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A Journey into the "Undiscovered Countries": Virginia Woolf's Illness and Creativity

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In spite of having been much disturbed and harassed by her mental and physical illnesses, being ill in bed while writing *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf observed that "*these curious intervals in life*—I've had many—*are the most fruitful artistically—one becomes fertilized*—think of my madness at Hogarth—& all the little illnesses—that before I wrote To The Lighthouse for instance. Six weeks in bed now would make a masterpiece of Moths [*The Waves*]" (*D*3 254: 16 Sep. 1929, *my italics*).

The relationship between Woolf's illness and her creativity has been a controversial issue in Woolf study. It seems that Woolf's illness not only became a central theme of her writing but also was somehow involved in the process of creative writing. Woolf took efforts to understand the effects of illness on her mind. On an occasion she remarked that "I believe these illnesses are in my case [. . .] partly mystical. Something happens in my mind. It refuses to go on registering

impressions. It shuts itself up. It becomes *chrysalis*."(*D*3 287: 16 Feb. 1930, *my italics*).

The metaphor of "chrysalis" is not an incidental one. The chrysalis is that of a moth. Woolf has been fascinated with the image of moths flying at night since her childhood when she and her siblings were enthusiastic about entomology, sugaring trees and making expeditions into the dark woods at night (Woolf 1990a, 114). The moth became a metaphor for something illusive and evanescent which she tried to capture in her writing. It provided a tentative title for her novel, *The Waves*, in which she initially intended to capture the image of moths haunting at night:

> Slowly ideas began trickling in; & then suddenly I rhapsodised (the night L. dined with the apostles) & told over the story of the Moths, which I think I will write very quickly, perhaps in between chapters of that long impending book on fiction. Now the moths will I think fill out the skeleton which I dashed in here: the play-poem idea: the idea of some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but (*The Waves*) of the ship, the night & c, all flowing together: I intersected by the arrival of the bright moths. A man & a woman are to be sitting at table talking. Or shall they remain silent? It is to be a love story: she is finally to let the last great moth in. The contrasts might be something of this sort: she might talk, or think, about the age of the earth: the death of humanity: then moths keep on coming. (*D*3 139: 18 Jun. 1927)

As shown above, a moth is Woolf's personal symbol of life and death, and perhaps her art. Considering this, Woolf's association with her illness and the image of chrysalis may deserve close attention. By making her mind a chrysalis, illness seems to prepare a birth of something mysterious and beautiful like a giant moth vanishing into the darkness. To investigate the mystery of her illness in relation with her writing, Woolf investigates the strange world of being ill in her essay, "On Being Ill".

"On Being Ill"

"On Being Ill" was published in November 1931, just after the completion of

her draft of *The Waves* (Woolf 1967, 193-203). Thus, her own experience of illness during the writing of the novel was infiltrated in it. Woolf's interest in illness focused on its subversive power, which defies all the rules and logic of reason and sanity:

> Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, *the undiscovered countries* that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to light, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us in the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads [. . .] (*CE*4, 317, *my italics*)

"[I]n illness, with the police off duty", Woolf argues, one can explore the untrodden region normally barred in health. The exploration of the unknown is fascinating as well as threatening. Her diary records both the "fascinations" and the "terrors"of the "dark underworld" of illness: "To be tired & authorised to lie in bed is pleasant [. . .] the dark underworld has its fascinations as well as its terrors; & then sometimes I compare the fundamental security of my life in all [. . .] storms [. . .] with its old fearfully random condition" (*D*2 125-26: 8 Aug. 1921). While the "undiscovered countries" are treacherous places with the "wastes and deserts of the soul" and steep "precipices" threatening to devour, they are also the site of new possibilities where the "ancient and obdurate oaks"of the law of the father are "uprooted." Woolf found in these "undiscovered countries" the "no man's land" she had been after (*D*4 355: 27 Nov. 1935).

Illness and Creativity

Woolf's experiences of "fascination" and "terror" in her illness shares certain similarities with those she had in her writing practice. In her diary, Woolf describes

her writing activity as diving into "seas of horror" (*D*1 20: 16 Jan. 1915). Similarly, writing *The Moth* [*The Waves*] was felt like going "down step by step into that queer region" (*D*3 239: 5 Aug. 1929) or "going down step by step into the well" (*D*3 243: 19 Aug. 1929). Perhaps, such similarity may not be a mere coincidence. There have been studies on the relationship between illness and artistic creativity, especially those between mental illness and artistic genius.

