding that the ill, even in death, leave something behind: the real world.

The connection to the real world when ill, tenuous though it may be, is a major part of Woolf’s work on illness. When she argues that “the poverty of the English language” and “human sympathy” get in our way of understanding illness, Woolf also implicitly makes the point that writing about illness is no easy task, for at the heart of illness is human communication. If there is no language for illness, then how do the ill express what they’re feeling? In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry studies a similar phenomenon – the “difficulty of expressing physical pain” (3). For Scarry, the difficulty in expressing human pain is slightly different than Woolf’s argument about the language of illness in “On Being Ill.” Scarry says that

words can't do quite enough because "[p]hysical pain has no voice" (3). She continues: "[w]hen one hears about another person's physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person's body may seem... as distant as the interstellar events referred to by scientists who speak to us mysteriously of... 'very distant Seyfert galaxies...'" (*Pain 3*). The use of the term "distant Seyfert galaxies" may seem, at first glance, over the top, but it's not: "[t]he very temptation to invoke analogies to remote cosmologies (and there is a long tradition of such analogies) is itself a sign of pain's triumph, for it achieves its aversiveness in part by bringing about... this absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons" (*Pain 4*). Scarry reminds us of the everyday phenomenon that takes place when we hear about someone else's pain: we hear the words, but they might as well be referring to some other world, because we can't process them, because the language of pain, like the language of illness, is not grounded in reality. Scarry insists, "physical pain – unlike any other state of consciousness – has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language" (5).

The resistance to language is the result of a natural split between the afflicted and the healthy. For the ill, the pain is "'effortlessly' grasped (that is, even with the most heroic effort it cannot *not* be grasped)" (*Pain 4*). Outside the afflicted person's body, though, there's a very different story taking place. Here, "what is 'effortless' is *not* grasping it" (*Pain 4*). The world thus becomes divided, between the ill and the well. To some extent – and the degree varies – the ill understand what's going on inside their own bodies, but the well cannot grasp such an "elusive" thing (*Pain 4*). As a result, "pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed" (*Pain 4*). It is at this crossroads that Woolf's project about illness situates itself. Like Scarry, Woolf is working with powerful,

sometimes contradictory ideas about illness and language. Because while Woolf says that illness complicates language and its communicability, she also insists (as does her oeuvre) that illness gives access to language in some new way. Scarry too thinks pain gives birth to new language, but for her that language is not primarily poetic but rather composed of pre-language, like grunts and “cries and groans” (*Pain* 6; 7). Woolf argues that the language of illness is not cries of pain but rather a dreamy, poetic, associative language. Both women recognize that to be in pain is to be unable to communicate on some level. A powerful paradox emerges between the two women’s works: language is somehow prohibited by illness, and yet illness depends on language if we are to have any hope of understanding – and healing – the ill. Scarry writes that “to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself” (6). For both women, illness is the constituent condition for language itself; it both destroys it and enables it.

II. Woolf’s Poetic, Modern Language

Many critics pick up on the importance of language in Woolf’s work, even if they don’t spend time studying the project Woolf outlines, first in “Modern Fiction” and then in “On Being Ill.”⁶ Shortly after Woolf’s suicide in May 1941, E. M. Forster delivered a lecture to Cambridge students about his late, longtime friend. In the lecture, he mentioned two key themes in Woolf’s writing, both of which are still studied by critics today. The first is the time Woolf spends writing about sensation and perception: “[s]he liked receiving sensations – sights, sounds, tastes – passing them through her mind, where they encountered theories and memories, and then

⁶ See Thomas Caramagno, *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf’s Art and Manic-Depressive Illness*; Louise DeSalvo’s Introduction to *Melymbrosia: An Early Version of The Voyage Out*; and William Evans, *Virginia Woolf: Strategist of Language*.

bringing them out again, through a pen, on to a bit of paper” (6). The second theme is her poetic language: “[b]elonging to the world of poetry, but fascinated by another world, she is always stretching out from her enchanted tree and snatching bits from the flux of daily life as they float past, and out of these bits she builds novels” (23). The subjects of sensation, particularly of vision, and of poetic language are two themes critics still study in Woolf’s work.

In *Between Language and Silence*, Howard Harper argues that Woolf’s fictions accomplish a new type of freedom, which is “achieved through the development of a poetic language. There the creative consciousness can explore new fields of meaning without the restrictions imposed by the rules of conventional language and logic: its only law is its own sense of truth” (4). As a result, Harper concludes, Woolf is more concerned with “the phenomenology of perspective and expression” than any sort of plot device (5). Harper isn’t alone in reading Woolf’s novels as poetic expressions. Stella McNichol also suggests that Virginia Woolf is “a poet who used prose fiction as her medium” (xi). But these critics fail to apply their studies of language to where they may be most fruitful: Woolf’s work on illness. In illness, as this thesis will study, the novel’s narrative is disrupted and the language often changes.

Those critics who study Woolf’s work with perception and internalization get closer to understanding Woolf’s project on illness.⁷ Bonnie Kime Scott writes that “Woolf’s frequent discussions of words articulate a quest or desire for new effects, serving new subjects, as is typical of modernists” (44).⁸ Melinda Feldt Cumings gets even closer to illness when she discusses visions in Woolf’s second novel, *Night and Day*, noting that there’s a “tension present

⁷ In *The Flight of the Mind*, for example, Thomas Caramagno writes that in her fever Rachel “suffers profound perceptual disturbances” (158).

⁸ Though Bonnie Kime Scott discusses Septimus’ vision of the word time splitting its husk, and also briefly mentions Rhoda’s “internal language,” she doesn’t examine how illness interplays with modernist language as fully as she could (52).

in all her fiction between the moonlit world of vision and the sunlit world of facts” (87).

Cumings helpfully identifies a “pattern of visionary ritual common to all Woolf’s novels,” one Woolf achieves “[b]y concentrating on a rhythmic sight, sound, or motion and by repressing the logical faculties, the character loses the sense of his or her self as a separate entity. In fact, the spirit often seems to expand beyond the bonds of the body feeling itself floating into space above the earth” (91). In noting the importance of vision and perception in Woolf’s work, James Harker, like Cumings, points to “what is distinctive about Woolf’s narrative fiction: characters are constantly observing and thinking as they navigate the world, whether that means sitting alone in a room contemplating an ordinary object, taking a walk, going to a party or looking out the window. The inner life is rich with sensation and thought, inspired by the lowest and most common of material artifacts” (2). But Harker sees these perceptions in a negative, rather than fruitful, light: “[y]et one of the most curious and pervasive features of Woolf’s oeuvre is that characters are so frequently wrong in their perceptions” (2). To call them “wrong” or “misperceptions” misses Woolf’s point, as outlined in “Modern Fiction,” that every perception, no matter how small or how trivial, is worth examining.

Nevertheless, these critics pick up on the importance of poetic language and altered perception in Woolf’s work. Though I also examine these two themes, I acknowledge that the exploration of new language is a dark and often painful task for Woolf – she doesn’t simply invent new languages and ways of perception, as Harper suggests (4). And though Cumings and Harker point to altered visions and perceptions in Woolf’s work, they fail to push their analysis as far as they could by ignoring illness, and in doing so, don’t explore all the possibilities of what’s behind these altered realities. It’s a costly process if we remember that the source of all this poetic inspiration is illness. A look at one of Woolf’s diary entries reminds us that illness in

Woolf's work is not a utopian undertaking. In 1926, when she was writing *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf had a breakdown. In her diary, she writes,

I know the feeling now, when I can't spin a sentence, & sit mumbling & turning; & nothing flits by my brain which is as a blank window... Oh its [sic] beginning its [sic] coming – the horror – tossing me up. I'm unhappy unhappy! Down – God, I wish I were dead. Pause. But why am I feeling this? ... Wave crashes. ...I cant [sic] face this horror any more – (this is the wave spreading out over me. (*Diary Vol. 3* 110)

Just by looking at this passage – rife with misspellings and grammatical errors – it should be clear how anguished Woolf was during a breakdown. Illness for Woolf, as for her ill characters, is a dark, fearsome, and often out-of-control experience. Though it opens Woolf and her ill characters up to a new kind of language, the costs are quite high. For Woolf, as for Rachel, Septimus, and Rhoda, death ends the exploration of language and illness.

Chapter One:

The Voyage Out: The Physical and Mental Anatomy of a Fever

“Were there no limits to the power of this illness? Would everything go down before it?”
(*Voyage* 403)

I. Introduction

In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf explores physical, germ-based illness. Here her description of illness, in this case of Rachel’s influenza, is the longest description of illness in any of Woolf’s novels. In Woolf’s later studies of illness, the malaise is more mental, the visions more otherworldly. In her first study of illness, Woolf begins to experiment with what the language of illness can and cannot do. The primary sources of this exploration are Rachel’s fever passages, which bring an intense, eerie dimension to Rachel’s fever and to the novel’s conclusion. Rachel and the reader are transported to another world, where Woolf builds themes of isolation, especially through water imagery. It is also in the fever passages that Woolf begins to develop the attributes of illness that will appear again with Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway* and Rhoda in *The Waves*. For Rachel, as for the other ill characters, illness invests her with an extraordinary sensitivity and allows Woolf to use highly evocative language. But illness also leaves Rachel able to communicate less and less with those around her, pointing to how scary the project Woolf outlines in “Modern Fiction” and “On Being Ill” is.

In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf explores that cost mostly through Terence’s point-of-view. His presence balances Rachel’s otherworldly fever scenes, reminding readers that Rachel is part of a couple, and that *The Voyage Out* can be read like an unconventional marriage plot; if not for Rachel’s fatal illness, she would have married Terence at the novel’s end. Though she falls ill, derailing the wedding, Rachel and Terence remain a couple; Terence’s anguished presence at her

bedside is another place for Woolf to explore what illness does to language. Terence's reactions, including his vacillating emotions, are all a part of the problems of communication, a larger motif in Woolf's work on illness and in general throughout her oeuvre.

Terence's reactions point to the divide between the sick and the well, epitomized in *The Voyage Out* by Rachel and Terence, which is one of the most important aspects to Woolf's project on illness. For readers, *The Voyage Out* is an initiation of sorts. In her later works on illness, Woolf won't so heavily focus on the physical or plot-based details of illness; nor will she spend so much time exploring how communication breaks down between the sick and the well. Here, though, through focalization, Woolf inhabits Rachel's mind as well as Terence's throughout the course of Rachel's influenza, providing insights from both on the nature of Rachel's illness while also showing how little Terence understands Rachel's illness. Through this technique, Woolf explores, at length, the absolute breakdown of communication that takes place between the two characters. It's important to note, though, that the focalization is subtle, controlled. In Rachel's case, the shifts in narrative point of view, never immediately noticeable, allow Woolf to demonstrate how Rachel's illness progresses from mild to serious to fatal. The subtlety of the novel's shifting character perspectives allows Woolf to play with language. Once she's ill, Rachel starts to perceive the world in different terms. We get access to these perceptions because we get access to Rachel's thoughts, which gradually start moving away from anything Terence or any other healthy character would recognize. This is because Rachel is open to almost all sensation, and so Woolf can pursue images that derail the narrative arc of the novel. But since we also get access to Terence's thoughts, we get to see another aspect of the language of illness in Woolf's work. We get to see the growing divide between Rachel and Terence. We understand this divide, even though, as Woolf asserts in "On Being Ill," we might not exactly

understand Rachel's illness. This equilibrated divide, though unique to *The Voyage Out*, establishes a pattern that's echoed in her later works: the ill are increasingly isolated, both from the people around them and from the everyday world.

When Rachel first falls ill, she and Terence are sitting outside on a very hot day. At this point, the narrator is zoomed out, and, as Howard Harper points out, "the perceptions of the wasteland and the feeling of exhaustion are generalized, not yet associated with any single character" (50). Terence reads Milton's *Comus* aloud to Rachel. Usually, "one could merely listen to [Milton's] words" (*Voyage* 380). But today, for some reason, "they sounded strange [to Rachel]; they meant different things from what they usually meant" (380). Words like "'curb' and 'Lochrine' and 'Brute'" start to suggest strange meanings and bring "unpleasant sights before her eyes, independently of their meaning" (381). Though Rachel, like the reader, hasn't yet realized she is ill, if we look to "On Being Ill," it's easy to see hints of where Woolf is headed. In the essay, Woolf writes, "...in illness, with the police off duty, we creep beneath some obscure poem by Mallarmé or Donne, some phrase in Latin or Greek, and the words give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow, and then, if at least we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having travelled slowly up with all the bloom upon its wings" (324). Under this approach, illness enables a certain liberation from sense, allowing the ill to find a new way to understand Donne or Mallarmé or, in Rachel's case, Milton. Doing so leads to new linguistic possibilities, for "[i]n illness words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other – a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause" ("Ill" 324). This is a key scene for Woolf's project on illness, as it establishes that with illness comes a new way of seeing words. Under the influence of illness,

reading is an altered experience, one that, as Woolf's project on illness progresses, will take its ill characters farther and farther from the narrative world.

