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ON BEING ILL

with

NOTES FROM SICK ROOMS

INTRODUCTION

ON BEING ILL, one of Virginia Woolf's most daring, strange, and original essays, has more subjects than its title suggests. Like the clouds which its sick watcher, "lying recumbent," sees changing shapes and ringing curtains up and down, this is a shape-changing essay, unpredictably metamorphosing through different performances. It "treats" not only illness, but language, religion, sympathy, solitude, and reading. Close to its surface are thoughts on madness, suicide, and the afterlife. For good measure, it throws in dentists, American literature, electricity, an organ grinder and a giant tortoise, the cinema, the coming ice age, worms, snakes and mice, Chinese readers of Shakespeare, housemaids' brooms swimming down the River Solent, and the entire life-story of the third Marchioness of Waterford. And, hiding behind the essay, is a love-affair, a literary quarrel, and a great novel in the making. This net or web (one of the key images here) of subjects comes together in an essay which is at once autobiography, social satire, literary analysis,

and an experiment in image-making. By its sleight-of-hand and playfulness, and its appearance of having all the "space and leisure" in the world for allusion and deviation, it gallantly makes light of dark and painful experiences.

Illness is one of the main stories of Virginia Woolf's life.[1] The breakdowns and suicide attempts in her early years, which can be read as evidence of manic depression (though that diagnosis has also been hotly contested) led, in the thirty years of her adult writing life, to persistent, periodical illnesses, in which mental and physical symptoms seemed inextricably entwined. In her fictional versions of illness, there is an overlap between her accounts of the delirium of raging fever (Rachel in *The Voyage Out*), the terrors of deep depression (Rhoda in *The Waves*), and the hallucinations and euphoria of suicidal mania (Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*). All her life, severe physical symptoms—fevers, faints, headaches, jumping pulse, insomnia—signalled and accompanied phases of agitation or depression. In her most severe phases, she hardly ate, and shed weight frighteningly. Terrible headaches marked the onset of illness or exhaustion. The link she makes in the essay between "fever" and "melancholia" was

well known to her. Her jumping pulse and high temperatures, which could last for weeks, were diagnosed as "influenza"; in 1923, the presence of "pneumonia microbes" was detected. At the beginning of 1922, these symptoms got so bad that she consulted a heart specialist who diagnosed a "tired" heart or heart murmur. Teeth-pulling (unbelievably) was recommended as a cure for persistent high temperature—and also for "neurasthenia." (So the visit to the dentist in *On Being Ill* is not a change of subject.) It seems possible, though unprovable, that she might have had some chronic febrile or tubercular illness. It may also be possible that the drugs she was taking, for both her physical and mental symptoms, exacerbated her poor health. "That mighty Prince" "Chloral" is one of the ruling powers in *On Being Ill*. (The other, less sinister, presiding deities—as opposed to the God of the Bishops—are "Wisest Fate" and "Nature.") Chloral was one of the sedatives she was regularly given, alongside digitalis and veronal, sometimes mixed with potassium bromide—which could have affected her mental state adversely. With the drugs went a regime of restraint: avoidance of "over-excitement," rest cures, milk and meat diets, no work allowed. All her life,

she had to do battle with tormenting, terrifying mental states, agonising and debilitating physical symptoms, and infuriating restrictions. But, in her writings about illness—as here—there is also a repeated emphasis on its creative and liberating effects. "I believe these illnesses are in my case—how shall I express it?—partly mystical. Something happens in my mind."[2] *On Being Ill* tracks that "something" in the "undiscovered countries," the "virgin forest," of the experience of the solitary invalid.

The immediate story behind the writing of *On Being Ill* begins with Virginia Woolf falling down in a faint at a party at her sister's house in Charleston on August 19th, 1925. The summer had been going swimmingly up till then. *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Common Reader* were published earlier in the year, and whenever she "registered" her books' "temperature" they seemed to be doing well. She was full of ideas for starting her next novel, *To the Lighthouse*, and she was at the most intimate stage of her absorbing, seductive relationship with Vita Sackville-West. But then, "why couldn't I see or feel that all this time I was getting a little used up & riding on a flat tire?"[3] The faint led to months

and months of illness, and her letters and diary, from September till the New Year (when no sooner did she start to get better than she contracted German measles) are full of frustration and distress. "Have lain about here, in that odd amphibious life of headache..." "I cant talk yet without getting these infernal pains in my head, or astonishingly incongruous dreams." "I am writing this partly to test my poor bunch of nerves at the back of my neck...." "Comatose with headaches. Cant write (with a whole novel in my head too—its damnable)." "The Dr has sent me to bed: all writing forbidden." "Can't make the Dr. say when I can get up, when go away, or anything." "I feel as if a vulture sat on a bough above my head, threatening to descend and peck at my spine, but by blandishments I turn him into a kind red cock." "Not very happy; too much discomfort; sickness...a good deal of rat-gnawing at the back of my head; one or two terrors; then the tiredness of the body—it lay like a workman's coat."[4]

