



On the Asylum Road with Woolf and Mew

Janet Lyon

What can disability theory bring to modernist studies?

Let's start with an infamous entry in the 1915 journal of Virginia Woolf, which reports a chance encounter with "a long line of imbeciles" on a towpath near Kingston. "It was perfectly horrible," she writes. "They should certainly be killed."¹

Woolf critics haven't known quite what to do with this violent speech act. Read it as an endorsement of eugenics activism? Soften it into an early symptom of Woolf's impending breakdown? Accord it the protected status of an uncensored private musing? Frame it in a list of Woolf's worst offences? Accept it as an unsurprising manifestation of Woolf's benighted political individualism?² None of these responses is particularly satisfying, given the wild disjunction between the brutality of Woolf's declaration, on the one hand, and on the other its inoffensive targets, who are simply taking a group walk along a tow path on the Thames. Indeed, it is telling that none of the commentary takes much account of those anonymous "imbeciles," who, though fingered for death, are more or less backgrounded as imprecise emblems of a bygone era of alienists and asylums. It is as if, to this day, no one quite *sees* those people. I will be turning presently to a fuller excerpt from Woolf's entry to ask what it is that *she* sees. But my preliminary interest here lies in the image of the recorded event itself: Virginia Woolf's encounter with a line of asylum inmates in a London suburb in 1915, which is rendered in language so assured and so extreme as to suggest that History itself "flashes up"—to use Benjamin's phrase—in the journal passage.³ I take this flashing up as an irresistible invitation to try to take hold of this image at this moment, which comprises at once the English national "problem" of mental deficiency (to use

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552 the argot of the time), modernism's experimental investigations of consciousness, the contested political realm of visibility, and the affective conditions for shock. I will trace these confluent provocations through a handful of writings by Virginia Woolf and her contemporary Charlotte Mew, which I will view primarily from a perspective afforded by disability theory. I take it as an uncontroversial proposition that modernist aesthetics, with its emphasis on disproportion, fracture, and incompleteness, shares with disability theory a foundational contestation of the category of "the normal."

It has been suggested recently by the philosopher Licia Carlson that mental disability may be the philosopher's "worst nightmare" because it renders reason irrelevant and poses questions that are alien to those that philosophy is equipped to answer.⁴ Given modernism's insistent experimental forays into territories beyond reason and its languages, beyond the proscriptive discourses of the symbolic realm, beyond normative models of subjectivity, we might expect to find the figure of mental deficiency somewhere along those frontiers. Such a figure might, for instance, offer a ready site of modernist engagement along the lines of what Henri Bergson, in his critique of the tautologies produced by philosophical analysis, famously called "intuition": the anti-positivist effort to encounter alterity on its own terms, through a "sympathy by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it."⁵ If the mentally "deficient" subject, whose mind is presumed to defy any theory of mind, were taken as both a modernist subject and as a modernist "object of thought," what insights might an effort of sympathetic intuition yield about its unique interiority and about compositions of interiority more generally?

The question is complicated no less by the fungibility of the concept of "modernism" than by the culturally induced ignorance surrounding mental disability and by the medico-legal discourses of aberrancy in early twentieth-century England, which materialized in, among other institutions, its burgeoning asylum system. With this overdetermined difficulty in view, I'll begin with a look at that legal terrain, in order to provide a context for a discussion of works by Woolf and Mew. Both writers had significant personal and familial connections to the English asylum system: Woolf's half-sister Laura, who was likely an autistic, was permanently institutionalized in a home for idiots in nearby Redhill, sometime around the age of 21; Woolf's cousin died in an institution after going mad at Cambridge; two of Mew's siblings were institutionalized for life in their teens after complete schizophrenic breaks; Woolf and Mew both spent time in mental homes after breakdowns; both lived in fear of insanity; both committed suicide at age 59.⁶

While insanity plays a central role in these parallel biographical events, I want to be clear that my subject here is not "madness" (a topic that has been central to modernist scholarship); rather, it is mental deficiency, a term I am intentionally employing as a now-anachronistic descriptor that broadly includes all manner of mental disability.⁷ In the British nineteenth century when the asylum system began to proliferate, "mania" (madness) and "dementia/amentia" (decayed/absent powers of mind) were habitually conflated in institutional guidelines and practices. It was understood, for example, that

persistent mania of the kind produced by “deep and overwhelming grief” or “extreme poverty” could eventually cross a line into permanent dementia, and as dementia was considered a functional equivalent of imbecility, the borders among all of these categories were constitutionally permeable.⁸ In keeping with the paradoxes of biopower, this permeability was heightened with each successive piece of British legislation that aimed to stabilize mental deficiency as an object of legal and social control. The Lunacy Act of 1845 and the Idiots Act of 1886 created categorical degrees of mania, idiocy, and dementia; and in 1913, the Mental Deficiency Act (MDA)—implemented just eight months before Woolf’s encounter on the towpath—elaborated these categories and established new ones, such as “feeble-mindedness” and “moral imbecility,” while explicitly providing for the targeted sequestration of mental defectives.⁹ Promoted vigorously by eugenics activists (who insistently connected mental deficiency with poverty, excessive fertility, racial degeneration, and so forth), and laced with the rhetoric of humanitarian concerns (since the mentally disabled were often haphazardly incarcerated in poor houses, prisons, and lunatic asylums), the MDA was hailed by many as the comprehensive solution to the “problem” of mental defectives.¹⁰ With the passage of the act in 1913 came the triumphant sense, among eugenicists especially, that the “problem” had been solved. Because it provided for local authorities who would alert asylum officers to the presence of untended feeble-minded individuals in local communities, the MDA implicitly promised a time, somewhere in England’s near future, when defectives would once and for all “be segregated under proper conditions so that their curse died with them,” to quote Winston Churchill’s endorsement of the act.¹¹ In effect, its passage simultaneously justified, retroactively, the construction of more than 150 lunatic and idiot asylums in the seventy years since the Lunacy Act, and projected a modern, efficient, federated approach to the institutional control of defectives.¹²

One aspect of the vague horizon of expectation produced by the MDA is central to my inquiry: that is, the manufactured expectation that the new social policy would effectively eliminate defectives from the public world. If “permanent segregation” was now, legally, “the dominant model of care and control” of the feeble-minded and their ilk, then how was the public to account for their continued appearance in public—their failure to disappear completely, as it were, from the sphere of citizenry?¹³ The MDA’s legal imperative for permanent sequestration of those deemed to be mentally deficient accomplished a discursive *a priori* cancellation of their eligibility as sovereign subjects (if that eligibility can be said to have existed). Once singled out and signified as feeble-minded *for* feeble-minded asylums, they became a part of an institutional sign system associating mental deficiency with the condition of civil death—*civilter mortuus*, the stripping of civil rights and political identity from persons deemed to be law-breakers or *non compos mentis*.

Here we may be reminded of Agamben’s argument, adapted from Hannah Arendt, that human rights are predicated on the manufacture of civil rights, and not the other way around; once a “declaration of rights” proclaims the citizen to be a bearer of “natural rights,” the non-citizen is nowhere to be found on the ground from which rights are claimed. In the period to which I am referring (though perhaps that period is still our

554 period), this status is further secured by the foundational presumption that mental defectives were incapable of meaningful language. It is beyond the scope of this essay to follow down to its roots the post-Enlightenment grafting onto “sovereign” subjectivity of the capacity for speech and, more specifically, the capacity for sovereign speech acts. Suffice it to say here that to be nonverbal or atypically verbal in a normative culture is to be presumed incompetent in the language of agency and therefore unintelligible as a political or moral subject; it is to be a non-subject.¹⁴ As we will see, atypical verbiage plays a role in the writings that illustrate my discussions of the provocations posed to modernist writing by what is at once the political transparency and opacity of mental disability (“they” are clearly not a part of “us”), since it confounds universalist assumptions about the sovereignty of speaking subjects.¹⁵ If mental deficiency, however ill-defined, becomes the provisional ground for what is in effect a liberal state of exception, where institutions like the asylum system take up the biopolitical management of defective “life,” then what would it mean to encounter those cancelled citizens, whose public appearance or disappearance has been constitutively tethered to national health?¹⁶ I will argue that public appearance of mentally deficient persons in this moment could and did constitute the conditions for a certain kind of shock, in the manner of Freud’s *Unheimlich*—that is, as something that shocks because it “ought to have remained hidden and secret.”¹⁷ From this hypothesis I mean to ask: what were “they” to “us”—we modernists—in the epistemic moment crystallized by the MDA?