Soon, it's not only words that look strange to Rachel. Next she notes that, "[o]wing to the heat and the dancing air the garden too looked strange – the trees were either too near or too far, and her head almost certainly ached" (*Voyage* 381). Interestingly, illness is only introduced at the end of the sentence, and then it's not as a cause. It's another effect of the "heat and the dancing air" (381). The process of Rachel's slow realization that she's sick is unique to the three ill character this thesis will study. Even after she thinks "her head almost certainly ached," it takes Rachel a bit longer to realize that she's actually ill, that it's not the heat that's causing the words to shimmer and the trees to dance. After a bit more mental deliberation – Rachel thinks a variation of the phrase "my head aches" seven more times in the next few lines – she reaches this definitive conclusion: "[b]ut her head ached; it ached whichever way she turned it" (381). The tone of the preceding section, during Rachel's deliberation, is mentally slowed down, mimetic of Rachel's thought process. But as soon as she realizes she is ill, she can hardly wait to tell Terence. This desire to share what she's experiencing is one of the cruxes of illness and language. As we'll soon see, Terence doesn't understand her.

Right after Rachel tells Terence "[m]y head aches," they stand in the garden, holding hands (381). With the delivery of these three simple words – "[m]y head aches" – there is the potential that Terence will understand what Rachel feels. But there is also the potential for a vast discrepancy between what Rachel means and what Terence thinks she means. This discrepancy ultimately leads to Terence feeling a "sense of dismay and catastrophe [that] were almost physically painful; all round him he seemed to hear the shiver of broken glass which, as it fell to earth, left him sitting in the open air" (381). All this agony from such a simple phrase! At this

point, Terence almost seems like the ill character. His sensation, of glass shards descending upon him, is terrifying and derived solely from what Rachel said. Terence's reaction indicates illness' power over language. He can't accurately translate the words Rachel's mind supplies to describe her ailment, and so he ascribes "doom and catastrophe" to her announcement of a headache (381). Terence soon notices "that she was not sharing his dismay, but was only rather more languid and heavy-eyed than usual" (381). Terence's gradual realization is a relief to him, but the time it takes him to puzzle through Rachel's announcement is a reminder that it's nearly impossible for the healthy to completely understand the ill. Terence's struggle has only begun.

II. The Fever Passages

Throughout the course of her illness, there are three fever passages in Rachel's narrative point of view. These passages, each marked by a vision in which she leaves the narrative reality of the novel and sees something that's not there, are traces of the visions Woolf's other ill characters will have. But Rachel's visions, though they enable her to follow sensations wherever they may lead her, which is usually towards the sea, also remain grounded in the reality of her bedroom, where Helen and Terence and various doctors and nurses come in and out. Though she's at one point riding the crest of a wave, at most times Rachel remains cognizant of the world around her, unlike Woolf's later ill characters. Regardless, the language and imagery used during the fever passages are part of a continuum. As Rachel's illness progresses, the visions she has become more intense. The language adapts to suit Rachel's worsening malady.

In addition, both Rachel and the other characters, particularly Terence, spend a lot of time analyzing Rachel's illness, including noting her various symptoms. It's the anatomy of Rachel's influenza. On the whole, the novel offers a near day-by-day account of Rachel's illness, which is

unique to Woolf's project on illness. With Woolf's other ill characters, no such discussion can be found. There are doctors in *Mrs. Dalloway*, but they play a very different role. And in general in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves*, Woolf dives straight into Septimus and Rhoda's illnesses, providing less back-story and more visions. In *The Voyage Out*, on the other hand, some sense of medical reality is retained, as Terence and Helen and doctors and nurses hover around Rachel's bedside. There are also hints of what's to come in Woolf's later work, particularly in Rachel's third and final vision, and in the sharp divide that wedges itself between Rachel and reality, in this novel manifested most clearly in Terence's anguish at his beloved's rapid withering.

In the first fever scene, on waking up from what was supposed to be a restorative nap, Rachel is introspective; she peers around the room and, remembering that Helen said the headache would be gone when she woke up, "supposed, therefore, that she was now quite well again" (382). But then, "at the same time," other, unusual sensations contradict this very notion (382). The room doesn't look as it should: "the wall of her room was painfully white, and curved slightly, instead of being straight and flat" (382). And when she looks to the window, she sees the blind blowing in and out, "drawing the cord with a little trailing sound along the floor" (382).⁹ It "seemed to her terrifying" (382). This minute focus on such a small, typically unnoticeable object is an indicator for readers that Rachel's perception – and, by default, ours – has shifted. Though this shift is clear enough, Rachel deliberates for a while longer, as if not wanting to admit that she is in fact still ill.

It's not until Helen comes in that Rachel knows for sure that she is ill. She's still capable of reading Helen's gestures; Helen "suddenly stopped her cheerful words, looked startled for a second and then unnaturally calm, [and] the fact that she was ill was put beyond a doubt" (383).

⁹ This sensation is one of Woolf's first recorded memories, as noted in "A Sketch of the Past" (64-5).

Soon the household and the maid, who “slipped past the bed with averted eyes” follow suit (383). Finally Terence comes in and smiles “too steadily, as she realized, for it to be natural” (383). Rachel logically picks up these cues from others, which is interesting for an ill character in Woolf’s work. It suggests that she’s not yet seriously ill; still, perhaps, thinking logically: “[t]here was the morning to get through, and then all the afternoon,” (383). But then there’s the third part of the sentence: “at intervals she made an effort to cross over into the ordinary world” (383). This is intriguing, as it suggests that Rachel is no longer fully in reality. Moreover, she’s conscious of the nascent, growing “gulf between her world and the ordinary world which she could not bridge” (383). She remains calm throughout her initial state of delirium, by supposing that tomorrow she’ll be able to return to the ordinary world. Interestingly, what she chooses to spend her time on in the meantime is trying to remember the lines from earlier, in the garden with Terence and *Comus*. As was the case when she first fell ill, there are ties here to “On Being Ill,” with words possessing a “mystic quality” in illness (“Ill” 324). Earlier, since she wasn’t yet certain she was ill, this was a liberating and interesting new way of looking at words. But here, the liberation from sense isn’t at all positive. Now, “the effort worried her because the adjectives persisted in getting into the wrong places” (*Voyage* 384).

The second day isn’t much different, except that the “world outside” seemed “distinctly further off” (384). Along with the noticeable isolation, Rachel also has a significant premonition of a wave, which will appear again and again in both her visions as well as in the other ill characters’ visions. Here, the “glassy, cool, translucent wave was almost visible before her,” (384). “Glassy, cool, translucent” sound a lot like the symptoms of a fever. Later, when she again visualizes a wave, it will not only be visible but also all-consuming. By the third day, Rachel no longer remembers the landmarks of the day; Woolf’s anatomy of a fever is now moving towards

a looser, less restricted place, as Rachel realizes, “every object in the room, and the bed itself, and her own body with its various limbs and their different sensations were more and more important each day” (384). This is one part of Woolf’s project on illness; sensations are essential. When you’re ill, you’re open to almost all of them. The pretenses of health – including, as we saw when Rachel first wakes up, mental deliberations and the timeline of an ordinary day, with lunch and teatime – drop away. What they leave is what Woolf will explore in Rachel’s first fever vision, an eerie trip back to London. In the following sentence, Rachel also realizes, “[s]he was completely cut off, and unable to communicate with the rest of the world, isolated alone with her body” (384). This is the second part of Woolf’s project on illness. After looking at the ill characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves* we’ll see how unusual these thoughts are for an ill character in Woolf’s work. They show a level of self-awareness on Rachel’s part about her place within the everyday world that isn’t available to Septimus and Rhoda. It’s hard to picture reading two such sentences in either one of these characters’ sections, which shows how Woolf’s depiction of illness evolves in the later novels, moving away from this kind of plot-based, physical version to something more existential.

In her first vision, Rachel is prompted into hallucinations by the new addition of Nurse McInnis to her bedside, who is to sit with Rachel at night. Startled Rachel is awake for hours, and senses the night spreading itself almost endlessly in front of her; at one point, “Rachel woke to find herself in the midst of one of those interminable nights which do not end at twelve, but go on into the double figures – thirteen, fourteen, and so on until they reach the twenties, and then the thirties, and then the forties” (385). “[W]ith dismay,” she catches sight of Nurse McInnis across the bedroom, playing cards by the light of a candle (385). To Rachel there is something “terrifying” and “sinister” about this scene (385). We’re reminded how far from reality she’s

drifted when Nurse McInnis approaches to fix Rachel's messy bedding; when Nurse McInnis accidentally touches Rachel's foot, Rachel does not "realize that the toe was hers" (385). Soon she sees Nurse McInnis transported to "a tunnel under the river" (385). This image also frightens her; when she calls out, the nurse and her ominous shadow move closer to Rachel's bedside. To escape, she again closes her eyes, but this time she sees a whole host of "little deformed women sitting in archways playing cards, while the bricks of which the wall was made oozed with damp, which collected into drops and slid down the wall" (385). Eventually Rachel senses that the nurses are actually Helen and Nurse McInnis, "standing in the window together whispering, whispering incessantly" (385). What's remarkable about this vision is how the setting keeps it grounded firmly in reality. Though when Rachel shuts her eyes she is in a dripping cavern, she ultimately senses that the little old women are really Helen and Nurse McInnis.

In the second fever passage, Rachel is more preoccupied with the "hot, red, quick sights which passed incessantly before her eyes" (397). Rachel's visions are no longer dictated by what's going on around her, as they were when she hallucinated about an old woman playing cards, subconsciously drawing on the nearby nurse's presence. Now, her vision is more about sensation, and it takes her all the way to the bottom of the sea. But first, Rachel starts to make a distinction between herself and everyone else. Rachel imagines the faces all around her as engaged, "concerned in some plot, some adventure, some escape," the nature of which escapes her (397). She knows, though, that "there was always a reason behind it, which she must endeavour to grasp" (397). This endeavor is likely their concern over Rachel's health and their determination to do what it takes to help her to recover. But Rachel turns away from grasping this reason when she imagines the healthy others as various things, all noticeably different from her. These imaginings are evocative: "[n]ow they were among trees and savages, now they were

on the sea, now they were on the tops of high towers; now they jumped; now they flew” (397). In each figuration, the group is far away from her, whether by choice or chance; though by the last two sentences – “now they jumped; now they flew” – it seems as if the group has chosen to be away from her, chosen to jump, chosen to fly. It’s an effort simply for Rachel to imagine these figurations, as “something invariably slipped in her brain, so that the whole effort had to begin over again” (397).

Soon she no longer has to try to keep up, as a second vision takes over. She “fell into a deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head,” (397). The water is sticky, which is an unusual adjective to describe water, and the fact that it closes over her head suggests that no one else can – or will – join her. Down below, Rachel “saw nothing and heard nothing but a faint booming sound, which was the sound of the sea rolling over her head” (397). This suggests deep isolation, but in the next line, we’re reminded that the others surround her bed, though Rachel calls them “her tormenters” (397), which suggests not just isolation but hostility on Rachel’s part. Her “tormentors” think she’s dead, though “she was not dead, but curled up at the bottom of the sea,” (398). Here, she can go no further – her isolation is almost complete. Her descent to the bottom of the sea, though not an actual description of a symptom or of pain, is a clear invocation of the distance illness has wedged between her and the healthy. She is worlds away from them, as thousands of feet of impenetrable water separate them. And yet she is not dead, as she asserts – “[t]here she lay, sometimes seeing darkness, sometimes light, while every now and then someone turned her over at the bottom of the sea” (398). So she’s not completely alone, just as she’s not dead – someone turns her over. She’s passive, but she’s still there; as she asserted earlier, she is “completely cut off, and unable to communicate with the rest of the world, isolated alone with her body” (384). Though the healthy are trying to intervene – sometimes

“someone turned her over” – she is still enclosed in water. It “eventually closed over her head” (384). Rachel is unreachable.

In the third and final fever passage, Rachel is still immersed in the deep pool of sticky water, but here she comes back to the surface. Rachel rises to the top of the water, but this elevation is not of her own accord – the “wave seemed to bear her up and down with it; she had ceased to have any will of her own” (404). Even on top of the wave, she’s not conscious of much of anything – not the sea air of her vision or the sick room atmosphere of her reality. Instead, she is “conscious of some pain, but chiefly of weakness” (404). Ultimately, she’s conscious of what’s lacking. In an unusual image for Woolf, next Rachel’s body becomes snow, melting.¹⁰ Her body – the drift of melting snow – is slowly sliding down the side of a mountain.