During these slow months, two friendships were changing shape. Vita Sackville-West was tender and affectionate to Virginia Woolf in her illness, and making herself more valuable by the threat of

absence: her husband, Harold Nicolson, was being posted by the Foreign Office to Persia; Vita would be off, from Kent to Teheran. (The 1926 version of *On Being Ill* made a private joke—later cut out—about how, in an imaginary heaven, we can choose to live quite different lives, "in Teheran and Tunbridge Wells.") Their letters became more intimate, and Woolf noted in her diary that "The best of these illnesses is that they loosen the earth about the roots. They make changes. People express their affection."[5] Just so, in *On Being Ill*, "illness often takes on the disguise of love..." wreathing "the faces of the absent...with a new significance" and creating "a childish outspokenness." That longing for the absent loved one, and the desire to call out for her, would make its way into *To the Lighthouse*. *On Being Ill* anticipates the novel in other ways too: her joke about the mind in its "philosopher's turret" prepares for Mr. Ramsay, and the essay's frequent images of water, waves, and sea-journeys spill over into the novel. In illness, she says in the essay, "the whole landscape of life lies remote and fair, like the shore seen from a ship far out at sea." Cam, in the boat going to the lighthouse, will echo this: "All looked distant and peaceful and strange. The shore

seemed refined, far away, unreal. Already the little distance they had sailed had put them far from it and given it the changed look, the composed look, of something receding in which one has no longer any part." Absence and distance are themes in both essay and novel.

The other changing friendship of 1925 was more of an irritant; but the essay would not have been written without it. In the 1920's, the Woolfs and their Hogarth Press had become closely involved with T. S. Eliot. They published his *Poems* in 1919 and *The Waste Land* in 1922; he published a story of Woolf's in his magazine, the *Criterion*, also in 1922. He praised, and published, her essay "Character in Fiction" in 1924; The Hogarth Press published his essays on Dryden, Marvell, and the Metaphysical Poets alongside her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" in the Hogarth Essays; and she tried to help him to the literary editorship of the *Nation* (which in the end Leonard Woolf took on instead). All this literary reciprocity and mutual assistance ran into difficulties when Eliot, in 1925, became a rival publisher at Faber & Gwyer, stole one of the Woolfs' authors, and reprinted *The Waste Land* without warning

them. "Tom has treated us scurvily."[6] It was the beginning of her frequent criticisms of him for slyness, ruthlessness, and creepy egotism. And it was a difficult moment for him to be commissioning an essay from her for his revamped *New Criterion*, an invitation which she accepted in flattering terms ("Of course I should think it an honour to figure in your first number")[7] but was late in sending ("Dear Sir," she wrote half-jokingly, "I am sending my essay tomorrow, Saturday morning, so that I hope it will reach you in time. I am sorry to have delayed, but I have been working under difficulties").[8] His response to *On Being Ill* was unenthusiastic, and, characteristically, this threw her into a state of depression and anxiety: "I saw wordiness, feebleness, & all the vices in it. This increases my distaste for my own writing, & dejection at the thought of beginning another novel."[9] Does Lily Briscoe's anger at Charles Tansley's criticism in *To the Lighthouse* ("Women can't paint, can't write") partly find its inspiration here?

Eliot's publication of *On Being Ill* in the *New Criterion* for January 1926 was the first of several outings for the essay. It took its place here in a high-minded quarterly publication which Eliot said, in

his preface ("The Idea of a Literary Review") to the first issue, was intended to be "an organ of documentation" of "the development of the keenest sensibility and the clearest thought of ten years," formed on "the interests of any intelligent person with literary taste."[10] *On Being Ill* rubbed shoulders with a story by Aldous Huxley, an instalment of Lawrence's "The Woman Who Rode Away," a baffling piece of Gertrude Stein's ("The Fifteenth of November"), an essay by Cocteau, a reminiscence of Oscar Wilde by Ada Leverson, reviews of the latest arts news in London, Europe, and New York, a round up of foreign quarterlies, and analytical pieces on subjects such as "Aristotle on Democracy and Socialism."

Friends praised *On Being Ill*, and Leonard particularly admired it. The Woolfs made sure that the essay had a life outside Eliot's pages. As a result, it has gone through as many shape-shifts as the clouds it describes. In April 1926, a shortened version was published in a New York magazine (edited by Henry Goddard Leach), *The Forum*, under the title "Illness: An Unexploited Mine." This was a much more glossy, middle-brow setting, with many more "issues" under discussion ("Is Democracy Doomed?

A Debate"; "A Plea for Psychical Research"; "Farming the Ocean"; "The Problem of Anti-Semitism"), some rousing documentaries ("Horse Bandits and Opium"; "To the North Pole by Airship" by Fridjof Nansen), illustrations, and light fiction ("And No Questions Asked!" a short story by Viola Paradise, all in dialogue). Contributors were introduced with brief biographical notes, called "Toasts": "From the appearance of her first book... Mrs. Woolf has been the centre of great literary interest... Gradually the public has followed the lead of the critics, and her latest novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, was widely acclaimed... The little essay with which she makes her debut in *The Forum* reveals her in a quietly contemplative mood."[11] This version of *On Being Ill* ended with the remark about the Chinese readers of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and cut the last passages on Shakespeare and Hare.[12]

In July 1930, Virginia Woolf typeset a new edition of 250 copies of *On Being Ill* for a Hogarth Press pamphlet. She signed each copy, exaggerating in her diary the labour of sitting in front of "the handmade paper on wh. I have to sign my name 600 times."[13] Vanessa Bell designed an appealing new

jacket. It was an attractive publication, if not a perfect one, as this mock-apology of Woolf's, written in case of criticism, but not sent, makes clear:

