

## **Chapter Four**

### **‘Undiscovered Countries’ through Virginia Woolf’s *On Being Ill***

[T]his 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*.

-Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill*

*On Being Ill*, the 1926 essay by Virginia Woolf trace her solitary journey into the unknown and distant country of illness where the destination and map with the help of which she used to navigate before were no longer relevant<sup>1</sup>. This sudden distantiation from the “army of the upright”, from the ideology of health, transcends her to a whole new paradigm of being-in-the-world. Illness in her case not only exerts a tyranny of pain

---

<sup>1</sup> In illness, Judith Zaruch notes, “The destination and map I had used to navigate before were no longer useful” (qtd. in Frank 1:1)

## **‘Undiscovered Countries’ through Virginia Woolf’s On Being Ill**

---

and suffering but also a mode of reflection and seeing things in new light. Her life long battle with excruciating and debilitating psychosomatic illnesses is not something to which she succumbs but sublimates and sublimes those agonizing affects into creative and liberating effects. She often associates it with mystical qualities:

If I could stay in bed another fortnight (but there is no chance of that) I believe I should see the whole of ‘The Waves’.... I believe these illnesses are in my case—how shall I express it?— partly mystical. Something happens in my mind. It refuses to go registering impressions. It shuts itself up. It becomes a chrysalis. I lie quite torpid, often with acute physical pain— as last year; only discomfort this. Then something *springs*.<sup>2</sup>

Illness, according to Woolf, is a journey of a solitary mind accompanied by none. It is not a shared experience and does not follow “cooperative conventions”; firstly, because of the confinement it leads to and secondly, because of the failure of language to capture the emotion associated with it— “Here we go alone, and like it better so”, she writes (12). The healthy and normative continuum of being-with-the-world is challenged in illness exposing the very nudity of the self— a self which concomitantly becomes unipolar and concentrated. It is like “a whole current of life cut off”. This alienated being cut-off from the world is an important aspect of illness. Moreover, the binary between *normal* and *abnormal*, the politics of segregation and social hygiene, were enforced quite violently in Europe in the first half of twentieth-century. Modern medicine, at the same time, by shifting its focus from the sufferer to the disease itself, alienates the person who

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 150

### **‘Undiscovered Countries’ through Virginia Woolf’s *On Being Ill***

---

is suffering throwing her into a solitary incarceration. In modern medical discourse the *voice* of the sufferer remains unacknowledged and, quite often, the muteness of the sufferer mingles with the deafness of the healer. The alienating and dehumanizing gaze of modern medicine and the disjuncture that illness yields are represented metaphorically through this lonesome journey.

Illness diagnoses the very poverty of language when it comes to representing the pain and agony of suffering. Illness does not only resist formal language but destroys it completely, “deconstructing it into the pre-language of cries and groans”<sup>3</sup>. “English” Woolf points out, “which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no word for the shiver and the headache” (6). This gives opportunity for her to call for a new breed of bodily language which will be more grotesque and carnivalised— “more primitive, more sensual, more obscene”— breaking the polite discourse of formal language (7). Here in language the politics of *equilibrium* gives way to the politics of *excess*. Such ‘linguistic turn’ will only be able to capture the daily drama of the body:

[L]ove 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 the white liquid with a sweet taste— that mighty Prince with the moth’s eye and the feathered feet, one of whose name is Chloral (7-8).

In this essay too the formal and classical structure has been challenged in favour of an almost plotless, wayward and impetuous narrative dealing with varied subjects and ideas. Such playfulness comes from the fact that her writing is more *through* the body and less

---

<sup>3</sup> See Elaine Scarry 172

### **‘Undiscovered Countries’ through Virginia Woolf’s On Being Ill**

---

*about* the body and more *through* illness and less *about* illness. Her writing then becomes very symptomatic of the grotesque body— the body in pain and suffering— materializing it into text. The grotesque and complex “lump of pure sound” is crushed with pain to create “a brand new word” which quite often evokes laughter (7). The symptoms of illness are meanings in themselves and cannot be standardized.