Reality remains, though: “[i]t was true that she saw Helen and saw her room, but everything had become very pale and semi-transparent” – like water or snow, like Rachel (404). Throughout this final fever passage, Rachel remains conscious at some level of the room around her. She senses Helen moving in and out of her plane of vision, though when Helen stoops to lean over Rachel, she appears “gigantic” in size (404). For the most part, Rachel just floats. She “would merely lie conscious of her body floating on the top of the bed and her mind driven to some remote corner of her body, or escaped and gone flitting round the room” (404). It is Terence who troubles her most: “[t]he sight of Terence was the greatest effort, because he forced her to join mind to body in the desire to remember something” (404-5). But “[s]he did not wish to remember; it troubled her when people tried to disturb her loneliness; she wished for nothing else in the world” (405). As a reminder of things past, Terence forces Rachel to rejoin her mind with her body; this rejoining is an effort that will become more and more difficult for the ill

¹⁰ This hints of Rhoda, who says she is like “the foam at sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness” (*Waves* 107).

characters, particularly Rhoda.

III. Terence's Reactions

If Terence knew of Rachel's desire to be alone, he'd be crushed. His anguish throughout the course of Rachel's fever is another place for Woolf to examine what happens when someone falls ill. In many ways, it is just as fruitful and revealing to follow his progression throughout Rachel's illness as it is to follow Rachel's. Though not actually ill, he is almost constantly at her bedside, and his investment in her recovery is huge, making him another part of Woolf's project of writing that is both caused by and focused on illness. Since Terence is in the presence of and in love with someone who is ill, his style of thinking changes, too. Though it is not as drastic as Rachel's changes are, Terence too is more open to perception than he is before Rachel's illness. As noted earlier, Terence's initial reaction to Rachel's illness is intense: "all round him he seemed to hear the shiver of broken glass which, as it fell to earth, left him sitting in the open air" (381). This painful imagery conveys Terence's dismay. Then, though, just a bit later, Helen tells Terence to relax – Rachel will be fine. With her words, Terence goes from feeling "unreasonably depressed" to "unreasonably reassured" (382). This dramatic shift is reflective of Terence's emotions throughout Rachel's illness. Later, Terence experiences emotions as dire as feeling "profoundly wretched" at the sight of his beloved's weakened state (388). Terence feels "dependent" on Rachel, as "his happiness was in her keeping" (387). Feeling dependent on someone with less and less ties to reality leaves Terence open to swift and often painful changes in mood. Not surprisingly, the shocks Terence feels as a result of seeing Rachel or hearing that her condition has worsened are intense. Though the shocks don't physically cause him pain, the emotions he feels – "profoundly wretched" and "despair[ing]" – are potential causes of pain, just as Rachel's illness is to her a source of physical pain (388; 387). But for Terence we don't get an

accompanying vision or even some helpful imagery of what feeling “wretched” or “despair[ing]” means to Terence (388; 387). We are expected to picture what a terrific shock means. But when Rachel is going through her own internal trauma, we aren’t given words like “shock” and “despair.” We’re given images and visions, like the “gulf between her world and the ordinary world” or the “deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head” to supplement our understanding (383; 397). Woolf seems to bet that we might have some idea of what Terence feels when he says he feels “profoundly wretched” (383). The mental trauma Terence experiences, though, brings with it no visions like the ones Rachel experiences. Though seeing her causes him to experience emotions as varied as reassurance and despair, we notably don’t get any kind of descriptions of what these words mean to him. We don’t get any visions, as we do with Rachel. Not yet, anyway.

Interestingly, when Terence opens himself up to forgetting “about everything,” he gets access to a different kind of language, not quite as removed from the narrative as Rachel’s perceptions and visions are, but noticeable for its exploration of imagistic possibilities (399). Late in Rachel’s illness, Terence stands alone at an open window. In the darkness, he allows himself to escape reality for a bit. It is as “if a wind that had been raging incessantly suddenly fell asleep, the fret and strain and anxiety which has been pressing on him passed away” (399). Now liberated, “[h]e seemed to stand in an unvexed space of air, on a little island by himself” (399). Terence’s imagined isolation is a feeling very similar to Rachel’s imagined isolation during her visions. But Terence, unlike Rachel, feels “free and immune from pain” on his “little island by himself” (399). This isolation allows him to feel, however briefly, that “[i]t did not matter whether Rachel was well or ill; it did not matter whether they were apart or together; nothing mattered” (399). Even in his own quasi-vision, Terence’s mind goes back to Rachel and

her illness. In thinking this way, he believes “[s]urely the world of strife and fret and anxiety was not the real world, but this was the real world, the world that lay beneath the superficial world... The quiet and the peace seemed to lap his body in a fine cool sheet, soothing every nerve” (400). The imagery of being “beneath the superficial world” sounds similar to the language of Rachel’s vision of being beneath a “deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head” (397). Of course, the moods emanating from these two scenes are drastically different: Terence’s brings him calm, while Rachel’s is one of eerie isolation. And Rachel’s vision of being beneath the sea is more full of imagery than Terence’s meditation, which is built through his thoughts and based upon his surroundings. Still, it’s noteworthy that when Terence allows himself to feel what might be possible in another reality, he is also opening himself up to a similar kind of language and sensations that Rachel experiences when she’s ill. His limited opening to perception is indicative of what Woolf is doing to the novel itself, what she writes about in “Modern Fiction” – “let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness” (“Modern” 213).

But Terence’s health ultimately prevents him from going any further. Though he may allow Woolf to “trace the pattern” an incident “scores upon the consciousness,” Terence is not ill, and so he cannot allow her to explore the language she does with Rachel. For Terence, after a few more minutes of musing, “a noise in the house roused him; he turned instinctively and went into the drawing-room” (400). Just like that, Terence’s “little island” dissipates (399). Here too is another difference between Terence’s meditation and Rachel’s vision – she can’t willingly remove herself from a vision, whereas for Terence all it takes is a reminder of life inside to pull him back into reality. Now, “[h]e remembered everything, the hour, the minute even... He cursed himself for making believe for a minute that things were different from what they are”

(400). Though for Rachel the divisions aren't so clear, Terence's vision here – and a darker one, soon to come, remind us that illness in Woolf is not just about the ill but also about how it affects the healthy, too. Terence also brings something new into the novel.

When Terence realizes that Rachel could die, he has another vision, this one graver than the first. “Suddenly he saw it all. He saw the room and the garden, and the trees moving in the air” (405). In this second vision, Terence isn't transported, per se, but everything around him becomes sharper. Even his memory intensifies: “[f]or the first time since she fell ill he remembered exactly what she looked like and the way which in which they cared for each other” (405). But when he starts resisting his strengthened perception – when he starts trying to make active decisions – the vision shimmers away: “[h]e could not let her die; he could not live without her. But after a momentary struggle, the curtain fell again, and he saw nothing and felt nothing clearly” (405-6). When the curtain falls, Terence's vision, never as consuming as one of Rachel's fever visions, fades away, and he is faced once more with the numbing realization that Rachel might die.

Though for the duration of Rachel's influenza the narrative consciousness has switched back and forth between characters, especially between Rachel and Terence, in Rachel's death scene, the narrative shifts away from Rachel once and for all. Woolf denies us access to Rachel's visions in her death scene, thereby recognizing the limitations of language in illness – words can only communicate so much. In Rachel's third fever vision, she rises to the top of the water she's been submerged beneath, but this is not a triumphant ascent. She is not rising out of illness to health. The second part of her vision, where Rachel imagines herself as snow, makes this clear – Rachel is melting away. This is Rachel's last vision; we don't get a fourth and final imagining. Instead, Woolf gives us death through a healthy person's point of view. We still see suffering,

but of a different nature. Terence's suffering is more mental, and though it is not nearly as bad as Septimus' is in *Mrs. Dalloway*, there are traces of Septimus' mental anguish in Terence's anguish after Rachel's death.

Though we see Rachel's death through Terence's eyes, there's a strange sort of communion tenuously reached between them, as if, in death and the moments before it, the healthy can finally understand the ill. At her death bed, "[t]he curtain which had been drawn between them for so long vanished immediately" (411). Terence feels as if they can communicate once more. But then Terence listens closely and realizes Rachel has stopped breathing. She's no longer with him, but the sense of communion still remains for Terence, in some part because they are still physically joined, holding hands. Terence thinks, "[t]hey had now what they had always wanted to have, the union which had been impossible while they lived" (412). He says, "[n]o two people have ever been so happy as we have been. No one has ever loved as we have loved" (412). Terence remains in the room, feeling "that their complete union and happiness filled the room with rings eddying more and more widely" (412). This is almost a third vision for Terence. He certainly seems joined with Rachel, uninterrupted, isolated together. This seems to be the case when "moments later, or hours later perhaps, he felt an arm behind him. The arms were round him" (412). Terence cannot, or will not, distinguish if these are male or female arms. In this way he is as Rachel was, when all the figures around her bed merged into one unending blur. But when the arms and hands usher him gently out of the room, the fragile sense of communion is broken. It "suddenly came over him that here was a world in which he would never see Rachel again" (413). Terence hasn't really joined Rachel, after all. Her otherworldly reality couldn't be transferred when the curtain finally rose between them. Now Terence feels the full force of grief: "Rachel! Rachel!" he shrieked, trying to rush back to her.

But they prevented him” (413). He “struggled to break free” and cries twice more ““Rachel! Rachel!”” (413) But even if Terence did make it back to Rachel, their world, with its shaky communion, would be gone. It disappears as Rachel does, floating along the top of a wave.

At this point in her project on illness, Woolf explores what death leaves behind. The later ill characters both commit suicide; in their cases, neither the death of the ill character nor the mourning of those left behind plays such a significant role as it does in *The Voyage Out*. Here, the death is plotted; its occurrence is of major narrative significance. But Woolf does not explore the language of death. Instead, she studies the reactions of those left behind. Rachel’s death leaves real human anguish – Terence’s cries are a great deal like the anguished woman at the end of “On Being Ill.” Her handprint leaves “the curtain, heavy, Mid-Victorian, plush perhaps... all crushed together where she had grasped it in her agony” (“Ill” 327). The image of Terence crying out for Rachel as he strains against the arms holding him back is as evocative as the woman’s lingering handprint. His cries are a painful reminder of how costly Woolf’s project on illness is. The cries will only grow louder as the novels progress.

Chapter Two:

Mrs. Dalloway: “Communication is health”

Septimus Warren Smith As a Mad and Modern Writer

“I adumbrate here a study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side – something like that.” (*Diary Vol. 2* 207)

I. Introduction

When she writes *Mrs. Dalloway*, starting in 1923, Virginia Woolf is still working on her project of exploring illness as a subject matter while also experimenting with new forms of writing. Only this time around, she takes it a few steps further, studying trauma-based illness. As ever, Woolf’s diaries allow us to see more than just the novel as a finished project; in her entries about *Mrs. Dalloway* she notes several ambitious goals for the novel: one is to study “insanity & suicide” through the war-struck character of Septimus Warren Smith, a young veteran suffering from shellshock after the First World War (*Diary Vol. 2* 207). Septimus introduces a new kind of ill character to Woolf’s work. Septimus is a writer, and though he also brings a new kind of language to the novel, his is associative and visionary where Rachel’s is dreamy and poetic, and he expresses it himself. Woolf is no longer the interpreter of the ill – in *Mrs. Dalloway*, through Septimus, Woolf has an actual character doing the modern, wild, experimental writing that comes with illness. As the embodiment of illness and experimental writing, Septimus is the locus for all of the expressive, beautiful, terrifying things that illness brings to Woolf’s work.

But Woolf doesn’t only want to study “insanity & suicide” in *Mrs. Dalloway*. She also wants to study “the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side” (*Diary Vol. 2* 207).

Christine Froula points out that the lives of characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* are incredibly interconnected as the novel, a “communal elegy [that] unseals ‘a well of tears’” moves through

one single day in London (87). Over the course of twenty-four hours, the characters “mark their progress through the day... battl[ing] psychic perils that write small the great crisis of loss, grief and anger facing post-war Europe” (Froula 89). The characters are connected by the circumstance of their survivorship in London after the First World War. This connection is where “Modern Fiction” and “On Being Ill” come together: Septimus is a mad writer, one who tries desperately to communicate to the well about “[t]hose great wars which [the body] wages by itself” (“Ill” 318). Here Woolf’s audience – Septimus’ audience, too – is twofold, including both the other characters and her readers. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf again tries to provide a new language for illness, one that’s appropriately “primitive, subtle, sensual, obscene” (“Ill” 319). This time around, Woolf makes her aim absolutely explicit when she has Septimus say, midway through the novel, “[c]ommunication is health; communication is happiness...” (*Dalloway* 93). And yet, as he says this, Septimus is talking to himself in such a terrifying manner that his wife Rezia sends for the doctor. Despite his assertion about communication, for almost all he says and writes, Septimus is not communicating clearly to anyone else in the novel. Ill writing remains a dark and costly undertaking for Septimus.