> As one of the guilty parties I bow to your strictures upon the printing of On Being Ill. I agree that the colour is uneven, the letters not always clear, the spacing inaccurate, and the word 'campion' should read 'companion'.
>
> All I have to urge in excuse is that printing is a hobby carried on in the basement of a London house; that as amateurs all instruction in the art was denied us; that we have picked up what we know for ourselves; and that we practise printing in the intervals of lives that are otherwise engaged. In spite of all this, I believe that you can already sell your copy for more than the guinea you gave, as the edition is largely over subscribed, so that though we have not satisfied your taste, we hope that we have not robbed your purse.[14]

For this edition, Woolf made all kinds of small changes from the 1926 *New Criterion* version. She cut a mocking passage, from the section on the Bishop and the believers, about the need for the Bishop to have a new motor car—"but this Heaven

making needs no motor cars; it needs time and concentration"—perhaps because it felt out-of-date. She tinkered considerably, too, with the wording about lines of poetry which speak to us in illness, cutting phrases about words which "spread their bright wings, swim like coloured fish in green waters," words which "ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow." It's as if, on re-reading, this eloquent, mysterious passage seemed too fanciful to her. Most revealingly, she cut a whole section in the passage about reading Shakespeare without intermediaries, on how re-reading *Hamlet* is to re-read one's own youth: "Thus forced always to look back or sidelong at his own past the critic sees something moving or vanishing in *Hamlet*, as in a glass one sees the reflection of oneself." This, she may have felt, was too self-revealing to keep.

After Virginia Woolf's death, Leonard Woolf reprinted the 1930 version of the essay twice, once in *The Moment and Other Essays* (1947) and again in the fourth volume of *Collected Essays* (1967), where he inaccurately gave its first publication date as 1930, perhaps as a way of wiping out Eliot's earlier connection to the essay altogether. Since then, the successive versions of the essay are being reprinted

in Andrew McNeillie's edition of Virginia Woolf's essays. That this magnificent, fully annotated edition only began publication in 1986 is a mark of how complicated and mixed the posthumous life of Woolf's essays has been. It has taken a long time for them to be read for their own sake, and for attention to be paid to their literary strategies and thought-processes.[15] Recent critical readings of the essays' tactics of apparent looseness and spontaneity, of interruptive open-endedness and refusal of authority, have looked especially closely at those which refuse categorisation and slip across and between genres—not manifesto, or literary criticism, or feminist argument, or meditation on life, or fiction or biography or history or autobiography, but a curious, original mixture of all these: essays such as "Street Haunting," "Thunder at Wembley," "Evening Over Sussex," "Hours in a Library," "On Not Knowing Greek," "The Sun and the Fish," "How Should One Read a Book?"—and *On Being Ill*. And this essay has, in recent years, gained another kind of recognition in a burgeoning literature of pathology, cited on medical websites alongside books like Anne Hawkins's *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* (1993), Arthur

Frank's *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (1995), Thomas Couser's *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* (1997), and Oliver Sacks's *A Leg to Stand On* (1994).

Eliot's lukewarm reception of *On Being Ill* is understandable when its quirky, wilful, inconsequential musings are set against his much more austere, authoritative, and classical essay-writing. He preferred impersonality and logical argument. But Woolf deliberately modelled her essay-writing on the Romantic essayists, Hazlitt, Lamb, De Quincey, Coleridge, who are all involved with *On Being Ill*. The title echoes Hazlitt—"On Going a Journey," "On the Fear of Death." (It's a joke, too, about how often that kind of title gets recycled: in an earlier essay on "Melodious Meditations," she teases American essayists for using titles like "Old Age" and "On Being Ill.")[16] Coleridge's writing on Shakespeare appears, if only as a faint mouse-squeak. Charles Lamb's essays and letters, always great favourites, are in her mind just at this time: she writes a letter on September 18th, 1925, to her friend Janet Case, praising Lamb's dashing and brilliant style, and she quotes one of his letters in the essay. De Quincey, whom she cites as one of the few

writers on illness, will be her next subject for a major essay ("Impassioned Prose"), and her first lavishly cumulative sentence is highly De Quincean (as are her fantasies about cloud-scapes and her insistence on our need for solitude). Like these Romantic essayists, she allows herself deviations and divagations, though she is more guarded about herself than they are, more anxious to conceal her personal experience. But, like them, she uses an intimate, inconsequential speaking voice which makes the essay read like a form of conversation. Her fantasy, in *On Being Ill*, of a secular, literary after-life consisting of gossip, conversation, and play-acting, is enacted in the tone of the essay itself. "I am very glad you liked my article—" she wrote to a friend about the essay in February 1926. "I was afraid that, writing in bed, and forced to write quickly by the inexorable Tom Eliot I had used too many words."[17] "Writing in bed" has produced an idiosyncratic, prolix, recumbent literature—the opposite of "inexorable"—at once romantic and modern, with a point of view derived from gazing up at the clouds and looking sideways on to the world. Illness and writing are netted together from the very start of the essay.

Why has illness not been as popular a subject for literature as love, she asks? Why has the "daily drama of the body" not been recognised? Why does literature always insist on separating the mind, or the soul, from the body? Perhaps because the public would never accept illness as a subject for fiction; perhaps because illness requires a new language—"more primitive, more sensual, more obscene." (In the manuscript of the essay, she had "brutal" for "primitive.") But illness is almost impossible to communicate. The invalid's demand for sympathy can never be met. People at once start complaining about their own condition. And, apart from a few (female) eccentrics and misfits (colourfully and rapidly invoked), the world can't afford regular sympathy: it would take up the whole working day. Besides, illness really prefers solitude. "Here we go alone, and like it better so." The ill have dropped out of the army of workers and become deserters. This gives them time to do things normal people can't do, like looking at the clouds or the flowers. And what they find comforting about clouds and flowers is not their sympathy, but their indifference. The ill, unlike the "army of the upright," recognise Nature's indifference; they know Nature is going to

win in the end, when ice will bury the world. What consolation is there for that thought? Organised religion? The idea of Heaven? An alternative, secular idea of Heaven, as invented by the poets? And poets (she jumps lightly on) are what we need when ill, not prose writers. "In illness words seem to possess a mystic quality." We are attracted to intense lines and phrases, to the incomprehensible, to the texture of sounds. We make rash readings without critical intermediaries, for instance, of Shakespeare. And if we have enough of him, we can read some trash like Augustus Hare's life of two nineteenth-century aristocratic ladies, which gives us a rush of scenes and stories.