On the Lane with Mew

My pairing of Charlotte Mew with Virginia Woolf in this discussion may at first seem counter-intuitive, in spite of the biographical similarities I have already mentioned, to which we may add the shared quandary of lesbian desire in a sexually normative world. Woolf wrote voluminous amounts of prose—fiction, memoirs, essays, creative nonfiction—and the body of criticism generated by her work is so vast as to have acquired a sturdy name: Woolf Studies. Mew was a deeply private poet and prose writer whose output was minimal; we know relatively little about her life and less about the creative engine room of her aesthetic practices, especially when compared to our microscopic knowledge of Woolf. Woolf boldly experimented on all the frontiers that we associate with modernism—narrative innovation, the content of “literature,” formal explorations of consciousness—while Mew’s official status as a “modernist” is by no means secure, since she wrote poems that, as often as not, worked within inherited forms: the graveyard poem, the isolated dramatic monologue, the Wordsworthian country lyric. And yet, because of the sexual and social dissent that she brought to those forms, and the techniques she developed to marshal them around unspeakable, dys-modern desire and to convey within them encounters whose meanings could not be accessed by the languages of modernity, I am not alone in counting Mew as a modernist. Her modernism becomes especially clear if we consider modernist aesthetics as a disruptor of what Jacques Rancière has called the “regime of representation,” whereby we

know “art” through its conformity to genres and hierarchies. The breaking up of that traditional regime by modernist aesthetics entails the intrusion of history into genres, thereby revealing within them what had hitherto been imperceptible: the “significant traits deposited in the topography of spaces, the physiology of social circles, the silent expression of bodies.”¹⁸ These traits form the substrates of Mew’s poetry. Her deployment of received poetic forms affords a palimpsestic vision of the present in the past and of the confluences and disjunctions between “the modern” and the pre-modern that it purports to have left behind.¹⁹

A good example of this doubled historical vision takes shape in Mew’s brief, four-stanza poem “On the Asylum Road,” which appeared in her well-regarded collection *The Farmer’s Bride* in 1916 (although the poem was probably composed a few years earlier, around the time of Woolf’s “horrible” encounter, when the MDA was becoming law.)²⁰ “On the Asylum Road” uses the form of a quaint country lyric—Wordsworth’s fanciful “The Idiot Boy” comes to mind—which, in Mew’s hands, becomes something palpably new: a meditation on modern conditions of mental otherness. The poem’s speaker is a colloquial first-person plural “we,” which, in the first two stanzas, unself-consciously narrates an encounter with inmates on an asylum road:

Theirs is the house whose windows—every pane—
Are made of darkly stained or clouded glass:
Sometimes you come upon them in the lane,
The saddest crowd that you will ever pass.

But still we merry town or village folk
Throw to their scattered stare a kindly grin,
And think no shame to stop and crack a joke
With the incarnate wages of man’s sin.²¹

Though the impenetrable inmates on the lane are “the saddest crowd that you will ever pass” (the “you” presumably includes modern readers), “we” merry town folk engage in a kind of neighborly, if perfunctory, friendliness with them, “[throwing] to their scattered stare a kindly grin” and “think[ing it] no shame to stop and crack a joke / With the incarnate wages of man’s sin.” These first two stanzas quickly mobilize all of the conventional pre-modernist figurations of mental disability, before its absorption into medico-legal discourse: the inmates’ faces are doubly metaphorical—they are like clouded glass, and also like the darkened windows of their asylum; metonymically, their many faces comprise one “scattered stare”; allegorically their defectiveness is the sign of a punishment from God. These are figures that seem to be “flashing up” from a time that has passed or is passing out of view.

In the third stanza, however, the “we” of the conventional “merry town folk” expands into a more universal “we” of reflexive observation. This is a technique that Mew frequently uses to create, at a stanza break, an abrupt perspectival shift from immediate human events to the contrapuntal activities of the natural world; its effect is to delay and concentrate an unsettling vision achieved in the stanza that follows.²²

556 Here in the suspended third stanza, the philosophical “we” contemplates the natural chasms and mutual opacity among living things, in effect undoing the pathetic fallacy of Romanticism:

None but ourselves in our long gallery we meet,
 The moor-hen stepping from her reeds with dainty feet,
 The hare-bell bowing on his stem,
 Dance not with us; their pulses beat
 To fainter music; nor do we to them
 Make their life sweet. (CM 22)

As the suddenly irregular rhythms in these ebbing lines suggest, humans, birds, plants may coexist in nature, but their interrelations are random, not dependent. We humans may believe that nature’s creations make our lives sweeter, but we can no longer imagine that the reverse is also true. And this compressed dictum is implicitly brought to bear on the asylum inmates in the road. When “we” encounter “none but ourselves in our long gallery” of reflexive representation, who is “ourselves”? Are the inmates part of that long human portrait gallery, or are they, like birds and flowers, a separate species of the non-human? Do we recognize them and call them a part of us? Or are they as unknowable as the moor-hen and the hare-bell?²³ The unresolved question hangs over the stanza break.

The fourth and final stanza answers it partly by way of attempting to imagine the isolated perspective of the inmates:

The gayest crowd that they will ever pass
 Are we to brother-shadows in the lane:
 Our windows, too, are clouded glass
 To them, yes, every pane! (CM 22)

The stanza’s revised “we” calls them our “brother-shadows,” vanished siblings of a shuttered and paned/pained world; it makes an effort to afford them some subjectivity, however hazy. They are divided from us not by speciation, it seems, but by doubly clouded glass, and by the asylum road itself, which literally and symbolically marks the line between the mobile civil sovereignty of the town folk on the one side, and the shadowy civil death of the mental institution on the other.

The thwarted face-to-face encounter picked out in the poem brings together politics—Agaben’s *homo sacer*—and the ethics of the face, which, in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, holds the unknown, naked face of the other to be the site of a profound ethical epiphany that calls me out of myself and into a relationship of non-instrumental responsibility to all others. “The face in its nakedness as a face,” writes Levinas, “presents to me the destitution of the poor one, and the stranger,” who, through the face, “presents himself as an equal.”²⁴ The asylum road’s unequal encounter could be construed, in Levinas’s terms, as a failure of recognition and surrender on the part of the townsfolk, who seem not to “see” at all the singularity of the faces before them.

But such a reading would be insufficient in itself, since its ahistoricity cannot accommodate the poem's historical conditions, and its universalism cannot account for the aesthetic properties of the poem—its carefully controlled persona and minimalist poetics of reflection whereby “we” and “you” and “they” all become uncertain entities in “our long gallery.” Rather, I would suggest that the proto-Levinasian critique that may be sensed in the poem takes for its object the poem's *title*: the asylum road that structures our long gallery. As a permeable institutional marker crossing the spaces of the normal and the pathological, the public and the secluded, the road does the work of the asylum, in effect overcoding the inmates' faces into one “scattered stare” of “the saddest crowd” imaginable. The asylum road ensures that the meaning of the inmates' collective, defective visage is known to the townsfolk in advance: their clouded face has already “become a content,” to use Levinas's words²⁵, and its single mien of abnormality forecloses any possibility for a “welcome of the face.”²⁶

Also in play here is the palimpsestic temporality embodied in the asylum road. Within the context of the poem's specific historical moment, the anachronism of the “merry folk” of ye olde village seems calculated to bring into contrast with the present of the MDA a pre-modern moment of naive village *gemeinschaft*. On the one hand, the villager's assumptions about the inmates—that they represent the wages of sin, for example—must seem archaic to modern ears; but on the other hand, their casual attempts at friendliness, their apparent acceptance of the inmates as part of the village topos, may seem equally outdated in an age marked by systems of “progressive” social control. “On the Asylum Road,” with its bewildering and unresolved encounter, in fact subtly discloses the real continuity between pre-modern and modern forms of social control—that is, the asylum as a persistent social fact—even as it retains the distinctly pre-modern expectations for sociability with “our brother-shadows.” Mew's merrie band may display a benighted understanding of mental deficiency, in spite of its speaker's attempt to inhabit the emotional state of “the saddest crowd” and to establish a filiation through differences of degree rather than kind; nevertheless, it would seem the disabled face-to-face encounter in “On the Asylum Road” does double duty as an abiding critique of the past, and, more damningly, of the modern enthymemes of mental deficiency. This dialectic of critique, according to which forms of the past become subtle staging grounds for blinkered universalist discourses of the present, is also central to “Ken,” Mew's companion poem to “On the Asylum Road.” Before discussing “Ken,” however, I want to turn to a return with renewed focus to Woolf's depiction, in her diary, of the encounter on the towpath.