II. Power Writing

In order to understand the extraordinary nature of Septimus’ writing, I want to contrast it with the most extensive scene of writing in *Mrs. Dalloway* – the letter-writing scene at Lady Bruton’s house, where a very ordinary – though also very powerful – kind of writing takes place. As three members of the British aristocracy, Lady Bruton, Hugh Whitbread, and Richard Dalloway are a cabal of power people, together crafting a letter to the editor of the *Times* about

the emigration of “the superfluous youth of our ever-increasing population” to Canada (110).¹¹ The letter demonstrates both an attempt at a kind of eugenic hygiene and a demonstration of power writing – writing that changes things and affects the world.¹²

Of the three, Hugh Whitbread is the best writer, known for “his name at the end of letters to the *Times*” (103). But the language throughout the scene should make us suspicious: though Hugh Whitbread has the skill to reduce “Lady Bruton’s tangles to sense,” when he ruminates (as is his habit), “he d[oes] not go deeply. He brushe[s] surfaces” (110; 102-3). This pairing should be cause for alarm – though Hugh Whitbread is a man without much depth, the outcome of the letters is of a potentially serious nature. The letter Lady Bruton and the two men write is a tangible example of power, as it has the real potential to cause change, and of a serious and political nature, if the encouragement of policy in the letter is to be followed. It’s hard to take Lady Bruton seriously when she imagines that emigration is “that subject which engaged her attention, and not merely her attention, but that fibre which was the ramrod of her soul, that essential part of her without which Millicent Bruton would not have been Millicent Bruton” (108). But “the essence of her soul is daily secreted” and “must eject upon some object – it may be Emigration, it may be Emancipation” (109). Though Woolf’s language in this description (as in the letter-writing scene itself) is noticeably over the top, making it hard to take the characters in the scene seriously, the subject remains shallow: though “the ramrod of her soul” is young

¹¹ Like Hugh Whitbread, Woolf also contributed to the *Times*, but she was a frequent contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement*. She’s doing multiple kinds of writing herself all the time too, making for a cool bifurcation as a writer into crafting different modes of address.

¹² Ironically enough, this is the kind of writing that sent young men like Septimus to war in the first place.

people emigrating to Canada, the “essence of her soul” changes daily, leaving the word “soul,” and Lady Bruton herself, emptier of meaning than they should be.¹³

Why, then, are Hugh Whitbread’s letters so often published in such a respected place if both he and Lady Bruton lack so much substance? Why is someone with so little depth so entrenched with the *Times*, a symbol of power and decision-making in the novel? Woolf raises these questions largely through her mocking tone throughout the letter-writing scene, drawing our attention to the discrepancy between the vehicle and the subjects of the scene. It’s because there’s not complex, deep thought taking place here that this writing can be so perfectly polished, and indeed, the letter will be published: while “Hugh could not guarantee that the editor would put it in... he would be meeting somebody at luncheon” (110). And just like that, the trio parts, leaving us with the sense that this incident is not the first, nor certainly the last time such a letter will be written. The letter writing scene is also indicative of the other “well” writing so prevalent in *Mrs. Dalloway*. “Well” writing consists mostly of letters between characters. Scenes like the one at Lady Bruton’s become revealing not only for what the healthy writers say, but for how starkly these writers contrast with Septimus’ oblique, strange, and often-unintelligible writing. Placing Septimus beside the “well” writing is another way Woolf studies “the sane & the insane side by side” (*Diary Vol. 2* 207).

¹³ Woolf gives the letter-writing scene a little edge when she includes that Lady Bruton was “in deference to the mysterious accord in which they [men], but no woman, stood to the laws of the universe; knew how to put things; knew what was said” (109). In Lady Bruton’s case, writing is something she willingly acquiesces to someone else because she doubts her own ability to communicate effectively due to her gender. In this case, Woolf is also commenting on gender restrictions – not simply the ridiculousness of the scene.

III. Woolf's Portrait of the Artist

Though the scene at Lady Bruton's is the most extensive scene of writing in the novel, Septimus Smith is also a character who writes, though his writings are often strange and unintelligible, especially when compared to Hugh Whitbread's precise letter to the editor of the *Times*. Still, Septimus is Woolf's first portrait of the artist, and his biography section is key in establishing him as an aspiring writer. The biography is the first time we learn about what Septimus is like before the narrative present of the novel, before the war wrecks him. Septimus leaves home "because he could see no future for a poet in Stroud" (84). In London, when he goes to school, he writes a love poem to his teacher, Isabel Pole, a poem that causes her to ask, "[w]as he not like Keats?" (85). This comparison speaks to more than Septimus' writing abilities – Keats died young, just as Septimus will. But Isabel Pole's question also establishes a fact of key importance about Septimus: he is a writer, one who is trying to express very serious things – in this case, about love. But Septimus is serious about writing in general, not just about the subjects he chooses. The actual process of writing is intense, and it wouldn't be unusual to have "found him writing; found him tearing up his writing; found him finishing a masterpiece at three o'clock in the morning and running out to pace the streets, and visiting churches, and fasting one day, drinking another, devouring Shakespeare, Darwin, *The History of Civilisation*, and Bernard Shaw" (85). Here is a man intoxicated with writing and reading; the descriptive verbs, like "devours," "tears," "paces," and "fasts," assert these key details.

In London before the war, Septimus gains access to learning and love and experience. It is here that Septimus comes alive as an individual; he's more than just a Smith. Here there's hope that Septimus will escape the fate of the many others with his surname: "London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith; thought nothing of fantastic Christian

names like Septimus with which their parents have thought to distinguish them” (84). Reading and writing aren’t only key in separating Septimus from the mass of Smiths, though. Reading and writing are essential to Septimus’ being, so essential, in fact, that when the First World War begins, Septimus “went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole” (86). Essentially, Septimus goes to World War I for love – both of language and of Isabel Pole.

The war changes everything for Septimus, but especially his love of language. When Septimus goes to war, the narrative point of view and the language is pulled into Septimus’ own point of view. This complete narrative shift is appropriate, as it shows the devastating effects the war has on Septimus. Just as the war changes Septimus completely, so the narrative point of view changes completely. It isn’t until after the death of his close friend Evans that Septimus starts to change, and then the change is drastic, irreparable. When Evans is killed, Septimus temporarily loses the ability to feel; this loss will continue to occasionally afflict him as a symptom of his shellshock. Here, in the aftermath of Evans’ death, “Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive. He was right there” (86). Though Septimus isn’t writing here, the slight fragmentation of his thoughts hints at what his thinking and writing will look like postwar.

At first, the war doesn’t seem to affect reading, writing, and Isabel Pole, the three things he fought for. Septimus “could read, Dante for example, quite easily” (88). The rest of his life seems to be falling into place, too: after returning from Italy, newly married to Rezia, he is

promoted and moves into “admirable lodgings off the Tottenham Court Road” (88). But when he returns to Shakespeare, the author he used to “devour,” the panic sets in (85). Like the sensation of feeling, Septimus’ investment in words has changed significantly. Now, “[t]hat boy’s business of the intoxication of language – *Antony and Cleopatra* – had shrivelled utterly” (88). Postwar, it’s a different kind of intoxication: “[t]his was now revealed to Septimus; the message hidden in the beauty of words. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair” (88). The “secret signal” Septimus sees in *Antony and Cleopatra* sounds a lot like the secret signaling he reads during the skywriting scene: “[s]o, thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me” (21).

Just as the language of Shakespeare has changed for Septimus into a coded, private language, so words have changed. Septimus thinks,

The word ‘time’ split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white, imperishable words, and flew to attach themselves to their places in an ode to Time; an immortal ode to Time. (69-70)

This is how Septimus sees words now – fruitful, organic things, capable of shedding their past meanings and bestowing wisdom, beauty on him, on Septimus, the man who will use those words to write things like odes to time and immortality.¹⁴ It’s an imaginative process of writing: words fall from his lips “without his making them” and then fly to “attach themselves to their places” (69). Though to us they are linguistic experimentation, to Septimus words are, as the seed metaphor implies, beautiful things planted within him that need to come out in order to bloom.

¹⁴ Again, there are ties here to Keats, with the “odes to time,” and to Wordsworth, with the odes to “immortality” (69-70).

The beautiful potential of the seed image isn't completely at odds with Septimus' realization, after reading *Antony and Cleopatra*, that language has "shrivelled utterly" (88). Though both notions offer different ideas about the potential of words (one idealistic, the other apprehensive), the key similarity between them is that words are coded messages that he can translate. What Woolf wrote about language and how the ill use it in "On Being Ill" is essential to understanding how Septimus sees words: "[i]n illness words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other – a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause" ("Ill" 318). Septimus absorbs the idea of hidden messages buried in language and begins to use it in his own attempts to communicate through both writing and speaking. It's important to note, though, that however lovely the "time split its husk" approach to words may sound, Septimus is reading extreme, private messages into words that aren't necessarily coded. This, of course, makes it harder and harder for other humans, like Rezia, to connect with him. In that way, when Septimus returns to writing after World War I, he fully becomes the character so essential to Woolf's project, bringing together writing, the war, illness, poetic language, and the problems of indecipherability and incommunicability.

IV. Septimus' Writings – The Transcriptions

Though Septimus writes a good deal in *Mrs. Dalloway*, much of what we see is Woolf's transcription of his thinking about writing or thinking about writing his thoughts down. Inhabiting Septimus' thoughts liberates Woolf, because when she writes about Septimus, his thoughts are wilder or more figurative than Hugh Whitbread's thoughts, where the prose is much less interesting. In a later section of the chapter, this thesis will examine the account of his writing that we get from Rezia, where the writing sounds like what we've been hearing through

Woolf's transcription all along. The impact of these writings is powerful, as they give us a much closer view of Septimus' writings than the paraphrases we've grown accustomed to through Woolf's transcriptions.

What does a shell-shocked writer write about? The first glimpse we get of Woolf's transcription of Septimus' writing, in Regent's Park with Rezia, is a brief one, but it's revealing nonetheless. Rezia watches Septimus, "sitting alone on the seat, in his shabby overcoat, his legs crossed, staring, talking aloud" (24). He says that "[m]en must not cut down trees. There is a God. (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes.)" (24). He continues: "[c]hange the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down)" (24). In this case his writing is generally about peace and violence and the reasons to avoid further killing. When he says "[m]en must not cut down trees," Septimus wants to avoid destruction altogether (24).

The parenthetical part of this passage is as revealing as the "revelations" themselves. Septimus "note[s]" them down. One of the key features of Septimus' writing is that every word counts. Septimus is convinced that his knowledge is world-changing, hence the "revelations." What he writes matters to him, though of course to us, his writing seems more ordinary than revelatory. He continues: "[c]hange the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down)" (24). Again, the actual action of his writing takes place in parentheses, which shows that what matters to Septimus are the insights, not the actual, physical writing. Unfortunately, the ideas seem less rich and powerful on paper than they do in his mind. It's hard to ignore that Septimus writes on envelopes, which carry letters – attempts to communicate something.

In a later scene, Septimus writes something remarkably similar:

[t]he supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; first that trees are alive; next that there is no crime; next love, universal love, he muttered, gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out, but the world was entirely changed by them for ever. No crime; love; he repeated, fumbling for his card and pencil... (67)

There's a second mention about trees – though this time that they're alive (is that why he says men must not cut them down earlier?). In this case, as in the case of the first transcription, Septimus' imperatives are short and bold – “next love, universal love,” “first that trees are alive” (67). But they are also largely indecipherable. Part of their incoherent effect is the way they're presented – we're seeing them second-hand in most cases, and the transcription is almost always in the form of a long sentence, interrupted by semicolons and commas and dashes. These are sentences as frenzied as Septimus' mind, and though the individual parts – “[n]o crime,” “love” – are easy enough to understand, when read together, they make little sense. What's the connection between trees, the supreme secret, universal love, and crime? This is one of the major roadblocks for us when we read Septimus' writing. We can't see the logic behind his associative thinking. Interestingly, in both sections, what he writes down is elevated to the status of revelations or profound truths, but of course we wonder how that can be if no one understands what he's saying. To be unintelligible is to be ignored, ultimately.