This loose improvisation is netted together by a complex pattern of images, drawing on water, air, earth, and fire, desert wastes and mountain peaks, deep forests and vast seas, clouds, birds, leaves and flowers, as though through illness a whole alternative universe is created. Intensely physical, the writing insists on the body, like a pane of glass, as the transmitter of all experience. The body is monster and hero, animal and mystic, above all actor, in an essay so much about play-acting and scene-making. (Her "cinema" of cloud-scapes, playing

"perpetually to an empty house," anticipates a fascinated essay on "The Cinema," published a few months later.)

As the images cohere, a satire on conformity begins to make itself felt. The ill are the deserters, the refuseniks. They won't accept the "co-operative" conventions. They blurt things out. They turn sympathisers away. They won't go to work. They lie down. They waste time. They fantasise. They don't go to Church or believe in Heaven. They refuse to read responsibly or to make sense of what they read. They are attracted to nonsense, sensation, and rashness.[18] On the other side of the glass is "the army of the upright," harnessing energy, driving motor cars, going to work and to church, communicating and civilising. Her prototypes for these good citizens, snatched rather wildly from the newspapers she happens to be reading at the time, are the Bishop of Lichfield, and Samuel Insull, who, before his collapse and disgrace in the Depression years, was co-founder, with Edison, of the General Electric Company, head of the Chicago empire of utility and transportation companies, and the bringer of electrification to "the cities of the Middle West": a wonderful embodiment of productive energy.

Reading in bed, reading when ill—like "writing in bed"—is, it's suggested, a form of deviancy. The theme of rash reading, making one's own "notes in the margin," seems also to allow for rash writing, writing with the apparent wilful inconsequentiality and inconclusiveness of this essay. Since it is as much about reading and writing as it is about illness, this is a very literary essay, full of quotations and allusions. But these are not just decorative tributes to the Romantic essayists, or to Shakespeare. Like her argument, her quotations are not as random as they look. She quotes from Milton's *Comus* ("and oft at eve/Visits the herds along the twilight meadows") part of the description of the goddess Sabrina (just before the invocation that haunts Rachel, in *The Voyage Out*, as she is falling ill), who is implored to help the imprisoned Lady. She quotes from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* Asia's recounting of her dream of clouds "wandering in thick flocks along the mountains," as a voice ("low, sweet, faint sounds, like the farewell of ghosts") calls "O follow, follow, follow me." She quotes from an agonised letter of Lamb's, wanting to kill the snake of time, and speaking of his loneliness, desolation, and inertia: "The mind preys on itself...I pity you for

overwork; but I assure you, no work is worse." She quotes from Rimbaud's poem "O saisons o châteaux" which made its way into his *Une Saison en Enfer*, as one of his examples of "verbal hallucinations." It ends with the phrase "l'heure du trépas," "the hour of death." She alludes to Shakespeare's tragedies, especially *Hamlet*. (I read *Hamlet* last night, she wrote to Vita on 23 September, three weeks after agreeing to write *On Being Ill*.)[19] *Hamlet* is in the essay from the beginning, in her reference to the "undiscovered countries" of illness, and in the phrase "shuffled off" (used of sympathy). "To be or not to be" is lurking in the margins. *Antony and Cleopatra* is there too, in her passage on the shape-shifting of the clouds, echoing Antony's speech to Eros about how the clouds unselve themselves, as he is about to do: "That which is now a horse, even with a thought/The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct/As water is in water."

All these literary echoes point the same way. *Comus*, *Prometheus Unbound*, Lamb's letter, Rimbaud, all have to do with pleas or longing for escape, struggles with a hell of human anguish and depression. The main Shakespearean allusions are both about suicide: Hamlet is contemplating it, Antony is

about to commit it. Would Christian faith, she asks suddenly, give its believers enough conviction "to leap straight into Heaven off Beachy Head?" (a well-known suicide spot). Under its playful surface, there is a muffled, anguished debate going on about whether illness can take one so far out to sea, so high up the mountain peak (like Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*), so apart from "normality," that suicide might seem the only escape.

The last section of the essay (cut from *The Forum*'s version) seems, at first sight, a peculiar coda. Why are we being treated to a potted version of a minor nineteenth-century historian's life of two unknown aristocratic ladies, jumbled comically together in the manner Woolf favours for her essays on "eccentrics" and "obscure lives"? Like so many of her essays on women ("Geraldine and Jane," "Miss Ormerod," "Mary Wollstonecraft," *A Room of One's Own*), this tells the story of a gifted woman suppressed and imprisoned by her circumstances. (And, for all its scatty, glancing manner, it reproduces in accurate detail Hare's account of the lives of Countess Canning and Lady Waterford.) Yet it still seems a rather random example of desultory reading, until we get to the last image, of the widowed

Lady Waterford, who "crushed together" the plush curtain "in her agony" as she watches her husband's body being taken to his grave.[20] This makes a startling echo of the sick person who, earlier in the essay, has to take his pain in one hand and "a lump of pure sound" in the other and "crush them together" to produce a "brand new word."