On the Towpath with Woolf

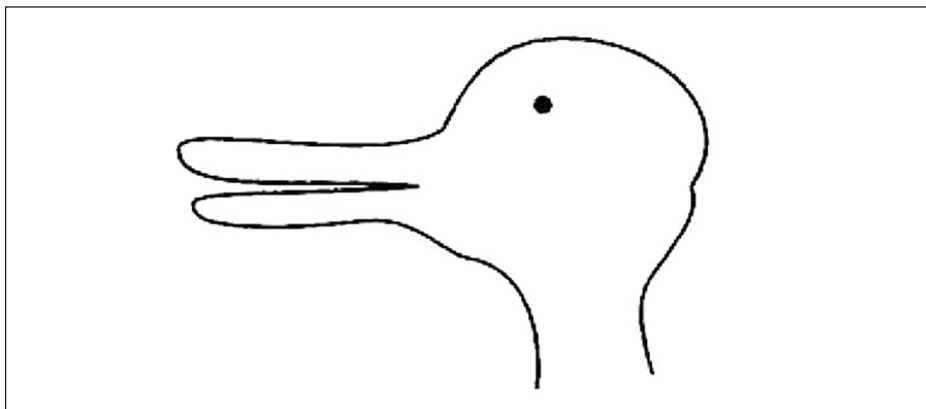
Woolf began her diary on January 1, 1915, while living in rented rooms in the center of Richmond. She had been banished from London to life in the suburbs after a suicidal bout of depression, which had begun in August 1913, made the stimulating urban world too risky for her continued mental fragility, in the opinion of her physi-

558 cians and her husband. (Indeed, six weeks after she began this journal, the violent manic phase of her illness suddenly surfaced with a vengeance.) Woolf's early diary entries seem determined to provide a studiously dispassionate account of her muted life in Richmond. January 2, for example, was "an altogether average sample of our life": breakfast with the landlady and a walk to the market past "the vilest little red villas" (whose interiors she imagines, somewhat ominously, are "rank with the smell of meat & human beings") (*Diary* 4–5). On January 9, she and Leonard walked to Kingston, several miles south of Richmond along the Thames. It was a "very good walk"; Kingston, approached via footpath through a purple field at sunset, looked "like a foreign town" (*Diary* 13). And then in the next sentence, at the towpath on the riverbank, she breaks into the passage with which I began this essay. In spite of her measured tone, Woolf is clearly unprepared for this encounter near the foreign-seeming town, just as we are unprepared for its conclusion:

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

That final sentence still manages to shock, even when we know it is coming. It circulates through the text and into us. The passage is marked by a rising sense of panic, as a group of what seem at first to be unmarked/unremarkable young men transforms before Woolf's eyes into a long line (like Mew's long gallery) of "miserable ineffective shuffling idiotic creature[s]." That "long line" of feeble-minded adjectives registers her increasing horror at the public encounter in the middle of a "very good walk." Emerging in the place of the expected normal, these denizens of a parallel world of abnormality materialize literally in front of her face, and she must pass each face, each grin and wild stare, one by one.

Woolf's shock has several sources: the surprise of such an encounter with the faces of imbeciles on a public road; their nonverbal, yet vividly affective communications that convey meaning without speech; the physical proximity forced by the path. But what seems essential to her horror is the *dawning* awareness of mental disability in those faces—the slow recognition that what-seems-to-be normal is in fact an illusion, and that beneath the illusion lies an uncanny reality, a kind of negative double of the apparent world. Deepening affective shock like this, produced out of dawning perception, can be found in Woolf's fiction as well as her nonfiction—it acts as a narrative-aesthetic trigger in *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, as we shall see—and therefore is worth our pursuing. Wittgenstein's famous discussion of "seeing-as" may be of some use here. His discussion centers on the example of a duck-rabbit picture, which can at first be perceived (perhaps) as a duck, then (perhaps, if one probes sufficiently) as duck and rabbit:



▲
Fig. 1.

Wittgenstein is especially interested in the status of the dawning perception in this scenario: “I *see* that [the figure] has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience ‘noticing an aspect.’ . . . And I must distinguish between the ‘continuous seeing’ of an aspect and the ‘dawning’ of an aspect.”²⁷ Aspects that at first had been unperceived come to dominate the seer’s sense of the object, in part *because* the dawning of the recognition demonstrates the leakiness of the conduit between perception and consciousness. Indeed, one might say that that the duck-rabbit produces the inverse operation of a metaphor: “duck” is no longer available to be like something else—it is certainly *not like* the rabbit, since it *is* (part of) the rabbit—and the recognition of this delimiting dependency puts the brakes on any interpretive elaborations of the duck or the rabbit. Now the duck cannot be metaphorical (it cannot be “like” Yeats’s eternal swans, for example), except insofar as it is tied to the rabbit as part of a duck-rabbit, which in turn can only be “like” other puzzle-pictures. Wittgenstein suggests that what is perceived in “the dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects” (212), which is to say that the duck-rabbit has always been duck-rabbit, and what changes in the “dawning” is the certainty that one can believe what one sees. In Woolf’s encounter, “dawning” marks an unbidden shift from what we might call subjective sovereignty to “perfectly horrible” epistemological instability. The faces become permanently human-and-unhuman and, in this sense, impervious to the metaphorical machinations of the imagination. On this reading, the indignant “certainly” of “They certainly should be killed” means, in part, that “they” should be evacuated from our public world (in one way or another) because their shocking presence among us disrupts, permanently, universalist presumptions of a stable normality. This kind of shock, for someone like Woolf, must surely extend to her own tenuous mental sovereignty. The sudden appearance of the face of the idiot declares, in effect, that all bets are off; with this breaching of sequestration, such random encounters with imbeciles in our midst give the lie to “progressive” control and its anchors in political thought.

Part of our own readerly shock at this passage must stem from our sense of Woolf as a writer whose project challenged (rather than reified) authoritative constructions of a

560 universal subject. Clearly Woolf harbors a few monstrous universalisms of her own in this candid moment, starting with an Enlightenment premium on intellectual ability.²⁸ And when read here against the implicit ethical charge in Mew's poem, Woolf's violent allergy to the inmates seems especially vivid. But what I have been emphasizing is the schismatic modern *context* of these two encounters: on the asylum road, individual faces have already been overcoded into one pathological face, and the poetic task is to make room for something vital behind that face; on the towpath, individual pathological faces emerge from a presumed unmarked group, and the task of the journal is to flatten the resultant shock with a sovereign-sounding speech-act of condemnation. By noting this chiasmus, I want to stress that I am not suggesting that a passage dislodged from Woolf's journal in a very troubled year is equivalent to or may be read on the same terms as Mew's published lyric poem. Rather, I take both of them as related and illuminatingly divergent modernist responses to the provocations of mental disability in an age when medico-legal taxonomies had wrenched it out of the realm of local knowledge and into the national discourses of biopower. Woolf's response is routed through modernist shock, while Mew's tunnels beneath it.