In both cases, though, the effort it takes for Septimus to draw out these observations is remarkable. In the first section, each little “revelation” feels as if it's written quickly, so as to usher it out of Septimus' mind and make way for the next revelation, to be spouted and written just as quickly. In the second passage, the intensity is even greater: “he muttered, gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths” (67). Woolf knows we're not going to

consider “these profound truths” as profound as Septimus does, which makes this kind of description heart-breaking. This discrepancy reminds us that there is a disconnect between what he wants to say and what comes out, between what he means and what we understand he means. And yet, Septimus’ urgency persists; we see it in Rezia’s description of Septimus as he’s writing. He’s always “clutching [Rezia] and telling her to write” (140). Or he “was always stopping in the middle, changing his mind; wanting to add something; hearing something new; listening with his hand up” (140). This is a portrait of a man with something at stake.

Overcoming this disconnect is a problem for any writer. And Septimus, though ill, is like healthy writers in that he wants to express something vital about human life in words. In a later scene directly before Dr. Holmes’ visit, midway through the novel, we’re reminded that though Septimus is ill and increasingly isolated, there is something very human about his desire to write. Here, Septimus writes, “[o]nce you stumble, [he] wrote on the back of a postcard, human nature is on you. Holmes is on you” (92). It’s significant that Septimus writes this on a postcard, an object designed to communicate one person’s thoughts to another. For who will read Septimus’ postcard? What he writes – “Once you stumble, human nature is on you. Holmes is on you” – is not easily decipherable, especially out of context, and yet Septimus persists throughout the novel, writing on a postcard, on little scraps of paper and on the backs of envelopes, all pieces of paper that can be easily left behind in a public place for someone else to read. It’s a fact of central significance that the postcard is never sent, the envelopes never mailed. Septimus’ little bits of writing – weird, truncated, modern phrases that no one understands – are an attempt to express something. After all, as Septimus says, shortly before Dr. Holmes’ disastrous arrival, “[c]ommunication is health; communication is happiness; communication –” (93). Which is

why it's so sad when Rezia asks next, "What are you talking about, Septimus?" (93). Her question reveals how futile almost all of Septimus' attempts to communicate are.

A vision Septimus has shortly after the transcription of his writing in Regent's Park ("the supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet"), is *the* point in the novel where we get to the core of Septimus' vision. It's the place where we're given access to his internal life, making the shifts between beauty and incoherence in Septimus' writing more understandable. The vision, like Septimus' writing, is at once horrifying and beautiful, making it undeniable that he is deeply ill, that his life is hurtling towards its end. Septimus and Rezia are still in Regent's Park at the beginning of the vision, and though he initially remains grounded in this setting, Septimus also feels – literally – on top of the world. He floats "on the back of the world. The earth thrilled beneath him" (68). Though watching from above, Septimus remains semi-grounded in Regent's Park. Little bits and pieces of that setting are reflected in his vision, like when he hears "[m]usic... clanging" or the sound of the "motor horn" of a car – these are both sounds of the Park around him (68). But then there's a scenic shift in Septimus' vision, as if he realizes just how far away he really is from Regent's Park. Now, instead of sitting atop the world, he imagines himself "high on his rock, like a drowned sailor on a rock" (68-9). With this, the tone of the vision darkens; Septimus has left Regent's Park. The language in this section of the vision is particularly intriguing, as this is the only time that the first person is used for the duration of Septimus' vision: "I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive" (69).¹⁵ The three first person sentences are a string

¹⁵ Septimus' submersion sounds a lot like one of Woolf's diary entries, written when she was ill: "I know the feeling now, when I can't spin a sentence, & sit mumbling & turning; & nothing flits by my brain which is as a blank window... Oh its [sic] beginning its [sic] coming – the horror – tossing me up. I'm unhappy unhappy! Down – God, I wish I were dead. Pause. But why am I

of dark thoughts for Septimus; arguably his most morbid thoughts of the vision. They tell us that Septimus fell, into the sea, to his death. And yet, immediately after, when Septimus is “now alive” – noticeably no “I” there – the first person again disappears from Septimus’ vision. But the morbidity does not disappear with the “I” from Septimus’ vision. Though he realizes that he is “now alive,” his next thought is “but let me rest still; he begged” (69).

Ultimately, though, he emerges. The last part of his vision is in imitative form: as Septimus rises from the depths of the sea, so the language rises until both are once more on the shore. Just as “the sleeper feels himself drawing to the shores of life, so [Septimus] felt himself drawing towards life, the sun growing hotter, cries sounding louder, something tremendous about to happen” (69). In this case, the “something... tremendous” is his return to Regent’s Park, where the world is glitteringly beautiful, a reward for having resisted death’s draw (69). It is a scene of blinding beauty: “[l]ong streamers of sunlight fawned at his feet. The trees waved, brandished. We welcome, the world seemed to say; we accept; we create. Beauty, the world seemed to say,” (69). Though inarticulate objects are speaking to Septimus, they aren’t doing so in a sinister way. Instead, the world welcomes him back. It would be hard to find another so completely positive and beautiful world in any section written in Septimus’ point of view (or in any character’s point of view, for that matter). Septimus, on his part, feels it all, as if the world is putting on a show for him: he watches “the leaf quivering,” the “swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out” (69). It is all “an exquisite joy” (69). Septimus’ reciprocal action is to interpret these offerings from the world: “all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere” (69). Septimus’ correlation here between beauty and truth echoes his musings,

feeling this? ... Wave crashes. ...I cant [sic] face this horror any more – (this is the wave spreading out over me)” (*Diary Vol. 3* 174). Water threatens to suffocate each writer.

especially when he says he feels the strain of “profound truths which needed, so deep were they,” to be spoken out (67).

But where does all this beauty come from? Is it the result of his hallucination? A reward for resisting death? Or is it another vision? It’s hard to say. A quote from Woolf’s diary may guide us: “these curious intervals in life – I’ve had many – are the most fruitful artistically – one becomes fertilised – think of my madness at Hogarth – and all the little illnesses” (*Writer’s Diary* 143). In one regard, Septimus’ vision in the park “fertilises” him, making Regent’s Park glow in the aftermath. But if we look closely at the language in this scene, the verbs Septimus uses to describe Regent’s Park around him aren’t as “calm and reasonable” as he says his view of the park is. These verbs include “waved; brandished,” “quivering,” “swooping, swerving, flinging,” and “rising and falling” (69). If only one or two such verbs were used, it wouldn’t be as noticeable, but as they read now, together the verbs create a picture of instability, seeming to imply that this beautiful world in front of Septimus isn’t real, that it’s a vision, ready to waver away at any moment. He seems more ecstatic than “calm and reasonable” (69). And when Rezia interrupts him, this beautiful world does indeed fall away. For Woolf, this falling away is one of the prerequisites for a vision of this nature; it is temporary, and only granted to those on the edge, like Septimus.

Septimus’ vision – not the only one he experiences in *Mrs. Dalloway* – is a reminder that ill writing is in some ways a celebration of new and experimental writing, but it also doesn’t come easily or last long, and it ravages those for whom it comes. In the end, ill writing is just that – caused by illness, interrupted by illness, both enabled and marred, ultimately, by illness. Septimus’ writing comes at a heavy cost. It’s exploration, certainly, but it’s also one of the contributing factors to his suicide. Septimus’ eerie vision, directly after fumbling for his pencil

and card, reminds us that death ends Septimus' exploration of language. Though illness opens Septimus up as a writer, it also isolates him, leaving his body "macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock" (68). Septimus' vulnerability, though it leaves him unprotected, enables him to perceive beautiful things, too. Hugh Whitbread is certainly never exposed like this. Ultimately, Septimus' maceration is the condition for seeing in this ecstatic way.

V. Septimus' Writings

Near the end of Septimus' life story, we get to see his actual writings, neatly gathered by Rezia and tucked away into a little side table. Rezia has just informed Septimus that he must go to one of Bradshaw's homes. Septimus is upset; revealingly, one of the first things he asks for after Rezia tells him about his fate is his writings – "Where were his papers? the things he had written?" (147). This scene marks the first time we read about Septimus' actual writings, not what he's thinking about writing down or Woolf's transcriptions of his thoughts or writing. At first glance, the writing sounds remarkably similar to what we've read before:

The table drawer was full of those writings; about war; about Shakespeare; about great discoveries; how there is no death. (140)

Now for his writings: how the dead sing behind rhododendron bushes; odes to Time; conversations with Shakespeare; Evans, Evans, Evans – his messages from the dead; do not cut down trees; tell the Prime Minister. Universal love: the meaning of the world.

(147)

The most noticeable aspect of these writings is also the most familiar: the mentions of trees and the Prime Minister, as well as the way his topics are presented in a sentence separated by

semicolons. But there are also glimpses of lyrical unity in these two bundles of writings, unity that we haven't seen in Septimus' writing thus far. The most noticeable motifs in this bundle of writings are death and mourning. The actual word "dead" is repeated twice. Septimus also seems to move through a continuum about death here: first outright denial – "there is no death" – then pseudo-acceptance: "the dead sing behind rhododendron bushes" (147). Septimus is no longer denying death's place in life, but he's not quite fully accepting it either, as the rhododendron bush image makes clear. It's an interesting configuration of death: the dead are out of sight but still, theoretically, in reach, hidden behind the bush's flowers. He seems to accept death so long as it's not a complete cessation of communication with those who have died, as we see in the third mention of the dead: there are still "messages from the dead" (147).

This denial of death's ultimate power makes more sense when we look at the men who are mentioned in these writings. He wants to talk to two of the men who meant a lot to him, both before the war (Shakespeare) and during it (Evans). He can't, of course, because they no longer exist, but that doesn't make his desire any less lyrical. His desire is anguished, too, as we see in the triple cry for his dead friend: "Evans, Evans, Evans" (147). Septimus may repeat ideas in his writings, like those about trees, but he doesn't often repeat words. This is a significant and anguished expression of grief.

Septimus' attempts in writing to communicate with these three dead men show he's still deep in the process of mourning. And in this section, Septimus also writes "about war," which is the first explicit mention of war in any of Septimus' writings. This is really intriguing: what exactly would Septimus write about the war? In an earlier transcription, he says that "no one kills from hatred," but Septimus has never explicitly said anything about the war itself (24). We're not told anything more about the subject, but the looming presence of death and Septimus' lost

friends in these writings makes it probable that when Septimus writes about war, he is also writing about himself, as if writing is a place to explore what's happened to him and why he's so alone now.

His conversations with Shakespeare and the allusion to Keats make it clear that Septimus is also in mourning for his former self. His "odes to Time" again liken Septimus to Keats, just as Isabel Pole did before the war (147). Similarly, his writings about "conversations with Shakespeare" reflect Septimus' pre-war past, as Septimus went to "France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays" (86). The phrasing "conversations with Shakespeare" is revealing, as it ties back to Septimus' postwar relationship with the bard, too: "*Antony and Cleopatra* had shrivelled utterly" (88). Septimus' relationship with Shakespeare throughout his biography is a place where Woolf makes a comment on the great English writer. For like any English writer, Septimus – and Woolf – has to deal with Shakespeare's legacy. Before the war, Septimus was intoxicated with all language, but especially Shakespeare's. But after the war, that intoxication "shrivels," and in making this observation, Septimus allows Woolf to say that there are certain things that Shakespeare doesn't do. The fact that his writings are "conversations *with* Shakespeare" and not only conversations *about* Shakespeare is important [emphasis added] (147). As a modern, idiosyncratic writer, Septimus says that he's writing about ideas that Shakespeare didn't.

What follows the message from the dead – though a semicolon separates it – is a return to by now familiar theme for Septimus: "do not cut down trees," followed by "tell the Prime Minister" (147). We've seen these phrases before in Septimus' writings. We didn't understand them then, and it's no easier now, even though this time they follow expressions of immense grief that we *do*, for once, recognize. These secondary, more mundane aspects of his writing

threaten the beauty and the impact of his work, causing Septimus to change paths, focusing on ideas less compelling than death and mourning. His writings now seem absurd, and certainly mundane. The phrases “[d]o not cut down trees” and “tell the Prime Minister” almost completely take away from the beauty of his writings about Evans and Shakespeare (147).

As a result, it’s far too easy to dismiss his last subject: “Universal love: the meaning of the world” (148). This line really is a revelation, especially for Septimus, as it’s the first time we’ve seen two associations clearly linked in his writing. Before, the phrase probably would have read: “Universal love; the meaning of the world.” Then, we would only have been able to suspect that the two ideas were linked for Septimus. But here, for once, we understand what he’s trying to say: universal love is the meaning of the world. This is a beautiful thought, one of those “profound truths” that Septimus has been after all along (67). But since it follows the two other, oft-repeated phrases, the final observation is less revelatory than it could be. Ultimately, though the mentions of “trees” and the “Prime Minister” taint some of the beautiful unity and clarity of these writings, we can’t deny that Septimus expresses himself in an evocative and at times understandable way in this section of writing. He’s still communicating in fragments, but these fragments start to come together to form a larger message about grief.