"Crushing together" is an action produced by agony. And, both for the invalid mastering illness through language, and the "great lady" mastering her grief, it is an image of fierce courage. "To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer." ("Of ten thousand lion tamers,—for these lions are within us not without.") Virginia Woolf does not write explicitly about herself; as in almost all her essays, she does not say "I" ("tyrannical 'I'"), but "we," "one," "us." Yet the essay is a demonstration of her heroic powers of endurance and courage, her lack of self-pity, and the use she made of her physical and mental suffering, every bit as productive as Mr. Insull: how she put them to work, and transformed them into a new kind of writing.

HERMIONE LEE
APRIL 15, 2002

NOTES

1. For a fuller account of this, see my *Virginia Woolf*, Chatto & Windus, 1996, Ch. 10. N.B. also Thomas Caramagno, *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf's Art and Manic-Depressive Illness*, University of California Press, 1992, 13, on how "anxiety-depression can mimic many diseases or disorders," and quoting Emil Kraepelin on the frequency of headaches in manic-depressive patients.

2. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, assisted by Andrew McNeillie, The Hogarth Press, 1980 [*Diary*], 16 February 1930, III, 287.

3. *Diary*, 5 September 1925, III, 38.

4. *Diary*, 5 September 1925, III, 38; Letter to Vita Sackville-West [VSW], 7 September 1925, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson, assist. ed. Joanne Trautmann, The Hogarth Press, 1977 [*Letters*], III, 205; *Diary*, 14 September 1925, III, 40; Letter to Roger Fry, 16 September 1925, *Letters*, III, 208; Letter to VSW, 13 October 1925, *Letters*, III, 217; Letter to VSW, 26? October 1925, *Letters*, III, 218; Letter to VSW, 16 November 1925, *Letters*, III, 221; *Diary*, 27 November 1925, III, 46.

5. *Diary*, 27 November 1925, III, 47.

6. *Diary*, 14 September 1925, III, 41.

7. Letter to T. S. Eliot, 3 [should be 8] September 1925, *Letters*, III, 203.

8. Letter to T. S. Eliot, 13 November 1925, *Letters*, III, 220.

9. *Diary*, 7 December 1925, III, 49.

10. T. S. Eliot, "The Idea of a Literary Review," Preface, *New Criterion*, IV (January 1925-1926), Faber & Gwyer.

11. *The Forum*, Vol. LXXV, No. 4, April 1926.

12. It made three other significant alterations. The list of diseases that

ought to be a fit subject for literature included "Appendicitis and Cancer." The need to have "the courage of a lion tamer" to look illness in the face went on: "of ten thousand lion tamers,—for these lions are within us not without." And the names of the alternative lives we might live as "William or Alice" became (linking it with an earlier passage), "Mrs. Jones or Mr. Smith."

13. *Diary*, 2 September 1930, III, 315.

14. VW to "Anon," 10 December 1930, *Letters*, IV, 260. See John H. Willis, Jr., *Leonard and Virginia Woolf as Publishers: The Hogarth Press, 1917-41*, University Press of Virginia, 1992, 34.

15. See *Virginia Woolf and the Essay*, eds. Beth Carole Rosenberg and Jeanne Dubino, St. Martin's Press, 1997; Juliet Dusinberre, *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance*, Macmillan, 1997.

16. "Melodious Meditations," 1917, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* [*Essays*], ed. Andrew McNeillie, The Hogarth Press, 1987, Vol. II, 80.

17. Letter to Edward Sackville-West, 6 February 1926, *Letters*, III, 239-240.

18. Cf. "In order to read poetry rightly, one must be in a rash, an extreme, a generous state of mind." "How Should One Read a Book?" given as a lecture on 26 January 1926 (in the same month as the publication of *On Being Ill*). *Essays*, III, 395.

19. Letter to Vita Sackville-West, 23 September 1925, *Letters*, III, 215.

20. Here she improves on her source, which has a "window blind" rather than a plush curtain: "This blind told me of her intense suffering, for there was the clutch of her fingers, as they wrinkled the surface in her anguish. There was writing in the folds caused by her squeeze that told more than words could of the heart's despair." Augustus Hare, *The Story of Two Noble Lives. Being Memorials of Charlotte, Countess Canning, and Louisa, Marchioness of Waterford*, London, George Allen, 1893, Vol. III, 23-24.

ON BEING ILL

Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us by the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist's arm-chair and confuse his "Rinse the mouth—rinse the mouth" with the greeting of the Deity stooping from the floor of Heaven to welcome us—when we think of this, as we are so frequently forced to think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and

jealousy among the prime themes of literature. Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia; lyrics to toothache. But no; with a few exceptions—De Quincey attempted something of the sort in *The Opium Eater*; there must be a volume or two about disease scattered through the pages of Proust—literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, and negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. The creature within can only gaze through the pane—smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant; it

must go through the whole unending procession of changes, heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness, until there comes the inevitable catastrophe; the body smashes itself to smithereens, and the soul (it is said) escapes. But of all this daily drama of the body there is no record. People write always of the doings of the mind; the thoughts that come to it; its noble plans; how the mind has civilised the universe. They show it ignoring the body in the philosopher's turret; or kicking the body, like an old leather football, across leagues of snow and desert in the pursuit of conquest or discovery. Those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia, are neglected. Nor is the reason far to seek. To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer; a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth.