By writing *through* the body she is trying to destabilize the dualism and the hierarchized structure prevalent in western metaphysics, of the body being a slave to the mind. She is, rather, pointing towards a grey zone of non-dualism when she says, “...[mind] cannot separate off from the body like a sheath of a knife or pod of a pea for a single instant” (4). A lived-body or a psychosomatic whole does not adhere to the Manichean binary which philosophy since pre-Socratic times has practiced. Philosophy always talks about “doings of the mind” and “how the mind has civilized the universe” (5). And body, on the other hand, has been kicked “like an old leather football, across leagues of snow and desert in the pursuit of conquest or discovery” (ibid). Woolf in this essay tries to materialize the mind and spiritualize the body. The mind and the body are too much into each other to be dealt separately and differently. This (in)distinction is generally deemed as lived-body (*leib*) as opposed to a passive ‘leather football’ called corporeal body (*körper*). And this dynamic lived-body “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” (ibid). As long as we are alive the body cannot be kicked off like an old leather football. Body should be ignored at

### **‘Undiscovered Countries’ through Virginia Woolf’s *On Being Ill***

---

its own peril. This essay and, in a way, her illness become an effort to go back to the body.

The “daily drama of the body”, according to Woolf, should not be overwhelmed by the “doings of the mind”. Her writing successfully captures the more primitive sound of the body— the cries and groans— and gives it a voice. The absence of the body in western philosophy disturbs her a lot as she thinks our being-in-the-world as always already embodied. There is no disembodied consciousness. But the ideology of health throws the body into a state of oblivion. Taking the opportunity of a harmonious and holistic existence of the holy trinity of mind-body-world, the mind-self takes the body for granted “kicking the body...across leagues of snow and desert” (ibid). Across metaphysics we see a reference to the body *in absentia*. This absent-body suddenly comes to the foreground when we are ill especially, in case of physical illness. In illness there occurs a dialogue where the body starts to speak to you (though in a very pre-linguistic, primordial manner) and the understanding of which requires dislodging our natural attitude in favour of a more radical reflection. Husserl would call this ‘intentional feeling’. In order to avert the “doings of the mind” we first have to do away with the natural and shared attitude (or rather a mere suspension of it). Illness helps in bracketing-out such attitudes.

Illness, as Havi Carel points out, not only entails rupture in the *contents* but *structure* of the experience too. It forces us to reflect on the things which were hitherto ignored. The daily drama of the body which was hitherto overwhelmed by the daily humdrum resurfaces to break down the whole structure of the everyday. In illness the

## **‘Undiscovered Countries’ through Virginia Woolf’s *On Being Ill***

---

continuum of time is replaced by individual moments and everyday is replaced by every day. One starts reflecting on the self and the world differently, as they appear now estranged and in a novel manner. In a painful and non-volitional way illness creates this *difference*. In that sense illness can also become a philosophical apparatus (this sounds uncanny, though). Carel explains:

While the execution of most philosophical procedures, such as doubt or questioning, is volitional and theoretical, illness is uninvited and threatening. Illness throws the ill person into a state of anxiety and uncertainty. As such it can be viewed as a radical, violent philosophical motivation that can profoundly alter our outlook. I argue that the radical nature of illness should be utilized to sharpen and expand philosophical discussion<sup>4</sup>.

Like Husserlian *epoché*, it can challenge the prevalent pre-reflective and metaphysical discourses and can become an embodied “philosophical gate” through which horizons of understanding and new philosophical encounters can be expanded and established.

The world seems *different* in illness. The corporeal enlightenment it leads to shuns the ignorance and alienation of a healthy being-in-the-world. The harmony of existence is challenged and replaced by the *disharmony* of phenomenological shock and revelation. Woolf does not beg to differ: “[n]ow, lying recumbent, staring straight up, the sky is discovered to be something so different from this that really it is a little *shocking*” (13). Here a Romantic existential expectation of empathy, harmony and integrated community gives way to a more radical outlook based on dis-integration or rather dys-

---

<sup>4</sup> For more detailed discussion, see Carel 20-40

### **‘Undiscovered Countries’ through Virginia Woolf’s On Being Ill**

---

integration. The Romantic empathy of sitting and hearing ‘each other groan’ is substituted by a Modernist disjuncture and ‘disinterestedness’. Such dis-integration and dis-involvement are prerequisites for any phenomenological understanding leading to what Merleau-Ponty has called the “wonder in the face of the world”<sup>5</sup>; Woolf would call this “strange” and “shocking”. One may not feel-like-at-home and the world may seem strange and unfamiliar; Woolf lying on her bed feels, “[t]he world has changed its shape; the tools of business grown remote... the whole landscape of life lies remote and fair, like the shore seen from a ship far out at sea” (8). The alienated being like “a ship far out at sea” manages to reflect and re-examine the familiar topography with greater vigour and preciseness.