This feeling of unity is nearly swept away by Septimus’ first critical reception as a writer. Just as we only see Septimus’ actual writing once, near the end of his life, we only see the reception of his work once, and this too is near the end of his life. Back at Septimus and Rezia’s apartment, “they found the girl who did the room reading one of these papers in fits of laughter. It was a dreadful pity. For that made Septimus cry out about human cruelty – how they tear each other to pieces” (140). The maid’s laughter is callous, disrespectful, but also not entirely surprising. She judges the incoherent fragments for what they aren’t – clear and impactful. She

doesn't look for beauty. The maid's laughter is a writer's nightmare. Her laughter is also a dismissal, one that tests us as readers. Haven't we, after all, considered Septimus a writer? Haven't we believed that he has something important to say? Thankfully, we also have Rezia, though her judgment isn't positive either – at least not entirely. In Septimus' writing, Rezia recognizes that “[s]ome things were very beautiful; others sheer nonsense” (140). The judgments are listed together, as if Septimus can't have one without the other.

VI. Septimus' Suicide

Septimus' suicide can be read in several lights. On one level, his leap is a vivid expression of rage against Dr. Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes and the ways in which they've mistreated him. But Septimus' suicide is also his final attempt to communicate. Either way it's read, Septimus' suicide is not a frenzied gesture. When he hears Dr. Holmes coming up the stairs, Septimus considers his options calmly and rationally: “Mrs. Filmer's nice clean bread knife... The gas fire? Razors” (149). None of these suffice. It is the window Septimus chooses, even though there's the “rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out” (149). There's nothing manic about his last considerations; his clarity of thought is calm and levelheaded in a way we never see in Septimus' writings. Septimus has also had Rezia prepare his papers: they “were tied up. No one should get at them. She would put them away” (148). His papers neatly gathered, the writer in Septimus is ready to depart. And so Septimus jumps, and in death makes a final attempt to communicate. His last words are “I'll give it you!” and they are expressive of the communicative nature of his suicide (149). But Septimus is giving more than his life in his suicide. It isn't until the last scene of the novel, when Clarissa learns about the suicide, that we realize just how much Septimus is trying to say.

In his final expressive gesture, Septimus does communicate, as he's been attempting since he got back from the war. So in the end, Septimus *does* indeed "give" something. But Clarissa is the only character to truly understand Septimus' suicide, and the sad fact remains that Clarissa understands because she is his twin soul. She has special, psychologically-based access to Septimus as Woolf intends Septimus "to be [Clarissa's] double" ("An Introduction to *Mrs. Dalloway*" 11).¹⁶ Woolf originally intended for Clarissa, rather than Septimus, to kill herself; knowing this adds another layer to this last scene ("An Introduction to *Mrs. Dalloway*" 11). Though it's a psychological, idea-based connection, as the two never actually meet, they are "entirely dependent on each other" ("A Letter from Virginia Woolf" 100). This dependency imbues Clarissa with a deep understanding of Septimus' last gesture; more than any other character, her assessment of Septimus' suicide becomes relevant and important. The fact that Woolf uses another character (rather than Septimus himself) to help the reader understand Septimus' suicide speaks again to the importance of exploring communication between the sick and the well in Woolf's work. Septimus can't tell us why he jumped, but Clarissa, a healthy character, can. Though Clarissa beautifully interprets Septimus' suicide, her understanding of him is not one that leads to a happy ending. Septimus has to kill himself to be understood, and then it is only by one other person, a woman he never meets.

When Clarissa first hears the news of the suicide, she doesn't immediately understand. Part of its beauty lies in its message, but since Septimus sees the world as coded, it wouldn't make sense if Clarissa understood the reasoning behind his suicide right away. At first, Clarissa reacts to the news almost selfishly: "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death" (183). But death doesn't leave the party, and Clarissa gradually accepts its presence. Her

¹⁶ This is a significant piece of Woolf's writing, as it is "Woolf's only published comment on one of her works" (*Mrs. Dalloway Reader* 10).

tone soon becomes cogent, understanding, accepting. She realizes that Septimus' suicide was a gesture. She thinks,

This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre, which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (184)

Clarissa understands that “[d]eath was an attempt to communicate” (184). She visualizes death as finally “reaching the centre” which has “evaded” Septimus for so long (184). She sees “an embrace in death” (184). Over the course of a few pages, Clarissa comes to understand Septimus' flight. All he wants is to connect. This is the reason for the jump – not his misery. Once Clarissa reaches this conclusion, she begins to evaluate her own life under the influence of Septimus' reality. In doing so, she joins Septimus' view of reality, transcending the barrier between the sick and the well, but only briefly. At this point, Clarissa “felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. ...He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun” (186). Clarissa is able to look at his suicide this way because she and Septimus are “entirely dependent” on each other (“A Letter from Virginia Woolf” 100) But there is also distance between them – Clarissa and Septimus are connected in ways that only exist in the world of fiction. For they never meet, and the fact that she calls Septimus a “young man,” reminds the reader that they are, in fact, strangers. This makes her interpretation of his suicide less personal – but certainly no less moving.

Ultimately, though Clarissa understands Septimus' coded last gesture, she doesn't join him. Eventually she turns back. In returning to her guests, Clarissa recognizes what Septimus could no longer see – that there isn't actually a code, that things in life – including humans – are sloppier than that. Here T.S. Eliot's “Burnt Norton” comes to mind, offering both a succinct

analysis of Septimus' suicide and the reason for Clarissa' return to her party: "Go, go, go said the bird: human kind / cannot bear very much reality." Turning back to the party is Clarissa's way of stepping away from the ledge. She cannot bear the reality of madness that Septimus suffers from. Because her nerves aren't macerated as Septimus' are, because she can still recognize the ordinary world, Clarissa steps back. Because of his illness, Septimus wouldn't have been able to do the same. Clarissa understands Septimus' gesture, but she does not join him. She does not jump, unlike Septimus. She doesn't hold Septimus' final, futile faith that others would understand her if she did.

Chapter Three:

The Waves: Rhoda as Foam, as the Embodiment of Illness Itself

“She gazed over the slate roofs – the nymph of the fountain always wet, obsessed with visions, dreaming.” (*Waves* 274)

I. Introduction

In *The Waves*, written in 1931, Virginia Woolf probes deeper into the abyss between the sick and the well, but this time, her ill character, Rhoda, is born with the attributes of illness. In *The Voyage Out* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, on the other hand, illness is something acquired – for Rachel, it is the fever she catches in an exotic South American country; for Septimus, his shellshock comes after his service in the First World War. But in *The Waves*, Rhoda embodies illness from the very beginning. While she shares certain characteristics with the other ill characters – characteristics like an extraordinary sensitivity, an inability to communicate with those around her, and an openness to perceptions that leads to highly evocative visions – Rhoda comes into the novel with her illness already a significant part of who she is. There are no doctors in *The Waves*; here, Woolf has moved from using illness and its symptoms as they manifest themselves in language to exploring what it means to perceive in a certain way. In *The Waves*, Woolf grows as a writer; she no longer uses plot to determine what would make a character ill. Instead, from the very beginning, Rhoda is “broken into separate pieces,” she is “no longer one” (*Waves* 106). In the narrative arc of illness in Woolf’s work, Rachel catches a fever; Septimus’ experience in war drives him crazy; and Rhoda *is* – her condition of being is that she embodies all that illness is in Woolf’s work, leaving her incredibly, dauntingly sensitive to the world around her.

Of herself, Rhoda tells us, “I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness; I am also a girl, here in this room” (107). Rhoda is constantly dispersed, but, as she adds immediately after, she is also undeniably human, and in near-constant anguish. She narrates her tale of struggling to reassemble when all she wants to do is fall apart from the beginning of her life until the end, when she vanishes from the novel. Rhoda’s illness is what it’s like *to be*. Her extreme sensitivity leaves her both vulnerable and porous, making her at almost all times a condition of perception. The language and the actions of everyday life evade her understanding; something in her disposition prevents her from being like the other characters, like Susan and Jinny, who “laugh really...get angry really” (43). Rhoda has “to look first and do what other people do when they have done it” (43). Life, for Rhoda, is a constant recognition of what’s not present in her.

The six sentences below, in which Rhoda can barely bring herself to step over a puddle, are indicative of Rhoda’s daily struggles to make it through life: “I was blown like a feather. I was wafted down tunnels. Then very gingerly, I pushed my foot across. I laid my hand against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into my body over the grey, cadaverous space of the puddle. This is life then to which I am committed” (64). This passage introduces us to Rhoda’s illness, which is not germ or trauma-based as it is in the first two novels discussed in this thesis, but rather identity-based. Rhoda’s problem is that her mind continuously wants to separate from her body. Her mind’s constant attempts to escape are thwarted by the immediacy of her body, of her undeniable physical presence in reality. The phrases “I was blown” and “I was tossed,” though they initially make it sound like Rhoda’s body is the thing being tossed around, actually pertain to her mind – after all, her mind’s the thing that is so painfully drawn “back into [her] body” at the passage’s end (64). Though the two earlier ill

characters escaped their bodies through visions, their escapes were fleeting and largely out of their control. Rhoda, on the other hand, seems desperate to leave her body in whatever way she can. Her determination to leave her body is apparent through the use of the first person throughout the passage, which is key for Rhoda – she knows what’s wrong with herself. That’s part of her problem. Unlike Septimus or Rachel, Rhoda can’t escape her self-knowledge; its continual presence interferes with just about any attempt she makes to remain in her body and in reality. Because Rhoda recognizes her mind’s desire to leave her body, she can push back against the wind that “blow[s]” or “tosse[s]” her around like a feather on the breeze – at least to an extent (64). Ultimately, she stops trying to stay in her body; at that point she commits suicide. But the other side of Rhoda’s struggle is her fear of becoming bodiless, of floating away. Though her desire to leave her body is a key part of Rhoda’s character, Rhoda is also Woolf’s exploration of the horrors of not having a body. In the end, both contribute to her death. We see hints of her eventual exhaustion when she says, “[t]hen very gingerly, I pushed my foot across” (64). Though now it’s an active decision: Rhoda “pushed” (64). But, of course, she does so “very gingerly,” (64). With this small step, she says, “I laid my hand against a brick wall,” which is something she does again later, to return to reality: I “must press my hand against the walls to draw myself back” (131). This movement is a signature one for Rhoda: to return to reality she must touch something solidly there, something that won’t move as she does, a feather on the wind. This is the part of her that doesn’t want to leave her body, that’s trying to find and then reenter it. When she places her hand on the brick wall, she returns both physically and mentally to the world, which is not an easy process: “I returned very painfully” (64). As she does, she draws herself back into her body; before, she was in the puddle and its “grey, cadaverous space” (64). The puddle’s presence, and its demand that Rhoda step over it, that she reunite body and mind, is like

life for Rhoda in that life constantly and painfully forces her mind back into her body. Rhoda's perpetually thwarted attempts to escape the identity of her body are the "life then to which [she is] committed" (64).

But Rhoda is more than just an exploration of what it's like to be – Rhoda also brings up problems of human communication. Susan Gorsky points out that, through Rhoda, Woolf asks questions like "what is identity? how can the individual distinguish himself from his world and from other people? ...how can one communicate with a person one cannot fully know?" (220). Though she may feel alone in this world, Rhoda is not – there are six other main characters in *The Waves*, five of whom are narrators. Like the puddle earlier, the other characters remind Rhoda that she must remain assembled, that her body and her mind cannot separate as she sometimes wants them to. Humans, especially the other five narrators, are a key part of Rhoda's condition. She feels that no one really knows her, but she's also terrified of ever being known. She's isolated, and yet she's part of an intimate company of characters who have known each other since childhood. A key paradox emerges: Rhoda is isolated, but she is also an integral part of this experimental novel, which is told by each character in a series of rotations in point of view. It's a novel of monologues, and so Rhoda must express herself.