Short of these, this monster, the body, this miracle, its pain, will soon make us taper into mysticism, or rise, with rapid beats of the wings, into the raptures of transcendentalism. The public would say that a novel devoted to influenza lacked plot; they would complain that there was no love in it—wrongly however, for illness often takes on the disguise of love, and plays the same odd tricks. It invests certain faces with divinity, sets us to wait, hour after hour, with pricked ears for the creaking of a stair, and wreathes the faces of the absent (plain enough in health, Heaven knows) with a new significance, while the mind concocts a thousand legends and romances about them for which it has neither time nor taste in health. Finally, to hinder the description of illness in literature, there 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. Probably it will be something laughable. For who of English birth can take liberties with the language? To us it is a sacred thing and therefore doomed to die, unless the Americans, whose genius is so much happier in the making of new words than in the disposition of the old, will come to our help and set the springs aflow. Yet it is not only a new language that we need, more primitive, more sensual, more obscene, but a new hierarchy of the passions; love must be deposed in favour of a temperature of 104; jealousy give place to the pangs of sciatica; sleeplessness play

the part of villain, and the hero become a white liquid with a sweet taste—that mighty Prince with the moths' eyes and the feathered feet, one of whose names is Chloral.

But to return to the invalid. "I am in bed with influenza"—but what does that convey of the great experience; how the world has changed its shape; the tools of business grown remote; the sounds of festival become romantic like a merry-go-round heard across far fields; and friends have changed, some putting on a strange beauty, others deformed to the squatness of toads, while the whole landscape of life lies remote and fair, like the shore seen from a ship far out at sea, and he is now exalted on a peak and needs no help from man or God, and now grovels supine on the floor glad of a kick from a housemaid—the experience cannot be imparted and, as is always the way with these dumb things, his own suffering serves but to wake memories in his friends' minds of *their* influenzas, *their* aches and pains

which went unwept last February, and now cry aloud, desperately, clamorously, for the divine relief of sympathy.

But sympathy we cannot have. Wisest Fate says no. If her children, weighted as they already are with sorrow, were to take on them that burden too, adding in imagination other pains to their own, buildings would cease to rise; roads would peter out into grassy tracks; there would be an end of music and of painting; one great sigh alone would rise to Heaven, and the only attitudes for men and women would be those of horror and despair. As it is, there is always some little distraction—an organ grinder at the corner of the hospital, a shop with book or trinket to decoy one past the prison or the workhouse, some absurdity of cat or dog to prevent one from turning the old beggar's hieroglyphic of misery into volumes of sordid suffering; and thus the vast effort of sympathy which those barracks of pain and discipline, those dried symbols of

sorrow, ask us to exert on their behalf, is uneasily shuffled off for another time. Sympathy nowadays is dispensed chiefly by the laggards and failures, women for the most part (in whom the obsolete exists so strangely side by side with anarchy and newness), who, having dropped out of the race, have time to spend upon fantastic and unprofitable excursions; C. L. for example, who, sitting by the stale sickroom fire, builds up, with touches at once sober and imaginative, the nursery fender, the loaf, the lamp, barrel organs in the street, and all the simple old wives' tales of pinafores and escapades; A. R., the rash, the magnanimous, who, if you fancied a giant tortoise to solace you or theorbo to cheer you, would ransack the markets of London and procure them somehow, wrapped in paper, before the end of the day; the frivolous K. T., who, dressed in silks and feathers, powdered and painted (which takes time too) as if for a banquet of Kings and Queens, spends her whole brightness in the

gloom of the sick room, and makes the medicine bottles ring and the flames shoot up with her gossip and her mimicry. But such follies have had their day; civilisation points to a different goal; and then what place will there be for the tortoise and the theorbo?

There is, let us confess it (and illness is the great confessional), a childish outspokenness in illness; things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals. About sympathy for example—we can do without it. That illusion of a world so shaped that it echoes every groan, of human beings so tied together by common needs and fears that a twitch at one wrist jerks another, where however strange your experience other people have had it too, where however far you travel in your own mind someone has been there before you—is all an illusion. We do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others. Human beings do not go hand in hand the whole stretch of the way. There is a virgin

forest in each; a snowfield where even the print of birds' feet is unknown. Here we go alone, and like it better so. Always to have sympathy, always to be accompanied, always to be understood would be intolerable. But in health the genial pretense must be kept up and the effort renewed—to communicate, to civilise, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work together by day and by night to sport. In illness this make-believe ceases. Directly the bed is called for, or, sunk deep among pillows in one chair, we raise our feet even an inch above the ground on another, we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters. They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream; helter-skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time for years, to look round, to look up—to look, for example, at the sky.