Nervous Normates and the Duskiest Chamber of the Being

Disability theorists have had a good deal to say about the interrelations between disability and textuality. Most build on Rosemarie Garland Thomson's foundational 1997 coinage of the term "normate" to conceptualize the dominant regime in which the empowered abstract figure of nondisabled corporeality ("the normate") embodies the norm against which corporeal diversity is pathologized and regulated.²⁹ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder subsequently proposed that disability acts as a "narrative prosthesis" that, in effect, recursively solves problems within the normate text and thereby extends the text's authority, and Robert McRuer has theoretically refined this argument by dovetailing it with queer theory, in order to analyze the normate phenomenon of what he calls "compulsory able-bodiedness."³⁰ More recently, in a project whose aims are closer to my own here, Ato Quayson has offered a nuanced study of "aesthetic nervousness"—his coinage for the textual crises produced by encounters with disability that lead to "the collapse of the dominant protocols that govern the representation."³¹ Quayson's formulations, which explicitly include mental disability, maintain a focus on textual enunciation and irruption—rather than, say, plot or character—and extend into twentieth-century global writing that includes Beckett's *End Game* and *Molloy* (for their disabled bodies) and Coetzee's autistic novels like *The Life and Times of Michael K*. And yet I would argue that the project of reading *modernism* through the lens of disability theory requires something more than what Quayson offers: it requires a doubled focus on self-conscious aesthetic practice and on the historical forces that underpin modernist textuality. I have proposed that the nominalism attending the discursive proliferation of mental disability in the early twentieth century plays a role in the volatile codes of modernism; to this I would add that one significant aspect of

the modernist aesthetic project—certainly in evidence in the writings to which I will next turn—involves the deliberate experimental creation (rather than short-circuiting or collapse) of new aesthetic domains out of the encounter with non-normate bodies and affects. In line with recent work by Tobin Siebers and Michael Davidson, I will my extend my proposal that modernism's interest in aporia and fracture, disproportion and asymmetry, are rooted in aesthetic and epistemological challenges to "normal."³²

Woolf's extraordinary essay "Street Haunting," written and published in 1930 in a limited edition, offers an extended example of this self-generating aesthetic.³³ The arc of the essay is simple enough: Woolf has been at her desk in London for the length of a winter afternoon. As early dusk is falling, she seizes the pretense of buying a pencil to go out into the evening. She walks the streets for a while, relishes her place among the "vast republican army of anonymous trampers" (20), appreciates the beauty of the city, buys a pencil, and eventually returns home. Woolf contrasts the experience of the street with being at home, where a comfortable private "self" is both enfolded and extended by the familiar objects that surround her—the bowl from Italy on the mantelpiece, the carpet with its burnt brown ring, each with its own highly specific autobiographical connotations. But when she steps outside into the approaching darkness (that time of day when "we are no longer quite ourselves" [20]), a phenomenological change occurs: her domestic "shell-like covering" breaks apart, exposing at its center an "oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye" that fully and impartially takes in the city's beautiful features (21–22). This beauty-seeking eye satisfies her for a while, as it glides across surfaces, retrieving "the prettiest trophies [like] little lumps of emerald and coral." But when Woolf becomes satiated by this diet of "simple, sugary fare," she begins to wish for a more complex kind of vision, one that might "compose these trophies in such a way as to bring out the more obscure angles and relationships" (23). She feels thus compelled to

halt at the door of the boot shop and make some little excuse, which has nothing to do with the real reason, for folding up the bright paraphernalia of the streets and withdrawing to some duskier chamber of the being where we may ask, as we raise our left foot obediently upon the stand: "What, then, is it like to be a dwarf?" (23–24)

A dwarf? The question is calculated to shock; it irrupts into the text, preceding any explanation, as though it has been sprung upon Woolf and upon us by her withdrawal to the "duskier chamber of the being"—as though, in eschewing the superficial beauty of the street and seeking a more complex form of perception, Woolf has vaulted into the bizarre and other-worldly *tableau vivant* that is materializing in the boot shop. A dwarf, we now learn, has entered the store, and the scale of her nontraditional body produces an immediate recalibration of all other surrounding bodies: she is "escorted by two women who, being of normal size, looked like benevolent giants beside her." Even the woman's own affect and proportions are destabilized in this dusky chamber: as she shops for shoes, she puts forward her foot, and "behold [!]" the foot of the dwarf is now the "shapely, perfectly proportioned foot of a well-grown woman. It was

562 arched; it was aristocratic. Her whole manner changed as she looked at it resting on the stand." The woman's "peevisish yet apologetic expression [that is] usual on the faces of the deformed" becomes "soothed and satisfied" as she tries on pair after pair of shoes (24). It is as if her well-grown foot has redrawn the boundaries between normate and non-normate and has transformed her entire being through the power of synecdoche: as her foot becomes the focal point in the textual dusky chamber, the woman behaves as though the stigmas of her body have disappeared into the proportional shift around her. "Seeing nothing but her feet," Woolf observes, not without a touch of malice, the little person "imagined perhaps that the rest of her body was of a piece with those beautiful feet" (24). We don't really know what the woman is imagining, of course, because Woolf does not grant her speech; she is a silent pantomime alternating between deformity and satisfaction. Woolf maintains this supercilious tone through the rest of the scene, until at last the woman reluctantly leaves the shop: her "ecstasy fade[s]," the Cinderella scenario dissolves, and she reverts to being "a dwarf only" (25).

Disability theorists have long remarked on the normate perspective that views atypical corporeal features as the sum total of an individual's identity; here, Woolf enacts that process in reverse: the pirouetting subject-woman is narratively remanded to her status as dwarf-only. Yet something has changed fundamentally. The little woman has retained her shape-shifting power over perspective; indeed, that power seems to have grown to encompass the world beyond the dusky boot shop. Woolf discovers, upon her own exit from the shop, that the dwarf has "changed the mood" of the very streets that were, only moments earlier, sites of disjointed beauty. Now disfigurement and disability reign: the dwarf has

called into being an atmosphere which [. . .] seemed actually to create the humped, the twisted, the deformed. Two bearded men, brothers, apparently, stone-blind, supporting themselves by resting a hand on the head of a small boy between them, marched down the street [wearing] the terror and inevitability of the fate that [had] overtaken them [. . .] and [cleaving] asunder the passers-by. [. . .] Indeed, the dwarf had started a hobbling grotesque dance to which everybody in the street now conformed: the stout lady tightly swathed in shiny sealskin; the feeble-minded boy sucking the silver knob of his stick [. . .]—all joined in the hobble and tap of the dwarf's dance. (25–26)

The dwarf's power has revealed a parallel non-normate world in its entirety; like the duck-rabbit, this shadow world is the constitutive, haunting complement of the superficially beautiful street. Its detection requires the complex vision of the duskier chamber; its seemingly magical actuation arises out of the infectious disproportion of the dwarf. The dwarf's triad—she, flanked by giantesses—is reproduced in the triad of the blind brothers who tower over their little guide; her gait becomes the dance of the street. What, indeed, is it like to be a dwarf? It is to be uncannily powerful.

Straining for some distance from this strange new world, Woolf asks, with forced nonchalance, where they live, how they survive, this "maimed company of the halt and the blind." Her ethical imagination makes a weak appearance via an insulated "we": surely their "fantastic" lives "cannot be altogether tragic"; surely they "do not grudge

us . . . our prosperity.” But at the moment of this assertion, her faux insouciance is met with a face-to-face shock:

[S]uddenly, turning the corner, we come upon a bearded Jew, wild, hunger-bitten, glaring out of his misery; or pass the humped body of an old woman flung abandoned on the step of a public building with a cloak over her like the hasty covering thrown over a dead horse or donkey. At such sights the nerves of the spine seem to stand erect; a sudden flare is brandished in our eyes; a question is asked which is never answered. (26)

The abandoned humped body, the hunger-bitten, silent-yet-questioning glare: these are the affective triggers of political revelation.³⁴ Woolf has made the face of *homo sacer* itself—*zoe*, without *bios*—flash into view and ask a mute, unanswerable question: What is it like to *be* and yet to be cancelled? Thus may the state of exception—inhabited by these remainders of poverty and disability—be seen only when the shell of normate life is cracked, and only by means of an aesthetic blow that is felt in the deepest nerves.