In illness there is a movement away from the world, a world “so shaped that it echoes every groan” and pain. It is in a way a movement away from a shared being-with-the-world and being-with-the-other. The landscape of health is very different from the landscape of illness. Woolf in her essay points out two separate phenomenological conditions— one in health and the other in illness. While in health, “the army of the upright *marches* to battle”; in illness, the recumbents “*float* with sticks on the stream; helter-skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested” (12). The more robust *marching* here is in stark contrast to the unstable and unanchored *floating* and *helter-skelter*; the latter being symptomatic of the loosening ties between the self and the world during illness. The body is an anchor through which we are connected to the world; in illness the anchor itself becomes a burden.

---

<sup>5</sup> See Merleau-Ponty xiii

### **‘Undiscovered Countries’ through Virginia Woolf’s *On Being Ill***

---

But Woolf in her essay subverts this ‘burdenhood’ of the body in illness into a site of fresh perception. The body in illness, amidst the pain and throbbing, can lead to new horizons which were hitherto unknown and unheard of. She writes, “[...] how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, that undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza bring to light” (3). It can take you to places “where man has not trodden”, “where even the print of birds’ is unknown” and that enables one with fresh perspective and new knowledge (15). The kind of epithets she uses in the essay— ‘undiscovered’, ‘virgin’, ‘unknown’ et al— for the landscape of illness signifies her uncanny existence, her not-being-at-home there. But as already mentioned this not-being-at-home is a *de rigueur* to any phenomenological perspective. Her going back to the body in-itself then becomes a way of understanding and going back to the things-in-themselves.

The ill body not only gives her a chance to gaze up at the clouds and look sideways on to the world but it also gives her wings of poesy. The way she conceives illness makes her no different from the Romantics and the transcendentalists. As Hermione Lee points out in her ‘Introduction’, the essay is “at once romantic and modern” (xxvii). The Romantic concept of illness becomes predominant in many parts of the essay and a clear ‘anxiety of influence’ can easily be traced. Reading in bed we can trace in her a bit of a reader of Coleridge here and De Quincey there, a bit of Lamb here and Keats there. The antic disposition of the Romantics influences the essay a lot— as if she is half in love with illness and death. Like the Romantics the debilitating illness chariots her to the untrodden landscape of the “undiscovered countries” and “virgin

## **‘Undiscovered Countries’ through Virginia Woolf’s On Being Ill**

---

forests”. Writing in bed we find in her a recluse— weighed down by fever, fret and weariness— looking for transcendence. In the essay we see a continuous vacillation between being-ill and becoming-transcendent.

Woolf’s vulnerable body takes a radical flight from the binding ontology of totality and perhaps the totality of ontology. Instead of nailing down illness loosens her from the binding existence of ‘here, now’ providing her a means of escape. As pointed out by Hermione Lee, Woolf writes in her diary that, “The best of these illnesses is that they loosen the earth about the roots. They make changes” (xviii). It pulls her out of her solipsism, her enrootedness and her natural attitude to a domain which is more hospitable and for-the-other. For Levinas vulnerability is a major pre-condition for hospitability; and, for Woolf, this vulnerability comes from her ailing body.

Though she regards illness as “the great confessional”, the virility of the confessional subject in this regard is slackened and humbled by the vulnerability that pain and suffering leads to. Referring to Levinas, Fleurdeliz R. Altez-Albela points out that for him body is dialectic medium between the existential condition of escape and the condition of a subject struggling against the enrootedness of presence and position<sup>6</sup>. In case of Woolf her presence and position were completely overwhelmed by her “great experience”, her pain and illness. They give her the opportunity to undertake a journey, to transcend herself. ‘On being ill’ brings to her the prospect of ‘on going a journey’<sup>7</sup>— a

---

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion, see Altez-Albela ‘The Body and Transcendence in Emmanuel Levinas’ *Phenomenological Ethics* 36-50

<sup>7</sup> The title of the essay echoes William Hazlitt’s 1882 essay ‘On Going a Journey’. The metaphor of journey becomes a very important one in Woolf’s essay.

## **‘Undiscovered Countries’ through Virginia Woolf’s On Being Ill**

---

journey towards creating a room of one’s own. But not for a long time; the room finally collapses in the year 1941.