Since there are five other narrators, who are intimates with Rhoda since childhood, we get revealing insights on their parts, too. We get to see how the healthy interact with the ill in a new way in *The Waves*, since each narrator often makes observations about the other characters around him or her. Bernard, the character who takes on the role of summarization by the novel's end, describes Rhoda as he's always seen her: "[s]he gazed over the slate roofs – the nymph of the fountain always wet, obsessed with visions, dreaming (274). Bernard's observation establishes Rhoda as a part of his community; it also establishes that she has always been

different from the others – in this case, she’s wet to their dry. Bernard’s observation ultimately frames Rhoda as a dreamy visionary, like Rachel and Septimus, but the key difference is that Rhoda has *always* been that way. It doesn’t take influenza or shellshock to open her up. Likewise, her co-narrators have been around her since they were all in early childhood; they’ve never known her not to be “some fasting and anguished spirit”; and so what they observe arises from lifelong exposure as opposed to the nascent shock Terence or Rezia must feel about the changes that have so suddenly taken place in their loved ones (197). So when a character makes a comment about “Rhoda’s strange communications when she looks past us, over our shoulders,” we get the sense that it’s not so much a question of why – why did Rachel fall ill? why won’t Septimus get better? – but an acknowledgement of Rhoda’s lifelong alienation, of the fact that “Rhoda was wild – Rhoda one never could catch” (98; 247). The novel’s format is a new way for Woolf to explore the losses in translation between the sick and the well. As readers, we know almost exactly what Rhoda is feeling. Her co-narrators have some sense of it, too, but their speculations about Rhoda are few and far between, with nowhere near the intensity that Rhoda brings when she talks about herself. Still, they, like life itself, keep Rhoda tethered to reality. Though Rhoda wants to be outside of her body, she also has major anxieties about that. In the end, she doesn’t simply want to escape being embodied. The other characters, like the puddle, bring about feelings of isolation for Rhoda, but the other characters also help keep her physically within her body, allowing Woolf to explore another aspect of illness. Through Rhoda, she explores what it means to not have a body – not literally, but in the way that Rhoda’s body can’t always contain her. She separates from it far too easily and often. Septimus and Rachel only had sensations of feeling bodiless. For Rhoda, it is a lifelong struggle.

II. Rhoda's Life

Like Rachel and Septimus, Rhoda often invokes her isolation using sea imagery. But in her case, she is not always completely taken over by the sea; it is a dominant force, but because she recognizes it, Rhoda at times evades the fate of Septimus and Rachel in their sea visions: complete and utter submersion. As a child, she is out alone to sea: “[o]ne sails alone. That is my ship. It sails into icy cavern where the sea-bear barks and stalactites swing green chains” (19). She’s not only alone; Rhoda knows she’s headed somewhere bleak, into the “icy cavern” (19). Here, though, Rhoda is not yet pinned beneath the wave, as the other two characters are almost anytime water is present in a vision.

In another vision centered around water, Rhoda says, “[I]et me pull myself out of these waters. But they heap themselves on me; they sweep me between their great shoulders; I am turned; I am tumbled; I am stretched, among these long lights, these long waves, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing” (28). “Let me pull myself out of these waters” is both a plea to herself – Come on, Rhoda, rise above – and a plea to something higher: “[I]et me pull myself out” – allow me to leave this struggle (28). But then there’s the rhythm of the waves, ever-constant, heaping themselves on her, sweeping her beneath them. Here the content of her vision is more like one of Rachel or Septimus’ visions would be, as the waves are pushing her under. Again her foreknowledge is present, though: “[I]et me pull myself out” – she knows what’s going to happen next (28). Next the passive verb construction comes back: “I am turned; I am tumbled; I am stretched” – these things are happening to her (28). And several words emphasize that this is a lifelong process for her: “stretched,” “long lights,” “long waves,” “endless paths” (28). The last four words of this selection are critical: “with people pursuing,

pursuing” (28). In the end, Rhoda lets go because she can’t bear “the hooks they cast” on her (232). Poor Rhoda: we feel her desire to escape with her initial invocation, but we also see that she’ll have to escape again and again. It’s terrifying for her to be exposed to other people; when she’s alone, she breathes a sigh of relief. But her isolation has terrifying aspects, too; when she’s alone she can hardly get a grip on herself, which is also terrifying.

We see the anguish of a single, ordinary moment when Rhoda wants to give flowers, delicate, fragile things that will soon wither and die, to someone. This is her way of trying to present herself. It takes constant and extraordinary effort for Rhoda to assemble herself – as if she is a bouquet of flowers – and as a result, she doesn’t achieve assembly very often. Interestingly, in this scene it’s reading a book that offers Rhoda the incentive to reassemble. This aligns her with Rachel and Septimus and “On Being Ill.” In “On Being Ill,” Woolf writes that in illness, “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” (323). Rachel is the first ill character to experience this phenomenon when Terence reads Milton’s *Comus* to her in the garden: the words “meant different things from what they usually meant. Rachel at any rate could not keep her attention fixed upon them, but went off upon curious trains of thought suggested by words such as ‘curb’ and ‘Lochrine’ and ‘Brute’” (*Voyage* 380-1). Septimus’ relationship with words is similar, though his often takes on an apprehensive undercurrent. After reading Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, Septimus also notices something hidden in words: “[t]his was now revealed to Septimus; the message hidden in the beauty of words. The secret signal” (*Dalloway* 88). For Septimus, and for Rachel to a lesser extent, what Woolf writes in “On Being Ill” holds true: “[i]ncomprehensibility has an enormous power over us in illness” (324). So when Rhoda goes into the library and has a reading experience that leads to a kind of vision, it’s

not surprising. She decides, “I will go now into the library and take out some book, and read and look; and read again and look” (56). She finds a poem “about a hedge,” and decides to enter the poem: “I will wander down it and pick flowers” (56). She envisions herself picking all kinds of flowers and gathering them in a garland. But what will she do with them? “I will... present them – Oh! to whom?” (57). Her action here, of gathering flowers, is normal enough. It’s easy to picture Jinny or Susan doing the same thing, though they would have no problem deciding to whom to give the bouquet.¹⁷ But this mundane action causes Rhoda to think, “[t]here is some check in the flow of my being; a deep stream presses on some obstacle; it jerks; it tugs; some knot in the centre resists. Oh, this is pain, this is anguish! I faint, I fail!” (57). In this section, Woolf introduces the idea that Rhoda is porous, open to anything and everything around her. This connects her to the other ill characters: she is undefended, unprotected, macerated. “Now my body thaws,” Rhoda says, “I am unsealed, I am incandescent. Now the stream pours in a deep tide fertilising, opening the shut, forcing the tight-folded, flooding free” (57). In gathering the flowers but realizing she has no one to give them to, Rhoda inadvertently unleashes immense anguish from within herself. The result is that she’s fertilized, as Woolf herself is fertilized by her own “little illnesses” (*Writer’s Diary* 143). But Rhoda, after being fertilized, has nowhere to go, and she asks, “[t]o whom shall I give all that now flows through me, from my warm, my porous body? I will gather my flowers and present them – Oh! to whom?” (57). This is Rhoda’s recurrent problem. When she does indeed assemble herself, what does she do next? Her life is a constant state of thawing and freezing, opening herself up to painful sensation and then closing off again, sealing a protective shell around her being.

¹⁷ I’m not arguing that all the other characters in the novel are “normal.” They too have their idiosyncrasies, and one of the novel’s greatest aspects is that it explores a character’s private space and self in relation to the others; this exploration is powerful largely because of the novel’s format of monologues.

In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf will say this is how all of our lives go. Woolf imagines that the goodness of a nice day is “embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool” (“Sketch” 70). The cotton wool stands for moments of non-being, which make up a large part of every day, for “[a] great part of every day is not lived consciously” (“Sketch” 70). But on those rare, “exceptional” moments of being, we glimpse that “behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern” (“Sketch” 72). To see this pattern is to perceive vividly, and Woolf argues “we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this” (“Sketch” 72). By the time she writes *The Waves*, Woolf realizes that illness is on the extreme end of the spectrum of perception. We all have moments of being in which we glimpse the pattern hidden “behind the cotton wool” of everyday life (“Sketch” 72). But Rhoda is more sensitive all the time – she lives her life in a constant state of “shock-receiving capacity” (“Sketch” 72). There is no break for her. This perpetual perception can be both inspiring and terrifying, and it leads to Rhoda’s constant exposure. Rhoda is like Septimus, who says that one of his symptoms of shellshock makes him feel like “[h]is body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left” (*Dalloway* 68). But Rhoda is constantly like this. Perceiving is her very condition of being. She’s simultaneously “a girl, here in this room” and a perceiving, sensitive, dispersed thing that’s not even human (107). Her recognition of this process is what makes her such a crucial character in Woolf’s project on illness; she has a deeper understanding of her malaise than Septimus or Rachel do of theirs. For Rachel, the effects of influenza are too foreign (and fleeting) for her to recognize what the illness changes in her. It’s similar for Septimus in his shellshock, though he still remembers his former self. But Rhoda has always been in anguish.

The question of where exactly Rhoda wants to be, if not firmly grounded within her body, is difficult to answer. By the end of her life, she seems to wish for death, but until after the

seventh character Percival's death, she doesn't seem to fully want to die – rather, she wants to be somewhere else. What Woolf writes in “On Being Ill” serves as a guidepost for Rhoda's life in some ways: “in health the genial pretence must be kept up and the effort renewed – to communicate, to civilise, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native... In illness this make-believe ceases. Directly the bed is called for... we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters. They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream; helter skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time for years, to look round, to look up – to look, for example, at the sky” (321). Rhoda is trapped somewhere between these two extremes. She senses the potential for escape, and her extreme sensitivity speaks to that; like the “irresponsible and disinterested” floater from “On Being Ill,” Rhoda knows that to let go of one world is to glimpse another. But Rhoda is also horrified of this disembodiment. She feels the physical trappings of her body. For Rhoda, “[t]here are hours and hours... before I can put out the light and lie suspended on my bed above the world, before I can let my tree grow, quivering in green pavilions about my head. Here I cannot let it grow” (56). Like Septimus, Rhoda invokes trees, organisms that grow up and out on their own. It's an appropriate invocation, for Rhoda often feels alive when she is alone.

But, as Woolf reminds us in “On Being Ill,” “[a]ll day, all night, the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. The creature within can only gaze through the pane – smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body” (318). Rhoda is trapped within, but she actively pursues an alternate reality. Later, that alternate reality will be death: “[t]here was a star riding through clouds one night, and I said to the star, ‘Consume me’” (*Waves* 64). While her resistance is lengthy – she doesn't kill herself until late in the novel, when she, like the other narrators, has

reached midlife, the fact remains that death directs her progress throughout the novel; she is ever in pursuit of “the inevitable catastrophe; the body smashes itself to smithereens, and the soul (it is said) escapes” (“Ill” 318). As the novel progresses, Rhoda’s visions of that “inevitable catastrophe” become less explorative, less imaginative, as if she grows tired of being trapped within, tired of gazing through the pane – and tired of the other pain, too.

In an unusual twist for an ill character in Woolf’s work, Rhoda actually attempts to explain her illness and how it makes her see the world. Rhoda’s explanation is not something Rachel or Septimus would or could ever offer, as it shows a deep understanding of illness’ inner working, an understanding that Rachel or Septimus do not possess. Rhoda explains to the others, “I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do – I cannot make one moment merge in the next” (130). Rhoda lacks the essential skill of processing reality, as did Septimus and Rachel. But she still knows that reality is there, which is an important distinction; she just “cannot deal with it” (130). Part of the reason she “cannot deal with it” is because to her the moments “are all violent, all separate; and if I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces” (130). Here Rhoda again echoes “A Sketch of the Past”: all moments for her are violent, much like “moments of being” are “sudden violent shock[s]” (“Sketch” 71). Unlike the rest of us, Rhoda lives “[a] great part of every day” consciously (“Sketch” 70). From her birth, Rhoda is “broken into separate pieces... no longer one” (106). Moreover, she is “foam,” which is already dispersed, near impossible to catch (107). Then again, she is “also a girl, here in this room” – though she’s dispersed, she is also a person, in anguish (107).

III. Rhoda's Vanishing

This thesis will now look at the ultimate threat to Woolf's ill characters – to all characters – death. In *The Voyage Out* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf's ill characters die in dramatic, demonstrable plot-centered ways. By Rhoda, death is no longer caused by fever; it is also no longer easily locatable in the narrative arc of *The Waves*. By time she reaches Rhoda, Woolf no longer needs to plot death. Rhoda simply vaporizes. If in life Rhoda *is* then in death she *is not*. We can look at *The Voyage Out* and *Mrs. Dalloway* as stages of initiation into Rhoda's ecstatic state. When Rachel dies, we know it immediately: "this was death. It was nothing; it was to cease to breathe" (*Voyage* 412). Her death comes at the end of a fight against influenza, and even if her death is not completely expected, it's not exactly surprising, either – Rachel is physically ill; death is a possibility in all illness. With Rachel's death, we also get signs of mourning, of what she leaves behind. We are moved by Terence's wails: "'Rachel! Rachel!' he shrieked, trying to rush back to her" (*Voyage* 413). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf hints at her impatience with plotting death. Woolf gestures in Rhoda's direction in *Mrs. Dalloway* when she writes Septimus' final thoughts: "[t]here remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury-lodging house window, the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was their idea of tragedy, not his" (*Dalloway* 149). Through Septimus' impatience at the steps of his suicide – the final steps of his life – we see Woolf's own impatience at plotting death. After all, Septimus thinks, "[i]t was their idea of tragedy, not his" (*Dalloway* 149). Death in the narratable, locatable sense is not Woolf's idea of tragedy, either. As we'll see with Rhoda's vanishing, death for Woolf is a private, mysterious place.