The first impression of that extraordinary spectacle is strangely overcoming. Ordinarily

to look at the sky for any length of time is impossible. Pedestrians would be impeded and disconcerted by a public sky-gazer. What snatches we get of it are mutilated by chimneys and churches, serve as a background for man, signify wet weather or fine, daub windows gold, and, filling in the branches, complete the pathos of dishevelled autumnal plane trees in autumnal squares. Now, lying recumbent, staring straight up, the sky is discovered to be something so different from this that really it is a little shocking. This then has been going on all the time without our knowing it!—this incessant making up of shapes and casting them down, this buffeting of clouds together, and drawing vast trains of ships and waggons from North to South, this incessant ringing up and down of curtains of light and shade, this interminable experiment with gold shafts and blue shadows, with veiling the sun and unveiling it, with making rock ramparts and wafting them away—this endless activity, with

the waste of Heaven knows how many million horse power of energy, has been left to work its will year in year out. The fact seems to call for comment and indeed for censure. Ought not some one to write to *The Times*? Use should be made of it. One should not let this gigantic cinema play perpetually to an empty house. But watch a little longer and another emotion drowns the stirrings of civic ardour. Divinely beautiful it is also divinely heartless. Immeasurable resources are used for some purpose which has nothing to do with human pleasure or human profit. If we were all laid prone, stiff, still the sky would be experimenting with its blues and its golds. Perhaps then, if we look down at something very small and close and familiar, we shall find sympathy. Let us examine the rose. We have seen it so often flowering in bowls, connected it so often with beauty in its prime, that we have forgotten how it stands, still and steady, throughout an entire afternoon in the earth. It preserves a demeanour

of perfect dignity and self-possession. The suffusion of its petals is of inimitable rightness. Now perhaps one deliberately falls; now all the flowers, the voluptuous purple, the creamy, in whose waxen flesh the spoon has left a swirl of cherry juice; gladioli; dahlias; lilies, sacerdotal, ecclesiastical; flowers with prim cardboard collars tinged apricot and amber, all gently incline their heads to the breeze—all, with the exception of the heavy sunflower, who proudly acknowledges the sun at midday and perhaps at midnight rebuffs the moon. There they stand; and it is of these, the stillest, the most self-sufficient of all things that human beings have made companions; these that symbolise their passions, decorate their festivals, and lie (as if *they* knew sorrow) upon the pillows of the dead. Wonderful to relate, poets have found religion in nature; people live in the country to learn virtue from plants. It is in their indifference that they are comforting. That snowfield of the mind, where man has not

trodden, is visited by the cloud, kissed by the falling petal, as, in another sphere, it is the great artists, the Miltons and the Popes, who console not by their thought of us but by their forgetfulness.

Meanwhile, with the heroism of the ant or the bee, however indifferent the sky or disdainful the flowers, the army of the upright marches to battle. Mrs. Jones catches her train. Mr. Smith mends his motor. The cows are driven home to be milked. Men thatch the roof. The dogs bark. The rooks, rising in a net, fall in a net upon the elm trees. The wave of life flings itself out indefatigably. It is only the recumbent who know what, after all, Nature is at no pains to conceal—that she in the end will conquer; heat will leave the world; stiff with frost we shall cease to drag ourselves about the fields; ice will lie thick upon factory and engine; the sun will go out. Even so, when the whole earth is sheeted and slippery, some undulation, some irregularity of surface will

mark the boundary of an ancient garden, and there, thrusting its head up undaunted in the starlight, the rose will flower, the crocus will burn. But with the hook of life still in us still we must wriggle. We cannot stiffen peaceably into glassy mounds. Even the recumbent spring up at the mere imagination of frost about the toes and stretch out to avail themselves of the universal hope—Heaven, Immortality. Surely, since men have been wishing all these ages, they will have wished something into existence; there will be some green isle for the mind to rest on even if the foot cannot plant itself there. The co-operative imagination of mankind must have drawn some firm outline. But no. One opens the *Morning Post* and reads the Bishop of Lichfield on Heaven. One watches the church-goers file into those gallant temples where, on the bleakest day, in the wettest fields, lamps will be burning, bells will be ringing, and however the autumn leaves may shuffle and the winds sigh

outside, hopes and desires will be changed to beliefs and certainties within. Do they look serene? Are their eyes filled with the light of their supreme conviction? Would one of them dare leap straight into Heaven off Beachy Head? None but a simpleton would ask such questions; the little company of believers lags and drags and strays. The mother is worn; the father tired. As for imagining Heaven, they have no time. Heaven-making must be left to the imagination of the poets. Without their help we can but trifle—imagine Pepys in Heaven, adumbrate little interviews with celebrated people on tufts of thyme, soon fall into gossip about such of our friends as have stayed in Hell, or, worse still, revert again to earth and choose, since there is no harm in choosing, to live over and over, now as man, now as woman, as sea-captain, or court lady, as Emperor or farmer's wife, in splendid cities and on remote moors, at the time of Pericles or Arthur, Charlemagne, or George the Fourth—

to live and live till we have lived out those embryo lives which attend about us in early youth until "I" suppressed them. But "I" shall not, if wishing can alter it, usurp Heaven too, and condemn us, who have played our parts here as William or Alice to remain William or Alice for ever. Left to ourselves we speculate thus carnally. We need the poets to imagine for us. The duty of Heaven-making should be attached to the office of the Poet Laureate.

Indeed it is to the poets that we turn. Illness makes us disinclined for the long campaigns that prose exacts. We cannot command all our faculties and keep our reason and our judgment and our memory at attention while chapter swings on top of chapter, and, as one settles into place, we must be on the watch for the coming of the next, until the whole structure—arches, towers, and battlements—stands firm on its foundations. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is not the book for influenza, nor *The Golden Bowl* nor *Madame*

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

and oft at eve
Visits the herds along the twilight meadows

wandering in thick flocks along the mountains
Shepherded by the slow unwilling wind.