A possible link between madness and genius is a controversial theme of a debate. The artistic imagination and inspiration sought for is often found on the border of reason. From ancient times, the divine madness, or fine madness, has been considered as "the gift of heaven," and "the channel by which we receive the greatest blessing" (Plato 46-7). Madness in this view is considered as an unusual state of mind which enables one to transcend the limit of human intelligence to express the higher order of the universe. Socrates regards madness in terms of artistic inspiration: "If a man comes to the door of poetry untouched by madness of the Muses, believing that technique alone will make him a good poet, he and his sane composition never reach perfection, but are utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman" (48). Outside the psycho-pathological point of view, madness or a certain unusual state of mind observed in artistic geniuses may have been or may be considered not as a disease but as a trait of genius.

Woolf was aware of the effect of her own so-called "madness" on imaginative powers: "As an experience, madness is terrific I can assure you, and not to be sniffed at; and in its lava I still find most of the thing I write about. It shoots out of one everything shaped, final, not in mere driblets, as sanity does. And the six months—not three—that I lay in bed taught me a good deal about what is called oneself." (*L*4, 180) Out of her own experience of the positive effects of illness on her creativity, Woolf was able to interpret some of her physical illnesses as "premonitions of a book" (*D*3 253: 16 Sep. 1929).

The Nature of Woolf's Illness: Was She Mad?

There have been some controversial debates over the nature of Woolf's illness. Woolf wrote in her death note that her fear of insanity was the main reason for her suicide. The question is, if she was, at least for certain phases of her life, really "mad" (Q. Bell 90). Not only the question of whether Woolf was mad or not, but the nature of her illness has been a central issue of Woolf study. Woolf's biographer and nephew, Quentin Bell, describes her illness as "madness" and even Woolf herself occasionally adopted the term. For instance, in her early journals Woolf uses the term, "mad" and "madness," twice: once to indicate the intensity of rage; the other for what cannot be appropriated, such as uncontrollable passion. In her mature diary, there are altogether 66 instances using the words "mad" (55 times) and "madness" (11 times). Eight of them (4 "mad"s and 4 "madness"s) refer to Woolf's own mental afflictions. Quentin Bell suggests that Woolf's mental illness resulted from the combination of the shock of losing her mother at an early age and the repressed sexuality and guilt inflicted by childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her half brothers (44).

Louise DeSalvo's controversial book on Woolf's childhood sexual abuse and its impact on her work and life has its own merit in that it illuminates the defects and problems inherent in Victorian childrearing. However, she ignores the hereditary aspect of Woolf's suffering by arguing that Woolf's illness was solely the result of her childhood sexual abuse and that her symptoms were those of depression and anger inflicted by the incidents. Convinced that Woolf was manic-depressive, Thomas Caramagno criticises DeSalvo for her reductionism. He argues that DeSalvo is "explaining complex mental states in terms of simple trauma" (7). Leonard Woolf also believed that Virginia Woolf was "manic-depressive" and not "neurasthenic" as the doctors diagnosed her (Lee 180). Manic-depressive illness is primarily a genetic disease, the symptoms of which may be modified and controlled by certain chemicals. Such a view may contradict psychoanalytic approaches to Woolf's illness.

However, although Woolf may have been manic-depressive, some prominent features of her writing cannot be easily explained by the psycho-pathological point of view, such as her obsession with her mother and her attraction to drowning. In her book, *Who Killed Virginia Woolf?: A Psychobiography*, Alma H. Bond does not give full credit to the genetic factors for the cause of Woolf's mental illness, although she supports the view that Woolf was manic-depressive. She argues that although "manic-depression has an inherited, metabolic substances [. . .]it seems unnecessary to postulate a biochemical factor as the major 'cause' of Woolf's manic-depressive illness" (23, 68).

After all these debates over the nature of Woolf's illness, Hermione Lee reminds us of an important point that "[M]uch of what we know about it [Woolf's illness] is derived from what she wrote about it." That is, "[H]er illness has become her language" (Lee 176). While arguing for the case of "manic-depressive", Lee is cautious in putting a decisive label on Woolf's illness for the same reason: "Illness 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 Woolf's illness is at once from the very moment of calling it an illness – to rewrite and re-present it, perhaps to misrepresent it" (176). Whatever Woolf's illness may have been, the point is that her symptoms seem to be closely related to her writing practice. Woolf observes that "one becomes fertilised" by what she calls "madness" (*D*3 254: 16 Sep. 1929) and that writing is her "great defence against the cold madness" (*D*5 64: 2 Mar. 1937). Woolf uses the term, 'mad' or 'madness'to refer to what is uncontrollable, unknowable: from a simple rage to a mental disorder and in a broader sense, to refer to the chaotic social and cultural disorder of the war she experienced. Leonard Woolf was also convinced that her illness was related to her creative genius, to her intense work levels and to the stress of finishing a book, observing that "the fabric of thought" separating Woolf's creative genius from madness was "terrifyingly thin" (L. Woolf 31).