This episode might be characterized as a site of aesthetic nervousness or collapse, in Quayson’s sense: the nervous narrative balks. But to read it this way would be to assume that the text itself has no prior knowledge of or expectation for its sudden unraveling. I would argue, to the contrary, that the *collapse itself* signifies a form of experimentation, a narrative strategy, a plotted textual disruption; and I would argue further that it is part of a series of exploratory disruptions that comprise the aesthetic plot of “Street Haunting.” The first stage takes place in the familiar flat, where known objects extend the self; next, the oyster eye of surface beauty emerges in the street; then the dusker chamber produces or is produced by a sudden complex and distorted vision. The aesthetic experiment associated with this third stage—the stage of the parallel non-normate world—gradually extends modernist subjectivism to its limit point, beyond which Woolf’s narrative sentience does not go. The street dance, with its idiot boy and tapping blind men, can be navigated by means of the carnivalesque aesthetics of freakish heterogeneity. But the face-to-face encounter with the wild, glaring Jew (demented perhaps by “overwhelming grief” or “extreme poverty,” to recall the Lunacy Commission’s report) marks a complete arrest of subjectivism’s imaginative penetration. The aesthetic capabilities of this stage hit the wall, as it were; this singular face cannot be marked down to impersonal freakery, and Woolf is not compelled (or, perhaps, aesthetically unequipped) to follow it into its vortex of poverty, disability, and civil death. On this reading, “Street Haunting” is an exercise in the phenomenology of the modern. The unanswered question posed by the silent “brandished flare” of the Jew marks the end of this particular aesthetic stage of street haunting. Its resonant hollowness becomes the dimension upon which the essay’s next stage builds. In that ensuing stage, Woolf refigures the halt and the blind as inanimate “derelicts” (26): now they are objects scattered about the streets, like pieces of the fantastic assemblages that fill up the surrounding shop windows.³⁵ In the next moment, Woolf simply abandons them, as her beauty-seeking eye returns with heightened energy: in this post-disability stage, the eye has become a “sportive and generous” organ that “creates [and] enhances”

- 564 her subsequent wanderings (27). Leaving behind the maimed company, Woolf's street haunting continues through several more aesthetic stages until she returns home to her flat, satisfied by this "greatest of adventures" (35).

The Half-lit Stair

The "dusker chamber of the being" is where Woolf acquires her transient vision of the haunting parallel world; the speaker of Mew's poem "Ken" begins to acquire her permanent vision in a similarly dusky "half-lit stair" (CM 17). Once again, however, Mew's poetic account of the "brandished flare" of the non-normate may be read in reverse relation to Woolf's. "Ken" is a dramatic monologue about a man—a mental defective—living in an ancient village in Brittany. As in "On the Asylum Road," the setting of "Ken" and the language of the speaker telling his story are imbued with the cadences of parochial life. She is one of the town folk, and she relates Ken's story from the perspective of her own "dawning" awareness of him.

The first stanza describes the old town in pentameter that is as neatly controlled as the "black clad people walking in their sleep" who are "watched from end to end / By the great Church above" (CM 16). Only the village's darting children seem alive, and then only in the morning and the early evening when they visit Ken's "gabled house facing the Castle wall" (CM 17). In this tomblike, pre-modern setting of Castle and Church, the second stanza, trimmed to tetrameter and tightly rhymed, recalls (and enacts through an anomalous halting caesura) the speaker's original shock upon suddenly meeting Ken:

When first I came upon him there,
 Suddenly, on the half-lit stair,
 I think I hardly found a trace
 Of likeness to a human face
 In his. And I said then
 If in His image God made men,
 Some other must have made poor Ken—
 But for his eyes which looked at you
 As two red, wounded stars might do. (CM 17)

The completed past tense of the stanza presages change: the poem's narrative will revise this initial impression of an unhuman, ungodly face that resists all recognition beyond the wounded eyes-stars of Christ. In the stanzas that follow, the speaker learns the language of Ken. His communications are powerful, though nearly nonverbal: "He scarcely spoke, you scarcely heard, / His voice broke off in little jars." Rather, it is an autistic's unbridled polyglossia, spoken through the body, through gait and affect, as he "ploughed up the street, / Groping, with knarred, high-lifted feet / And arms thrust out as if to beat / Always against a threat of bars" (CM 17). This affective language is

conveyed to the deer he visits in the park and to the children who flock to him; and it is understood, finally, by the narrator, who comes to recognize in his nonverbal communications a potent synecdochal vitalism. She learns that for Ken (in contrast to the deathliness of the village), nothing is dead:

He said "a bird" if he picked up a broken wing,
 A perished leaf or any such thing
 Was just "a rose"; and once when I had said
 He must not stand and knock there any more,
 He left a twig on the mat outside my door. (CM 18)

Ken retains life and gives gifts (here, a tree) through a distinctly poetic medium of figuration. Reason is of little use in this medium, except as a mode by which to extrapolate discarded parts into newly imagined wholes. And it is precisely this faculty of Ken's—this resurrecting of life from behind the broken façade of death—that is his undoing, making it impossible for him to sit quietly in the village church on Sunday nights. The sight of a dead Christ hanging on the dark altar drives him into "evil fits": "Biting his rosary to bits. / While pointing to the Christ he tried to say / 'Take it away.'" (CM 18). The tortured god repels any of Ken's efforts at synecdochal resurrection; the authority of the crucifix, for the villagers (though not for Ken), resides in its deathly form.

At this point the poem shifts into the same kind of temporal and perspectival hiatus that we saw in "On the Asylum Road." This time the speaker abruptly turns, in the poem's longest stanza, to the seasonal cycle of death and change:

Not long ago
 The last thrush stiffened in the snow

 But now the wind has left our rattled pane
 To flutter the hedge-sparrow's wing,
 The birches in the wood are red again

 And if God please
 With all of these
 We too, shall see another Spring. (CM 18)

What has happened during this turn away from human events? What shock does Mew delay and concentrate through the narration of the death and life in a season's natural passing? The speaker reveals the event obliquely in the last two stanzas. She begins by wondering about "that red brick barn upon the hill," with its "twenty windows in a row" looking down at the town—the asylum that bookends the church (CM 18). In "that place," she wonders, "can one own the deer, / And does one walk with children still / As one did here"? And if you have evil fits, and

They cannot move you from your chair
 What happens there?
 I do not know. (CM 18–19)

Ken has been seen by the “eyes” of the asylum and has been removed to it; and the speaker, his familiar, receiver of his gifts, has been complicit in her passivity:

So, when they took
 Ken to that place, I did not look
 After he called and turned on me
 His eyes. These I shall see— (CM 19)

The asylum will discipline Ken into not-Ken, stripping him of his house and park—and of his name, which means, literally, “scope of understanding.” He will be institutionalized as inmate and absorbed into a metonym to be seen, perhaps, as part of a “scattered stare” on the asylum road.

But although the speaker betrays Ken, she retains the indelible synecdochal transmissions that hold open her new “scope of understanding”—not only about Ken, but also about how the State may suddenly create naked life—*zoe*—from individual lives. She had refused to look at Ken’s face when he was taken away, but his eyes remain fixed in the future tense of the broken ending of the poem, which, like the broken wing, now stands as the textual remainder of Ken. The speaker now sees and also sees through his wounded god-eyes; they have become organs of what we might call a political seeing-as: Ken’s singular face/the installed face of feeble-mindedness. His is the face invoked by Levinas, which calls into question the sovereignty of my own face, revealing the fiction of my autonomy and freedom—the face of “the other who asks me not to let him die alone.”³⁶

In 1844, after his mother’s institutionalization, Max Stirner, that famous precursor of modernist Egoism, tried to write about the State’s production of naked life through its carceral system. In a short passage in *The Ego and His Own*, Stirner coins the term “un-man” to mean the man who, by being designated non-normate, defines by default the normate man. The State “excludes” the un-man; “it locks him up, or transforms him from a fellow of the State into a fellow of the prison . . . [or] the lunatic asylum or hospital.” These “[m]en that are not men, what should they be but *ghosts*? Every real man, because he does not correspond to the concept ‘man,’ or because he is not a ‘generic man,’ is a spook.”³⁷ Ken, we may imagine, has been designated an un-man, and will have joined the ghosts of the dis-modern asylum road that is both ancient and modern. As with “On the Asylum Road,” this poem’s anxiety about the asylum (“What happens there” when inmates aren’t docile?) fuses the past and present in the recognition that “asylum” is simply a transhistorical vehicle of control that may be justified by any number of traditional or scientific beliefs. What ends “Ken” is the trauma of a horrible recognition: “These I shall see—”.