Or there is a whole three volume novel to be mused over in a verse of Hardy's or a sentence of La Bruyère. We dip in Lamb's Letters—some prose writers are to be read as poets—and find "I am a sanguinary murderer of time, and would kill him inchmeal just now. But the snake is vital." and who shall explain the delight? or open Rimbaud and read

O saisons o châteaux
Quelle âme est sans défauts?

and who shall rationalise the charm? In illness words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other—a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause—which the poet, knowing words to be meagre in comparison with ideas, has strewn about his page to evoke, when collected, a state of mind which neither words can express nor the reason explain. 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.

Rashness is one of the properties of illness—outlaws that we are—and it is rashness that we need in reading Shakespeare. It is not that we should doze in reading him, but that, fully conscious and aware, his fame intimidates and bores, and all the views of all the critics dull in us that thunder clap of conviction which, if an illusion, is still so helpful an illusion, so prodigious a pleasure, so keen a stimulus in reading the great. Shakespeare is getting flyblown; a paternal government might well forbid writing about him, as they put his monument at Stratford beyond the reach of scribbling fingers. With all this buzz of criticism about, one may hazard one's conjectures privately, make one's notes in the margin; but,

knowing that someone has said it before, or said it better, the zest is gone. Illness, in its kingly sublimity, sweeps all that aside and leaves nothing but Shakespeare and oneself. What with his overweening power and our overweening arrogance, the barriers go down, the knots run smooth, the brain rings and resounds with *Lear* or *Macbeth*, and even Coleridge himself squeaks like a distant mouse.

But enough of Shakespeare—let us turn to Augustus Hare. There are people who say that even illness does not warrant these transitions; that the author of *The Story of Two Noble Lives* is not the peer of Boswell; and if we assert that short of the best in literature we like the worst—it is mediocrity that is hateful—will have none of that either. So be it. The law is on the side of the normal. But for those who suffer a slight rise of temperature the names of Hare and Waterford and Canning ray out as beams of benignant lustre. Not, it is true, for

the first hundred pages or so. There, as so often in these fat volumes, we flounder and threaten to sink in a plethora of aunts and uncles. We have to remind ourselves that there is such a thing as atmosphere; that the masters themselves often keep us waiting intolerably while they prepare our minds for whatever it may be—the surprise, or the lack of surprise. So Hare, too, takes his time; the charm steals upon us imperceptibly; by degrees we become almost one of the family, yet not quite, for our sense of the oddity of it all remains, and share the family dismay when Lord Stuart leaves the room—there was a ball going forward—and is next heard of in Iceland. Parties, he said, bored him—such were English aristocrats before marriage with intellect had adulterated the fine singularity of their minds. Parties bore them; they are off to Iceland. Then Beckford's mania for castle building attacked him; he must lift a French *château* across the Channel, and erect pinnacles and towers to use as

servants' bedrooms at vast expense, upon the borders of a crumbling cliff, too, so that the housemaids saw their brooms swimming down the Solent, and Lady Stuart was much distressed, but made the best of it and began, like the high-born lady that she was, planting evergreens in the face of ruin. Meanwhile the daughters, Charlotte and Louisa, grew up in their incomparable loveliness, with pencils in their hands, for ever sketching, dancing, flirting, in a cloud of gauze. They are not very distinct it is true. For life then was not the life of Charlotte and Louisa. It was the life of families, of groups. It was a web, a net, spreading wide and enmeshing every sort of cousin, dependant, and old retainer. Aunts—Aunt Caledon, Aunt Mexborough—grandmothers—Granny Stuart, Granny Hardwicke—cluster in chorus, and rejoice and sorrow and eat Christmas dinner together, and grow very old and remain very upright, and sit in hooded chairs cutting flowers it seems out of coloured

paper. Charlotte married Canning and went to India; Louisa married Lord Waterford and went to Ireland. Then letters begin to cross vast spaces in slow sailing ships and communication becomes still more protracted and verbose, and there seems no end to the space and the leisure of those early Victorian days, and faiths are lost and the life of Hedley Vicars revives them; aunts catch cold but recover; cousins marry; there are the Irish famine and the Indian Mutiny, and both sisters remain to their great, but silent, grief without children to come after them. Louisa, dumped down in Ireland with Lord Waterford at the hunt all day, was often very lonely; but she stuck to her post, visited the poor, spoke words of comfort ("I am sorry indeed to hear of Anthony Thompson's loss of mind, or rather of memory; if, however, he can understand sufficiently to trust solely in our Saviour, he has enough") and sketched and sketched. Thousands of notebooks were filled with pen

and ink drawings of an evening, and then the carpenter stretched sheets for her and she designed frescoes for schoolrooms, had live sheep into her bedroom, draped gamekeepers in blankets, painted Holy Families in abundance, until the great Watts exclaimed that here was Titian's peer and Raphael's master! At that Lady Waterford laughed (she had a generous, benignant sense of humour); and said that she was nothing but a sketcher; had scarcely had a lesson in her life—witness her angel's wings scandalously unfinished. Moreover, there was her father's house forever falling into the sea; she must shore it up; must entertain her friends; must fill her days with all sorts of charities, till her Lord came home from hunting, and then, at midnight often, she would sketch him with his knightly face half hidden in a bowl of soup, sitting with her sketch-book under a lamp beside him. Off he would ride again, stately as a crusader, to hunt the fox, and she would wave to him and think

each time, what if this should be the last? And so it was, that winter's morning; his horse stumbled; he was killed. She knew it before they told her, and never could Sir John Leslie forget, when he ran downstairs on the day of the burial, the beauty of the great lady standing to see the hearse depart, nor, when he came back, how the curtain, heavy, mid-Victorian, plush perhaps, was all crushed together where she had grasped it in her agony.