Illness and the Mother

The relationship between Woolf's illness and writing activity may be a more complex one than what is noted above: a source or channel of artistic inspiration and a therapeutic means. On a deeper level, it seems that her illness or her symptoms may have been affected by the texture of her writing itself which deliberately disrupts the symbolic, causing a disturbance of the already precarious balance of her mental landscape. Toril Moi argues that Woolf's mental illness was related to her writing practice and feminism through "the pre-Oedipal mother-figure." Drawing on Kristeva, she suggests a possibility that "Woolf's own periodic attacks of mental illness can be linked both to her textual strategies and to her feminism,"which attempt to bring the semiotic force of the mother into the symbolic (Moi 11):

> many women will be able to let what she calls the 'spasmodic force' of the unconscious disrupt their language because of their strong links with the pre-Oedipal mother-figure. But if these unconscious pulsations were to take over the subject entirely, the subject would fall back into pre-Oedipal or imaginary chaos and develop some kind of mental illness. The subject whose language lets such forces disrupt the symbolic order, in other words, is also the subject who runs the greater risk of lapsing into madness. In this context, Woolf's own periodic attacks of mental illness can be linked both to her textual strategies and to her feminism. (11)

Kristeva tells us that "the call of the mother" "troubles the Words", generating "voices, 'madness', hallucination" (Kristeva 1977, 39). "The calls of the mother" is the attraction to the archaic mother, the mother in pre-Oedipal.

What is interesting is that at the very center of Woolf's writing, there is the mother. Woolf recalls and relives the memories of her mother and mourns her death throughout her writing both fictional and autobiographical. Woolf lost her own mother at the age of 13. Later she recalled how important the mother had been in

her daughter's life: "Of course she was central. I suspect the word "central" gets closest to the general feeling I had of living so completely in her atmosphere that one never got far enough away from her to see her as a person"(*MB* 83).

"Think Back through Our Mothers"

Woolf's obsessive relationship with her mother needs to be taken into account when one considers Woolf's famous assertion to "think back through our mothers". In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf suggests to "think back through our mothers if we are women," trying to establish a literary tradition for women writers, unearthing the forgotten literary mothers (76). Rosenman observes that the assertion "has taken its place at the center of an important thread of feminist thought among studies of mothers and daughter in literature, psychoanalytic theories of female identity that stress the mother-daughter relationship, and philosophical investigation of maternal thinking as a paradigm for ethical human behavior"(13). Although this famous statement might have been a passing one, I believe that it indicates the direction Woolf's literary career was bound for. The figure of the mother is deeply involved in Woolf's literary experimentation which is deemed as modernist as well as feminist. Recent psychoanalytic discussion of the mother may throw some light on this matter.

In the formative stage of development, to become a subject of language, the child needs to separate him/herself from the mother. However, the mother is not completely eliminated from the subject. She remains as abject, which is neither subject nor object. According to Kristeva, in language there exist the residues of the mother which cannot be appropriated by the symbolic. She calls it the semiotic "chora," which can be found in the form of children's echolalia, laughter, or rhythm. The semiotic chora disrupts and pulverizes meaning. Kelly Oliver summarizes the threats the mother poses to the Symbolic in two ways: "Her *jouissance* threatens to make her a subject rather than the Other against which man becomes a subject"

and "she not only represents but is a strange fold between culture and nature that cannot be fully incorporated by the Symbolic" (Oliver 50). Thus, a writer who tries to incorporate the semiotic with the Symbolic and to bring about the maternal element into language risks the crisis of his/her subjectivity, the danger of madness.