Maisie Johnson's Shock: "Horror! Horror! she wanted to cry"

Trauma plays a pronounced structuring role in some strains of Woolf's aesthetic innovations, although, as I have been suggesting, shock appears to produce for her an especially potent brand of trauma that must be managed through narrative emplotment, impersonal tone, and contextualization within broader and less harrowing encounters. In "A Sketch of the Past," the memoir written in the last year of her life, Woolf explicitly identifies shock as the *primum mobile* of her life's writing; as she puts it, "the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer"; one of her life lessons concerns the struggle with shock, the recognition that, however horrifying it may be, shock "is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. . . . [And so making] it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me."³⁸ In this account, shock is the name for a transdimensional shattering of appearance. As with Freud's model of traumatic shock, when such shattering occurs without warning, it delivers a physically palpable psychic wound that must be managed, however approximately and unconsciously, by repetition.³⁹ In Woolf's case, we may say, that repetition takes the form of experimental nonfiction and fiction.

In "A Sketch," Woolf rehearses several raw incidents of childhood shock that interrupted her boring life of "cotton wool": out of nowhere, and "for no reason that I know about, there [would be] a sudden violent shock; something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life." There is the time when, while roughhousing with her brother Thoby, she is suddenly overcome by "a feeling of hopeless sadness. It was as if I became aware of something terrible; and of my own powerlessness." And the time when, while walking in her moonlit garden, a familiar apple tree suddenly embodies the news received that day about the suicide of a recent family guest, so that the tree itself seems to imbue the whole world with the event of the suicide, paralyzing the young Virginia in a "trance of horror" (71).⁴⁰ And then there is the moment of shock that she "always remember[s]"—one that we will recognize no less by the style of its delivery than by its components. Midsentence she breaks into the traumatic moment when

the idiot boy sprang up with his hand outstretched mewing, slit-eyed, red-rimmed; and without saying a word, with a sense of the horror in me, I poured into his hand a bag of Russian toffee. But it was not over, for that night in the bath [with Vanessa] the dumb horror came over me. Again I had that hopeless sadness; that collapse I have described before; as if I were passive under some sledge-hammer blow; exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning that had heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected, with nothing to ward it off, so that I huddled up at my end of the bath, motionless. (78)

The idiot boy's paradoxical possession of power—the power to shock both physically and psychologically—is overwhelming; like the dwarf who conjures up the disfigurement of all before her, he hypnotizes the young Virginia without words and so quite literally transforms her into a dumb, naked, paralyzed, huddling defective. What is the "real thing behind appearances" in this shocking encounter? Is it an early version of seeing-

568 as, when the reality of the non-normate world overtakes and subsumes the illusion of concrete normality?

An incident in *Mrs. Dalloway* portrays this kind of “seeing-as,” or “dawning,” as it plays out in a more managed context. Near the beginning of the novel, when multiple points of subjectivity are conveyed through a series of London bystanders, nineteen-year-old Maisie Johnson appears briefly in Regent’s Park. She has just arrived from Scotland and asks Rezia and Septimus Warren Smith for directions. Septimus is hallucinating and Rezia is trying to distract him, and to distract others from noticing him. “Both seemed queer, Masie Johnson thought. Everything seemed very queer.” As she walks away past a cluster of “invalids most of them in Bath chairs,” the sense of queerness grows in her, until “Maisie Johnson positively felt she must cry Oh! (for that young man on the seat had given her quite a turn. Something was up, she knew.) Horror! horror! she wanted to cry. (She had left her people; they had warned her what would happen.)” This horror amidst un-homely strangers will remain with Maisie Johnson for her entire life: the scene of “this couple on the chairs [that] gave her quite a turn; the young woman seeming foreign, the man looking queer; so that should she be very old she would still remember and make it jangle again among her memories.”⁴¹ Maisie Johnson cannot say just what has shocked her, but feels certain that what she had expected to be normal turned out to be abnormal.⁴²

But why must this kind of dawning encounter produce lasting “horror”? After all, in the final pages of the novel, Richard Dalloway has his own dawning experience when he realizes that he “had not recognized” the “lovely girl” (189) at his party as his own daughter Elizabeth, and his delayed recognition brings them together in surprised pleasure. “Seeing-as” is not always deployed by Woolf in the service of managing her private horrors. But when it is accompanied by a sense of the *Unheimlich*—the queer young man, the invalids haunting the edges of Regent’s Park—the experience of the *Heimlich* itself comes under fire. To return to Freud’s writings on the subject: he says of the word *heimlich* that it “belongs to two sets of ideas . . . : on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight”; thus *unheimlich* adds not only an *un-* but also an *ought-not* to the private, the home-ly: “everything is uncanny that *ought to have remained* hidden and secret, and yet comes to light.”⁴³ Lacan goes further than this: the uncanny is that which proves the human subject’s lack of autonomy by demonstrating its contingency.⁴⁴ It is, we might say, the switchpoint where the normate world crumbles before its complement. The Woolfian *Unheimlich* is in this sense the unbuffered, unanticipated appearance in public—the coming to light—of what “certainly” ought to have remained secret and private: mental disability.

The horror produced by this transformation of appearance bears on conventional understandings of horror as a response to something threatening and impure, usually a mixed-up creature that uncannily breaches categories, like the living-dead, or a dog-man, or even a duck-rabbit. The threat of Woolfian horror lies in the power of the revelation—that “others” exist quite naturally among, and may even be, “us”—to engulf (one might say infect) perspective itself. Maisie Johnson doesn’t begin to feel

that *London itself* is queer until her encounter with the Warren Smiths; Woolf doesn't see the "grotesque dance" of London until her encounter with a dwarf. When one is susceptible to shock's chain reaction of transformations, the whole world is always on the verge of becoming a place in which one is not-at-home. Consider how Septimus, fully in the throes of mental illness, is continually bearing witness to the to the world-altering power of dawning; the sight of a simple tree-like pattern triggers the "gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames" (15). A dog begins to turn into a man (a "horrible, terrible [thing] to see" [66]); his dead friend Evan materializes as the living-dead. The threat of transformation lurks just beneath the visible world.

Woolf, however, is in control of Septimus's gradual dissolution into a picture puzzle: she dwells in and pilots his consciousness, leavening his horrible visions with (increasingly rare) moments of extraordinarily beautiful sensory clarity. Though becoming mad, he remains an aesthetic conduit, a vehicle for excessive imagination, not to be confused with the "maimed file of lunatics" he encounters in the street, who "ambled and nodded and grinned past him . . . each half apologetically, yet triumphantly, inflicting his hopeless woe" (88).⁴⁵ In killing him off, Woolf prevents his institutional descent into the condition of un-man. Yet in rescuing him from the horrors of Dr. Bradshaw, she also rescues her own imagination from the impasses of the face beyond which her aesthetics cannot and will not go. Septimus's throbbing interiority is preserved for its next stage: it becomes a space that Mrs. Dalloway sympathetically inhabits when she learns of his suicide.