When Rhoda vanishes, on the other hand, we're never sure exactly when she left. Throughout *The Waves*, Rhoda frequently transcends the limitations of her body, and, as a result, she is hard to pin down in the narrative. In some ways, Rhoda escapes fiction and narrating life itself. She has been dispersed all her life, making her hard to grasp, like "the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness" (107). She vanishes in a way that is equally impossible to plot. At this stage in Woolf's work, it no longer matters that she dies of a fever or because she jumps out a window. By the time we get to Rhoda, being ill is just being. And if being is the kind of illness Rhoda exemplifies, it matters in some way that she takes her own life because she can only bear so much. When Rhoda does vanish, there's no narrative to explain her death, as there is for Percival. Her death is the kind of death that can't quite be registered or understood. Unlike Rachel or Septimus, Woolf gives Rhoda the privacy to die alone; she allows Rhoda an unnarrated space to disappear. Denying us an actual location in the plot for Rhoda's death makes it even harder for us to grasp her, as does the mysterious cause of her death. She becomes the novel's specter, occasionally called forth for instances of reflection by Bernard. Rhoda disappears into figurations of her death, like the one Bernard offers: "Rhoda always so furtive, always with fear in her eyes, always seeking some pillar in the desert, to find which she had gone; she had killed herself" (281).

In *The Waves*, Woolf graduates from a kind of germ-/trauma-based model of illness to something existential, and it's fitting that Rhoda is born as foam and vanishes as foam. In death, Rhoda finally shucks her body off as though it were a shell. In doing so, she transcends the pairing of body and mind, a pairing inherent in all of us and one that Woolf writes about in "On Being Ill": "[a]ll day, all night, the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. The creature within

can only gaze through the pane – smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body” (318). Throughout her life, “[t]he creature within” Rhoda pursues this separation from her body, but she never quite achieves it (“Ill” 318). Reality always calls her back to her body, leaving her feeling both bodiless and conflicted: where does she most want to be? In death, Rhoda finally encounters “the inevitable catastrophe; the body smashes itself to smithereens, and the soul (it is said) escapes” (“Ill” 318). Like the soul, Rhoda escapes, but that escape is from a life marked by feelings of isolation to a place of never-ending isolation: death.

Conclusion:

Between the Acts: The Retreat From Ill Writing

“I feel, if this is my last lap, oughtn’t I to read Shakespeare? But can’t. I feel oughtn’t I to finish off *P.H.* [*Between the Acts*]: oughtn’t I to finish something by way of an end?” (*Writer’s Diary* 324)¹⁸

Between the Acts (1941) was written in the face of a world war, the second in Woolf’s lifetime. It was also written during a time when Woolf’s style as a writer had changed significantly. In diary entries, letters, and essays, as John Whittier-Ferguson points out, Woolf “offers the foundational outline of her career: after *The Waves* (1931), her most extensive experiment in representing human consciousness and the complexities and isolation of the human subject, she turns to writing that attends primarily to externals, to facts. She works with ‘granite’ rather than ‘rainbow,’ object instead of subject, outer before inner, the world and its contingencies as they impinge upon the self” (232). While Woolf’s late shift in style has obvious and myriad implications for her oeuvre as a whole, it also significantly affects her project on illness: the world of the ill characters no longer exists as it once did. There’s no hope of finding a character like Rhoda or Septimus or even Rachel in the pages of Woolf’s last novel. But there is Isa Oliver, a woman who may very well have been an ill character had she turned up a decade earlier in Woolf’s work. Isa is as odd, socially peculiar, and disconnected as the ill characters, and she is also a writer of sorts, which is always a distinguishing characteristic in Woolf’s work. But Isa does not offer Woolf the chance to explore once more the zany, bizarre, modernist writing that the ill characters bring with them. Though her presence at all in Woolf’s last novel echoes Rachel, Septimus, and Rhoda, that echo is ultimately a weak one: Isa is not a final ill

¹⁸ *P.H.* stands for *Pointz Hall*, which was Woolf’s working title for *Between the Acts*.

character. As embodied experiments in the costly and complicated celebration of illness and writing in Woolf's earlier work, the ill characters bring with them visions and other worlds. But as Don Summerhayes points out, in *Between the Acts* "there is no unapprehended reality," and indeed, Isa's world, though she at times attempts to pull away from it, is rife with reality (245). In Woolf's last novel, Isa does not serve as a culmination to Woolf's lifelong project on illness. Instead, Isa terminates that project by calling into account both the other ill characters and the power of language itself when she asks a question that for Woolf at this stage was unanswerable: "What remedy was there for her at her age – the age of the century, thirty-nine – in books?" (19). This conclusion will glance at two of Isa's key scenes in *Between the Acts*. The first takes place in the house library, where Isa, as an ill character would, turns to books as a source of refuge. The second scene is Isa at work: in front of her vanity mirror, Isa composes a poem. In each scene, there's the potential for some very pivotal work to be done with writing and experimental language, but in neither scene is any sort of inspiration reached by Isa. Ultimately, she falls short. She can't grasp the worlds the ill characters could.

Though she isn't prone to visions as the ill characters are, Isa is also looking for something more than the world in front of her. Like them, she needs something to fill her porous boundaries, and she looks for it in books. She enters the library with a metaphorical toothache: "[y]et as a person with a raging tooth runs her eye in a chemist shop over green bottles with gilt scrolls on them lest one of them may contain a cure, she considered: Keats and Shelly; Yeats and Donne" (19).¹⁹ The toothache metaphor, along with the fact that she looks for the cure in books,

¹⁹ In her search for a linguistically-aided rescue, Isa calls to mind "On Being Ill," when "in illness, with the police off duty, we creep beneath some obscure poem by Mallarme or Donne, some phrase in Latin or Greek, and the words give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow, and then, if at least we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having travelled slowly up with all the bloom upon its wings" (324).

makes her akin to the ill characters, who also use words as a means of exploration and escape. For Rachel, it is *Comus* that provides a chance to experiment with language and reading when the words “meant different things from what they usually meant. Rachel at any rate could not keep her attention fixed upon them, but went off upon curious trains of thought suggested by words such as ‘curb’ and ‘Lochrine’ and ‘Brute’” (*Voyage* 380-1). For Septimus, it is Shakespeare, whom he “devour[s]” (*Dalloway* 85). And for Rhoda, it is a poem that allows her to escape to another world, imagining herself as “wander[ing] down it and pick[ing] flowers” (*Waves* 56). In all cases, the ill characters feel a powerful connection to words; in Rhoda’s case this feeling is so strong that she feels as if she is transported onto the page. But Isa, though she too knows to look for some kind of help in reading, isn’t taken anywhere by reading. Instead, unsatisfied Isa moves from one literary genre to the next; first poetry, with “Keats and Shelly; Yeats and Donne” (19). Then she decides, “perhaps not a poem; a life” (19). Biography won’t do, either, but Isa tries once more with “science – Eddington, Darwin, or Jeans” (20). But “[n]one of them stopped her toothache” (20). Unlike the ill characters, there’s no alternative vision for Isa in books. Isa simply cannot “rifle the poets of their flowers,” nor can she “break off a line or two and let them open in the depths of the mind, spread their bright wings, swim like coloured fish in green waters” (“Ill” 323). Though the fact that she tries at all is noteworthy, calling our attention to her similarities with the ill characters, in the end, the question that framed her quest for a cure – “What remedy was there for her at her age – the age of the century, thirty-nine – in books?” – remains noticeably unanswered (19). It’s hard to imagine an ill character – or really, any early Woolf character – asking such a disparaging question on the subject of reading.

And yet all hope is not lost – or so it seems – as Isa turns to a newspaper. In its black block font she finds some remedy, though it is a fleeting one. At first glance, the newspaper is just what she needs, as she reads about “[a] horse with a green tail...” which was fantastic. Next, ‘The guard at Whitehall...’ which was romantic and then, building word upon word, she read: ‘The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse’” (20). At this point, the newspaper offers what poetry or biography or science couldn’t: “fantastic,” “romantic” imagery, a place for Isa to come alive, an opportunity to fill her porous boundaries, much like the ill characters would. But this quixotic reading experience doesn’t last long, as the full story is revealed: [a]nd they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face....” (20). Isa has been reading about a rape all along. The newspaper, a place Isa initially thinks might serve as an escape, is as violent as the real world around her. Though the newspaper effectively sweeps Isa away from the library, she’s taken to a violent place, and even this escape must come to an end, as it does when the door “opened and in came Mrs. Swithin carrying a hammer” (20). Mrs. Swithin’s entry announces the end of Isa’s reading experience, and this time, the question Isa asks in the first place – “What remedy was there for her at her age...in books?” – is an uncomfortable reminder that words for Isa, and in Woolf’s last novel, no longer offer much in the way of escape (19).

Isa’s poems leave her similarly stranded in reality. They are not a place for experimental language; in fact, her poems are childish, simple. In the poetry composition scene, she seems even less open to sensation than she does in the library, when after reading the newspaper at least she feels something “real,” something vividly (though temporarily) different than the room

around her (20). But when Isa writes a poem, she remains firmly set in reality, and this costs her just about any chances she has of making some kind of poetic impact. Her poem reads:

‘Where we know not, where we go not, neither know nor care,’ she hummed. ‘Flying, rushing through the ambient, incandescent, summer silent . . .’

The rhyme was ‘air.’ She put down her brush. She took up the telephone. (15)

The rhyme is “air” (15). That’s it – air – that’s the word Isa’s been searching for to complete her poem. Not only is it an obvious rhyme, but when she finds it, Isa doesn’t seem to care much – though she puts down her brush, it’s not to grab a pen and write the poem down but to pick up the telephone to order fish for lunch. For a creative character in Woolf’s work, Isa is dismissive about her work, moving quite seamlessly between the interior realm of her mind and the exterior realm of her reality, in which she must keep a household running. In picking up the telephone, John Whittier-Ferguson points out, Isa “dispels any poetic mists that might still linger about this scene” (236). Though she’s seemingly in the midst of a creative process, she is also in the midst of the mundane.

Isa’s poems – clichéd, obvious, written without much effort – put her in almost direct opposition to Septimus. For Septimus, drawing words out is painful; when he writes, the process is markedly different: “he muttered, gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out, but the world was entirely changed by them for ever” (*Dalloway* 67). For Isa, humming as she writes her poem, the stakes don’t seem so high. Though Septimus’ writings may be incoherent, they are also, at times, beautiful and lyrical, and there is always a sense of urgency behind them. But Isa’s poems are pathetically simple. Even she admits that “[t]he words weren’t worth writing” down (15). Isa is a writer who doesn’t care much for books; though she writes poetry, she remains at

all times cognizant of what it lacks. For Septimus, writing and reading are everything, both before and after the war. Woolf's last portrait of the creative person – it's difficult even to call Isa a writer, let alone a poet – is one without much drive. We've come a long way since Septimus, who is deluded into thinking that his crazy writings had immense potential: "the world was entirely changed by them for ever" (*Dalloway* 67). With Isa, there's none of that delusion, but also none of the excitement. Writing for her is not a possibility to explore perception in new kinds of language. Writing is something to be hidden "in [a] book bound like an account book in case Giles suspected her" (15). Her writings are not impassioned or dependent on communication, like Septimus' writings are. Isa's writings are private musings. The fact that they're not experimental *and* not communicated even further removes Isa from the ill characters. In Woolf's last novel, ill characters are no longer present, and the one who looks most like them is disenchanted by words. As the last trace of an ill character, Isa's attempts to read and write are futile. Her inability to do what the ill characters did before her calls their attempts into question. If illness for the ill characters leads to a kind of new, modernist language, than in Woolf's last novel, Isa, the central writing character, retreats from all the zany, bizarre writing experiences in Woolf's earlier novels. If Rachel is dreamy, Septimus visionary, and Rhoda foam, then Isa is "abortive" (15). For her poetry, "abortive" implies that Isa finishes very little, that things are interrupted before they can ever be communicated (15). For her character, "abortive" can also mean that Isa fails to produce the intended result, and this speaks to her failings as more than just a poet. As a final semblance of an ill character, Isa fails to engage with words and reading and altered perception of any kind. In the end, Isa retreats from the language of illness.

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