Woolf may be considered to be what Kristeva calls a "writer of abjection": "the writer fascinated by the abject, imagines its logic, projects himself into it, introjects it, and as a consequence perverts language – style and content" (Kristeva 1982, 16). While the writer of abjection could be either male or female, the woman writer may take more risks in her attempt to write in this way. For her complicated relationship with the mother, the woman writer maintains a precarious stance in the symbolic, the collapse of which may easily lead her into madness. Makiko Minow-Pinkney discusses the dilemma women writers like Woolf have to face:

> Here arises the tragic difficulty for women artists who try to situate their work over the interplay of the symbolic and the semiotic. For the male, the reactivation of the pre-Oedipal phase as the semiotic ruptures the symbolic causes laughter and pleasure. But for the woman, 'the rush of these nonsensical, periphrastic, maternal rhythms in her speech, far from soothing her, far from making her laugh, destroys the symbolic armour: makes her ecstatic, nostalgic, or mad [. . .]' (Minow-Pinkney 1987, 22)

To cope with horror and abjection, Woolf had to write. Her obsessive writing practice seems to endorse Kristeva's view that a writer is "a phobic who comes back to life"by screening horror by writing (Kristeva 1982: 38). Woolf tried to explain her relationship to writing in various words. She said: "I feel like the man who had to keep dancing on hot bricks. Cant let myself stop" (*D*5 55: 12 Feb. 1937). She "cant live without that intoxicant" which is writing (*D*4 159: 21 May, 1933) because "there[']s no richness", furthermore, "no security" (*D*5 109: 29 Aug. 1937) without it. Woolf declares that for her writing "must be a physical, moral, mental necessity" to keep her being against the threat of madness because it "brings the whole universe to order. I can see the day whole, proportioned" (*D*4 232: 28

Jul. 1934). Her love of writing may be compared to drug addiction. E. M. Forster remembered that Woolf "liked writing with an intensity which few writers have attained or even desired" (Forster xiii). While Woolf tries to ward off the horror by the screen of writing, her attempt to bring the semiotic into the Symbolic threatens to push her over the edge of sanity, perhaps because as Kristeva observes, "female phobics have a harder time gaining access to it than do male writers" due to "the impact of the maternal relationship" (Kristeva 1996, 66, 67).

Interestingly, Kristeva's description of Woolf's writing is similar to that of illness and madness. Once she remarks that "[I]n women's writing, language seems to be seen from a foreign land; is it seen from the point of view of an asymbolic, spastic body? Virginia Woolf describes suspended states, subtle sensations and, above all, colors—green, blue—, but she does not dissect language as Joyce does. Estranged from language, women are visionaries, dancers who suffer as they speak" (Kristeva 1981, 166). Woolf dares not "dissect language," perhaps due to the fear of insanity.

Estranged from language, Woolf juggles with two different modes of language: the language of communication and the language of illness and madness. Shoshana Felman argues that "madness" is what fails to be translated into "our language," the language of communication: "To speak about madness is to speak about the difference between languages: to import into one language the strangeness of another; to unsettle the decisions language has prescribed to us so that, somewhere between languages, will emerge the freedom to speak" (19). Seen in this light, it appears natural for Woolf to have difficulty in describing her own "madness" because madness is what cannot be said "straight out – yes" (*D*2 304: 21 Jun. 1924). Once Woolf questions herself: "What was I going to say? Something about the violent moods of my soul. How describe them, even with a waking mind? I think I grow more & more poetic" (*D*2 304: 21 Jun. 1924).

In "On Being Ill" Woolf complains of the lack of a language of illness:

> [*t*]*here is 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. It has all grown one way. The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (*as perhaps the people of Babel did in the beginning*), so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out. (*CE*4, 318-19)

Looking into literature, she found that illness had also been absent there and wondered why: "illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature", maintaining that "Novels [. . .] would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia; lyrics to toothache. But no; with a few exceptions" (*CE*4, 317). What is the origin of such poverty? Does it not lie in the nature of "illness" itself, its "madness"? If so, it may not be surprising that illness has not been "among the prime themes of literature." As Woolf observed, illness opens "unknown" territory to us. It is uncomfortably contrary to the topography of the world of reason and sanity. Illness, which is a form of deviation from "normality" approximates to "madness." Woolf turns to poetic language to articulate it, for the poetic language "embodies contradiction". Thus, "Life *and* Death, being and non-being, good and evil, etc. can exist simultaneously in a text" (Lechte 95). If the voice of madness can be heard only in poetic articulation, it may not be an accident that Woolf found herself becoming "more & more poetic" (*D*2 304, 21 June 1924).