If mental disability—and specifically the idiocy haunting Woolf's memoirs—delivers a "sledge-hammer blow," it is precisely because Woolf cannot enter into or dwell in its consciousness. The face of idiocy—"mewing, slit-eyed," and utterly incomprehensible, though full of an unknown, even sovereign, power—represents the limits of her imagination, and thus the undoing of her last, best defense against her own dissolution. The triumph of *Mrs. Dalloway* may be a narrative consciousness that "glides into the recesses of the heart . . . dispers[ing] itself" like "a bee with honey"(49)—or, as Hillis Miller once put it, "a perfect transparency of the minds of the characters to the mind of the narrator"—but its nemesis is an alien face that stops consciousness cold.⁴⁶ The power of this face to command without words, to paralyze, to conjure an opposite world, represents not only the shock-delivering arrest of her otherwise penetrating imagination, but the delimiting of the reach of self-reflexive thought. One may plan (heroically) to kill Septimus in order to save him from the Foucauldian nightmare of the institution, while at the same time wishing death upon "defectives" for their insufficient institutionalization. Surely Woolf recognizes the violence of this ethical contradiction on some level, for the idiot boy remains with her to the end of her life, in both his real, tactile form, with hand outstretched, and as an enigma haunting the bestial face that she dreams about in the *mise en abyme* of a hall mirror.⁴⁷ He is her *frère*, her *semblable*.

570 **Notes**

My grateful thanks go to Joe Valente, Chris Reed, Susan Squier, and Michael Bérubé for lengthy, stimulating conversations and advice concerning this essay.

1. Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, intr. Quentin Bell, vol. 1, 1915–1919 (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 13; hereafter cited in text as *Diary*.

2. See, for example, Hermione Lee, “Virginia Woolf and Offence,” *The Art of Literary Biography*, ed. John Batchelor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 129–50; and Patricia McManus’s response in “The ‘Offensiveness’ of Virginia Woolf: From a Moral to a Political Reading,” *Woolf Studies Annual* 14 (2008): 91–138; and David Bradshaw, “Eugenics: They should certainly be killed,” in *A Concise Companion to Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 34–55, especially 49–53. Bradshaw details Woolf’s unapologetic involvement in the eugenics movement, but also notes that her involvement was hardly atypical of her intellectual contemporaries.

3. “The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. . . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.” Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. and intr. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 255.

4. Licia Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 4. Carlson’s path-breaking philosophical study warrants attention from literary critics.

5. Henri Bergson, “Introduction to Metaphysics,” in *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle Andison (New York: Citadel Press, 1992), 161. See also Bergson, *Creative Evolution* [1911], trans. Arthur Mitchell (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 176–79.

6. See Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), 100–104 and 64–65. Jean O. Love provides an account of Laura’s life in the Stephens household in *Virginia Woolf: Sources of Madness and Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 159–69. The standard biography of Mew is Penelope Fitzgerald’s *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends* (London: Collins, 1984). This has been supplemented by an extraordinarily detailed website associated with Middlesex University, “Charlotte’s Web,” at <http://studymore.org.uk/mew.htm>.

7. Nor will I address the topic of eugenics/degeneracy in the modernist period, which has generated plenty of interesting scholarship charting connections among such figures as Max Nordau, Cesare Lombroso, and the Fabians, with organizations like the British Eugenics Education Society (established in 1907 and numbering among its members Ottoline Morrell, Havelock Ellis, and Stella Browne). See, for representative studies, Mathew Thomson, *The Problem of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy, and Social Policy in Britain c. 1870–1959* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); Donald J. Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Mark Jackson, *The Borderland of Imbecility: Medicine, Society and the Fabrication of the Feeble Mind in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

8. *The 1844 Report of the Metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy*, part 2, “Dementia,” <http://studymore.org.uk/xmad1844.htm#Dementia>.

9. See pages 398–99 of Harvey. G. Simmons, “Explaining Social Policy: The Mental Deficiency Act of 1913,” *Journal of Social History* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1978) on these two “new categories” in English law. The vast majority of persons deemed “feeble-minded” were unwed mothers (397–98), while “moral imbeciles” tended to be males who showed “mental defectiveness coupled with strongly vicious or criminal propensities.” *The Mental Deficiency Act of 1913*, [http://lessonsfromthepast.co.uk/assets/files/documents/Extract of the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act.pdf](http://lessonsfromthepast.co.uk/assets/files/documents/Extract%20of%20the%201913%20Mental%20Deficiency%20Act.pdf).

10. Also targeted for sequestration by the bill were women with any degree of “deficiency” who were “in receipt of Poor Law relief when giving birth to or pregnant of an illegitimate child,” and children deemed unable to “receive benefit from education in special schools.” Evelyn Fox, “The Mental Deficiency Act and Its Administration,” *The Eugenics Review* 10, no.1 (April 1918): 2–3, 8. In a lengthy editorial, the *Review*—which was the organ of the Eugenics Education Society—details the many “calamitous” direct results and “completely disastrous” indirect results of mental deficiency

in England. See "The Eugenic Principle and the Treatment of the Feeble-Minded," *Eugenics Review* 2, no. 3 (November 1910): 180.

11. Quoted in "Editorial Notes," *Eugenics Review* 2, no. 3 (Nov. 1910): 163–64.

12. See Jeremy Taylor, *Hospital and Asylum Architecture in England 1840–1914* (London: Mansell, 1991), 202–18, table 2. See also Taylor's overview of the architectural changes that accompanied the rising demand for asylums in chapter 1, "Architectural Developments," 1–49. See Jackson, *Borderland*, chapter 2, "The Birth of the Borderland," 21–52, for a historical fleshing out of that demand. I have attempted to determine which of the Richmond/Kingston area's four large asylums was home to these young men; likely they were inmates at the Wandsworth Asylum in Surrey, to which an Annexe for Idiot Children was added in 1897 (Taylor, *Hospital and Asylum Architecture*, 204).

13. Jackson, *Borderland*, 78. Harvey G. Simmons, offering an illuminating account of public expectations for the MDA in "Explaining Social Policy," reports that reformers (and eugenicists) were disappointed to discover that the MDA's segregation of the mentally defective had virtually no effect on rates of crime, poverty, or fertility. With that wind taken out of its sails, the MDA became in ensuing years no more than a dormant set of guidelines for institutionalization. It was largely ignored until the sensational media exposés of deplorable asylum conditions in the 1950s.

14. The traditional view associating speech/voice with authentic self-presence is precisely the starting point for the deconstructive turn to textuality. The traditional assumption shapes Rousseau's adduction of speech as the constitutive cornerstone for the human subject, for example. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress, intr. Peter Gay (Indianapolis, IN: Kackett, 1987), 25–111, especially 47–50. Philosophical challenges to the assumptions linking self-possession and self-representation to political personhood have been mounted by, among others, Eva Kittay in *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and Martha C. Nussbaum in *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), both of whom aim to disassemble the dominant Kantian conception of personhood (associated with reason and moral rationality) in order to reconceive personhood as a condition of human potential for which degrees of ability are essentially irrelevant. See, e.g., Nussbaum, *Frontiers*, 127–33.

15. We might consider, in this regard, the way that *The Sound and the Fury* negotiates Benjy Compson's speech by first rendering his interiorized, defamiliarizing impressions of his world through free indirect discourse and then presenting through other characters a uniform external reaction to it as expressive noise.

16. Agamben links this condition of civil death (his more elaborately historicized equivalent is *homo sacer*—he who may be killed without consequence) to Carl Schmitt's idea that sovereign power must remain outside the law in order to enforce civil law, or, in the case of an arbitrarily assessed "state of emergency," to suspend it. Schmitt notoriously supported the concept of (Nazi) dictatorship, but his "state of emergency" has been useful—to Agamben, at least—for understanding that the suspension of protective law depends upon and in turn justifies the categorical cancellation of political subjecthood for certain groups of people. And when one considers the circulation, described by Foucault, of the much weaker (though ubiquitous) emanations of biopower from local sites within liberal bureaucracies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one may see how those local sites of specialized, bureaucratized power could suspend (internal) law through self-adjudicating "states of emergency" whose conditions were necessarily opaque to larger regulatory apparatuses. For our purposes, these would include not only the "inside" of individual asylums or asylum systems but also the MDA's "outside" Board of Control and its newly established Local Authorities, whose job it became to allocate local funding and to ensure that the feeble-minded in local communities were brought to the attention of asylum officers. For Foucault, see for example, "Two Lectures" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Writings, 1972–77*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 78–108. For Schmitt, see *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* [1922], trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5–16. For Agamben, see *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 126–35.