This essay was published in 1926 and finally not being able to sustain further, in 1941 she commits suicide. During this period she quite repeatedly acknowledges the overpowering nature of her illness. She finally succumbs to what had made her suffer lifelong. Throughout her lifetime it had controlled almost every aspect of her life. Even her love for her husband was not able to withstand the onslaught. Addressing Leopold Woolf she writes in her suicide note:

Dearest,

I feel certain that I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier 'til this *terrible disease* came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that — everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer.

I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been. V.<sup>8</sup>

She considers this ‘fight’ a lost battle and laments, “everything has gone from me”. The transcendence and subversion of which she talks about in the essay give way to a more

---

<sup>8</sup> Sylvie Crinquand, *Last Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2009), 43.

## **‘Undiscovered Countries’ through Virginia Woolf’s *On Being Ill***

---

morbid and negative conception of illness as antithetical to love and life. The *journey* finally ends in Rive Ouse into which she submerges herself never to surface again.

Though *On Being Ill* accounts her journey on “a ship far out at sea” from where the shore of health looks far away the essay also, as Lorraine Sim points out, contrary to the medical discourse of the time “seeks to validate the perspective of the invalid, and while illness and pain are not enjoyable or desirable states Woolf suggests that, as integral aspects of ordinary life, they require much more attention and narrative representation so that as experiences they might be better understood and appreciated”<sup>9</sup>. The *being* of ‘on being ill’ then ceases to remain a passive being of a patient and turns into a more dynamic *becoming*. Illness leads her to corporeal confinement and spatiotemporal constriction; it also paves the way for a ‘radical flight’ and transcendence from mechanized existence. Arthur W. Frank deems such journeys/narratives as quest narratives as “they meet suffering head on”. He observes, “[T]hey accept illness and seek to use it. Illness is the occasion of a journey that becomes a quest. What is quested for may never be wholly clear, but the quest is defined by the ill person’s belief that something is going to be gained through the experience.”<sup>10</sup>

The *telos* of the body is body itself. The *entelechy* of the body is body as *entelechia*. In the essay Woolf’s journey to the ‘undiscovered countries’ is as much bodily as the ‘undiscovered country’ itself. It is a situation where the space of both the journey and the destination remains the same. Jean Luc-Nancy would consider body to be

---

<sup>9</sup> See Sim 82

<sup>10</sup> *The Wounded Storyteller* 115

## **‘Undiscovered Countries’ through Virginia Woolf’s *On Being Ill***

---

both “world” and “worldling”, both “space” and “spacing”. This is unlike what Aristotle conceives body to be in the *De Anima* i.e. soul as the complete realisation or *entelechia* of the body. The *journey* of the body in illness is not merely towards ‘presence’ in spatial term but, to use Nancy, a ‘birth to presence’ which is more temporal<sup>11</sup>. This is simply because of its *ek-static* and ever-evolving nature. Derrida would refer to it as touch-without-touching as opposed to simple touch. The ‘sense’ (body as sense and sense as body) aggravates during illness; and this is what Woolf is trying here to posit. A close reading of the narrative of *On Being Ill* will make it clear that Woolf’s depiction of illness is both monadic and nomadic at the same time. Illness enables her to *exscribe* (“writing out”) — *from* the body, *to* the body and *through* the body. Her “exscribe” gives us an alternative by thwarting the tendency of modernity to control what Leibniz calls *principium vitale* (“life principle”)<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup> It becomes very difficult to speak in terms of simple spatiality or temporality, as Nancy points out in *The Gravity of Thought*, there is no pure space and time but, there are only places, which are simultaneously locations and extensions of bodies. (77)

<sup>12</sup> Leibniz writes “This first acting principle, this entelechia is a real life principle (*principium vitale*) which has a perceiving ability as well, and which is imperishable. And this just what I consider as the soul of animals”.

## **Work Cited**

Altez-Albela, Fleurdeliz R. “The Body and Transcendence in Emmanuel Levinas’ Phenomenological Ethics”. *Kritike Vol. 5*. Web June 2011

Carel, Havi. “The Philosophical Role of Illness”. *Metaphilosophy Vol. 45*. 1995: 20-40. Print.

Crinquand, Sylvie (ed.). *Last Letters*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2009. Print.

Frank, Arthur W. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Ethics, and Illness*. Chicago: Chicago UP. 1995, Print.

Merleu-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. C. Smith. New York: Routledge, 1962. Print.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985. Print.

Sim, Lorraine. *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Writer’s Diary: Being and Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Leonard Woolf. San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1954. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *On Being Ill*. Intro. by Hermione Lee. Massachusetts: Paris Press, 2012. Print.