The Language of Illness, One on the Verge of Incommunicable Chaos

Hermione Lee observes that "There is a gap between the inner, "incomprehensible"

language of the ill person and the language of witnesses and retrospect" (195). The question is that of the communicability of the inner language. The "incomprehensibility"of the inner language, Woolf argues, may be artistically advantageous. According to Lee, "The voices she [Woolf] heard [in illness] create a new kind of fictional language. There is a relation between illness and modernism in Virginia Woolf"s writing life" (195). Woolf recognized the advantage of illness for artistic purposes. She argues:

> *Incomprehensibility* has an enormous power over us in illness, more legitimately perhaps than the upright will allow. In health meaning has encroached upon sound. Our intelligence domineers over our senses. But *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 distil their flavour, and then, if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having come to us sensually first, by way of the palate and the nostrils, like some queer odour. *Foreigners, to whom the tongue is strange, have us at a disadvantage*. The Chinese must know the sound of Antony and Cleopatra better than we do. (*CE*4, 324-25) (*my italics*)

As "[F]oreigners, to whom the tongue is strange," may notice what is hardly to be perceived by the native, in illness, one may be able to notice what is hardly perceptible in health. Woolf claims that she heard "birds singing in Greek" and that "the king Edward VII lurked in the azaleas using the foulest possible language" during her breakdown (Q. Bell 90). Her own experience is incorporated in the mad scene of *Mrs Dalloway*, in which Septimus hears birds singing about life and immortality in Greek:

> He listened. A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over and went on, drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words how there is no crime and, joined by another sparrow, they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death. There was his hand; there the dead. (*Dalloway* 13)

In this state, Septimus' perceptiveness is sharpened to "colours, rhythms, sounds with extreme intensity as the thetic subject is dissolved into the semiotic *chora* it had formerly so severely repressed" (Minow-Pinkney 79).

Some Fruitful Intervals in Life

Woolf's attempt to incorporate the maternal element [the corporeal elements] into the symbolic involves risks of putting herself on the borderline state, while her illness also put her in similar conditions. Here one may find a similarity and a link between Woolf's illness and her writing. Through the gate opened by illness, she explored the extraordinary landscape of the unknowable, which she tried to translate what she had experienced during what she called "curious intervals in life" into the communicable language and to convey "madness" into the language of reason and sanity. About the unknowable, the madness she encountered in her illness, she remarked that "I've reached the no man's land that I'm after; & can pass from outer to inner, & inhabit eternity" (*D*4 355: 27 Nov. 1935). This "no man's land" is a maternal space, to which she bids us go back when she urges us to "think back through our mothers." Working on the border between reason and madness, meaning and nothingness, Woolf constantly took the risk of collapsing into insanity and nothingness. However, that was the price she was willing to pay for her exploration of the "undiscovered countries" of illness in her search for a new mode of language and a new mode of subject for women writers. After all, these "curious intervals in life" seems to have helped Woolf with unusual "artistically fruitful" inspirations. Or one may say that it was Woolf who succeeded in transforming the most painful experiences of her life into the unique art of her works.

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Abstract

A Journey into the "Undiscovered Countries": Virginia Woolf's Illness and Creativity

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In her essay, "On Being Ill"(1931), Virginia Woolf observes that illness discloses the "undiscovered countries" in our minds with the police of reason "off duty." Like an explorer of the unknown territories, in her writing she investigates the uncharted parts of her mind that are opened by illness. Woolf made an interesting analogy between her experiences of illness and her writing practice, adopting terms of adventure and risk. She compares writing activity to diving into "seas of horror"(*D*1 20: 16 Jan. 1915) or to sending "parachutists into these remote places" of her mind (*D*5 289: 29 May 1940).

I believe that Woolf's illness and her attempt to explore the unknown part of her mind in her writing are closely related. Suffering from mental and physical illnesses, Woolf tried to sublimate the painful experiences into creativity. The relationship between her illness and creativity is a complex one. It seems that while her writing activity seems to have some therapeutic effects on her suffering, Woolf's pursuit of a new mode of writing which she hoped to be more amenable to women by means of exploring the unknown may have aggravated her already precarious health.

In this study, I ventured to look into Woolf's daring expedition to these "undiscovered countries" in her mind and how such an exploration affected her literary experimentation and shaped her writing by reading "On Being Ill," and *A Room of One's Own*, along with her autobiographical writings including her diary, with a particular reference to Julia Kristeva's theoretical discussion of abjection.

■ Key words: Virginia Woolf, the unknown, illness, abjection, Kristeva, creativity, the mother