- 572 17. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Freud: On Creativity and the Unconscious: Papers on the Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, Religion*, ed. Benjamin Nelson (New York: Harper, 1958), 130.
18. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 37. Versions of Rancière's thesis about the three major regimes of the "sensible" may be found throughout his recent work.
19. Joseph Bristow has argued convincingly for Mew's modernism on related, though more persona-driven grounds: her poems, he writes, "exert themselves in defamiliarizing, and thus modernizing, well-established genre[s] that her speakers have no further wish to inhabit." I am suggesting a shift from his focus on the speaker to the manipulation of history through genre. Joseph Bristow, "Charlotte Mew's Aftereffects," *Modernism/modernity* 16, no. 2 (April 2009): 255–80.
20. The collection included "The Fête," a poem published by Pound in *The Egoist* on May 1, 1914; it was reviewed by a puzzled but perceptive reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement*, September 21, 1916, 455.
21. Charlotte Mew, "On the Asylum Road," in *Charlotte Mew: Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. and intr. Val Warner (Manchester, UK: Carcanet, 1997), 22; hereafter cited in text as *CM*.
22. Fitzgerald memorably describes this technique—writing "at a distance of time from the first experience"—as "delayed shock" (*Charlotte Mew and Her Friends*, 45).
23. Mew was certainly aware of the contemporary debates about the status of "defectives." She tells Harold Monro in a letter that "Ken" (a companion poem to "On the Asylum Road" that I will discuss presently) was rejected for publication by editors who "believed in the segregation of the feeble-minded" (cited in Fitzgerald, *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends*, 47).
24. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* [1961], trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 213.
25. Emmanuel Levinas, "The Face," in *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 86.
26. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 189.
27. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 193, 194 (italics in original).
28. For a sustained examination of Woolf's complicated relation to the idea of "the intellectual" and the function of "the intellect" in her own systems of thought regarding gender and class, see Melba Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, The Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
29. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 8–9.
30. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Robert McRuer, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, eds. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Sharon L. Snyder (New York: MLA Publications, 2002), 88–99. In the past decade McRuer has published extensively on the intersections of disability theory, queer theory, and neoliberalism. See, especially, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
31. Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 51.
32. See Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2008); and Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2010). Siebers's main focus is on visual arts: "To what concept, other than the idea of disability," he asks, "might be referred modern art's love affair with misshapen and twisted bodies, stunning variety of human forms, intense representation of traumatic injury and psychological alienation, and unyielding preoccupation with wounds and tormented flesh?" (4).
33. Leonard Woolf later collected "Street Haunting" in the posthumous *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942), 20–36. Woolf criticism abounds with thematic readings of "Street Haunting": Rachel Bowlby deftly centers the essay in her influential critique of

the masculine figure of the *flâneur*; on this reading, “Street Haunting” illustrates Woolf’s simultaneous participation in and transgression of the (gendered) assumptions of a cultural practice linked closely to aesthetic innovation. In general, most accounts of “Street Haunting” follow this model: Leslie Kathleen Hankins argues that “the streets provided [Woolf with] an open public space—in some ways the towerless and classless utopian vision she later espoused,” while for Makiko Minow-Pinkney, the essay “explores positively and even celebrates the dissolution of the self in the experience of the *flâneur*.” Because of my focus linking the essay’s aesthetics with the theoretical implications of disability in modernity, my reading is anchored in those scenes where disability exceeds the essay’s aesthetic capacities. Rachel Bowlby, *Still Crazy After All These Years: Women, Writing and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 19–30; Leslie Kathleen Hankins, “Virginia Woolf and Walter Benjamin Selling Out(Siders),” in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Pamela L. Caughie (New York: Garland, 2000), 18; Makiko Minow-Pinkney, “Virginia Woolf and the Age of Motor Cars” in Caughie, *Mechanical Reproduction*, 165.

34. The figure of the Jew in this passage is part of a constellation of Woolf’s references to Jews that has drawn sustained attention from critics exploring her shifting treatments of race and class across the breadth of her oeuvre. See, for example, Merry M. Pawlowski, *Virginia Woolf and Fascism: Resisting the Dictators’ Seduction* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2002); and Maren Linett, “The Jew in the Bath: Imperiled Imagination in Woolf’s *The Years*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 2 (2002): 341–61. By contrast, I’m interested in his “wild” face of misery because of its sudden emergence from a hitherto undifferentiated world that subtends the “London Adventure” of the essay’s subtitle.

35. One strand of Bowlby’s multifaceted reading of this scene proposes that “[t]he ‘derelicts’ freely ‘choose’ their position, and it is to them that ‘commerce offers’ its exhibition. They are not beggars but ideal consumers” (24).

36. Emmanuel Levinas, *Face to Face with Lévinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (New York: SUNY Press, 1986), 24.

37. Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own: The Case of the Individual against Authority [Der Einzige un sein Eigentum, 1844]*, trans. Steven T. Byington (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005), 177.

38. Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” in *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 72; hereafter cited in text as “Sketch.”

39. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961). See especially chapter 4, 26–39. A full discussion of the differential accounts of modern shock as they are elaborated by Freud, Benjamin, and Simmel, to name only a few of the interested parties, is beyond the scope of this essay.

40. Woolf includes among these formative moments a scene in which a flower bed suddenly becomes “the whole,” “part earth, part flower” (“Sketch,” 71). In *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Jane Goldman provides an insightful account of the three moments together: “For Woolf where reason overcomes sensation, satisfaction results; but where reason fails and sensation dominates, she finds despair. She abhors the submission of mind to body (subject to object)” (45). Goldman’s monograph traces with great nuance the aesthetic transformations that Woolf’s memories undergo between genres—between, say, a journal entry and an essay, or between an essay and a work of fiction.

41. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway [1925]*, anntd. Bonnie Kime Scott, ed. Mark Hussey (New York: Harcourt, 2005), 25–26.

42. We may compare this to an earlier version of this scene in *The Hours*, where Maisie’s thoughts continue: “Is this life? Maisie Johnson asked herself, remembering Edinburgh. If this were life crawling, staring, then she was for death.” Virginia Woolf, *The Hours: The British Museum Manuscript of Mrs. Dalloway*, transcr. and ed. Helen M. Wussow (London: Pace University Press, 1996), notebook II, 288.

43. Freud, “Uncanny,” 129–30, italics in original.

44. On Lacan’s discussion of Freud’s “uncanny” in Seminar X, see Anneleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory* (New York: SUNY Press, 2011) 54–58.

574 45. In *The Hours*, the first attempts at this scene are much more graphic and visceral:

The repulsiveness of human nature was poured out of every corner, like the stream of rancid fat, up from the grill of an <the grating> of an eating-house. restaurant. It was exhibited <to a [blared?] at passerbys> on posters, <&> in [bread?] & rubber good shops, in & at all these corners where the

<At the street corners> where the wretched fluttered their gaudy rags; There were hags crippled with cold on the pavement. Terrible bands of pock marked or idiotic faces paraded the pressed close, in & leered up from blood red eyelids; pressed against one in the omnibuses & in tubes.

And once the <a> maimed file of lunatics, being exercised, or rather displayed for the diversion of the populace, stumbling, leering, half apologising, & yet triumphantly insisting upon the right to inflict their woe, one ambled & nodded & grinned past him, in the each inflicting his own hideous scar, & sapped each his inflicting his <inflicting a> hopeless sorrow." Notebook I, 115.

All of the keywords of Woolf's horror are contained in these scarred notebook pages, including the "blood red eyelids" of "A Sketch"'s "red-rimmed" eyes of the idiot boy.

46. J. Hillis Miller, "Mrs. Dalloway: Repetition as the Raising of the Dead" [1970], in *Critical Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Morris Beja (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985), 65.

47. Woolf's self-described "looking glass shame," stemming from her sexual abuse by her half-brother, includes a dream "that I was looking in a glass when a horrible face—the face of an animal—suddenly showed over my shoulder" ("SP" 69).