

3 Interdependence: Pattern and Precarity

Is it possible to cultivate virtuosity (*aretē*) without succumbing to the kind of arrogance that leads to self-interestedness? Can one strive to be exceptional without falling prey to elitism? These are questions that circle back to the questions of value that Barbara Herrnstein Smith contemplated, for if excellence (*aretē*) is quality one possesses, then it is something that is *intrinsically* valuable. But if excellence is a practice that involves negotiation – as value does in Smith’s theory – then it is social and relational, rather than intrinsic. This relationality is highlighted in another key Woolfian motif: interdependence. Woolf often alludes to social interdependence through the metaphor of the “pattern” or, as in the case of her metaphor for fiction in *A Room of One’s Own*, through the image of a web (AROO 41).

For example, in one of the most cited passages from *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf comments on her capacity for making sense of experience through writing:

Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right, making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art.¹

There are many ways to read Woolf’s ecstatic insistence on connectedness. Perry Meisel writes of Woolf’s repeated imagery of patterns, fabrics, and networks: “These figures or, really, metalanguages, are often organic ones, and suggest a vision of life as a pattern of connections ‘drawn out’ on ‘every leaf on the trees.’”² Other critics, among them Julie Kane and Donna Lazenby, interpret the high premium Woolf

places on interdependence as a form of mysticism – an emptying of the self and appreciation of our apparent oneness with the world.³ Yet others, including Gillian Beer, Holly Henry, and Paul Tolliver Brown, show the influence of scientific discourse – Darwinism, astronomy, and quantum physics – on Woolf’s conception of the “pattern” behind the “cotton wool” of everyday existence.⁴ Beer, for example, argues that “The language of physics chimed with her search for rhythmic prose to give her new working freedoms. She used those freedoms to sound communal experience, even universal experience, and to reveal the lines of force that run through historical moments.”⁵ Brown contends that “In *To the Lighthouse* . . . [Woolf’s] concept of space and time remains relative, and she melds Einstein’s theories with an additional sense of the permeable boundaries of consciousness between entities that reflects the holistic nature of subatomic phenomena.”⁶ And Henry notes that Woolf and her contemporary, Olaf Stapledon, “forged literary images of the earth in space as a means of launching a critique of human aggression and war.”⁷ By giving humans a different perspective, exposing our relative minuteness in the immensity of the universe, Henry continues, “advances in astronomy not only served these two modernist writers in their articulation of a pacifist politics, but also catalyzed a new sense of the human position in the universe.”⁸

These perspectives represent the tip of the iceberg of scholarship on Woolf’s deep interest in communalism, on the one hand, and strong attraction to monadism on the other.⁹ My aim is not to provide yet another contribution to the already existing work on the overdetermined influences (whether spiritual, scientific, or philosophical) that shaped Woolf’s understanding of interconnectivity and particularity. Rather, my purpose here in a volume on Woolf’s value – communicating the value of reading her work through an exegesis of what the work values – is to explore the insights Woolf opens up to her readers through her sustained and elegant illustrations of the dynamic interplay between the particular and the structural in her depictions of human interconnection. That is, Woolf invites us to perceive the particle and the wave, the node and the circuitry, the atom and the organism as mutually constitutive components of an interconnected ecology, or “pattern” of living.

Why might it be valuable to be able to perceive particularity (let's call it individuality, since Woolf is primarily interested in persons as particulars) as situated within networked patterns (let's call them ecologies)? If I may be forgiven an evaluative judgment of my own, it is simply more accurate to describe social reality as a complex dynamic system. For example, language, as structuralists and deconstructionists alike have argued, is a massive and complex system within which any one individual's utterance makes sense (if one follows the structuralist line of thinking), or ultimately evades sense (if one follows the deconstructionist path). Or, to choose another example, the intelligibility of identity – a concept that we commonly think of as personal and intrinsic – is dependent on (although not entirely determined by) pre-existing social norms, habits, and beliefs. Recently legible identity categories – such as intersexed, queer, or transsexual – depend on social norms and customs that have, in the past several decades, shifted enough to make such identities intelligible, if not universally respected. The cultural process of shifting legibility is not exclusively a late-twentieth-century phenomenon. It was simply not possible to identify as an American, for example, before the seventeenth century. Nor is it possible today to identify as the King of France, although the category certainly existed in the seventeenth century. Even then, an individual who claimed that identity without social backing would have been in a precarious position vis-à-vis the person whose claim to that identity was upheld by custom and belief.

The interdependence of individuals on social systems for their very identity would seem like a simple and self-evident concept, and yet a strong strain of political and philosophical thought has valued individuation, autonomy, and self-reliance as indispensable virtues. Liberal individualism from Hume to the present provides an example of this strain. Human beings are far from independent monads, however, and Woolf, as a socialist, embraced a worldview that recognized the interdependence of persons, even those who perceive themselves as autonomous. At any moment, we depend on others for sustenance, comfort, information, connection, and belonging. Recognizing that dependence (or, more accurately, interdependence) entails an acknowledgement of our

precarity, a term that has received critical attention lately (e.g., in Judith Butler's *Prearious Life*), but which has a longer-standing history in public discourse about poverty and economic injustice that can be traced back at least as far as Dorothy Day's 1952 essay, "Poverty and Precarity."¹⁰ We are all, because we are living beings, in a precarious position; we are woundable, killable, and subject to catastrophes (natural and political) beyond our control. Butler draws on this facet of human existence to call for a recognition of our commonality across difference, as woundable, killable beings. From the commonality of "precarious life," she calls for an ethics of recognition and compassion.¹¹

This being said, there are limits to our common ground, our human sameness. No social system or ecosystem, no matter how comprehensive or compelling, can without variation determine the individual traits, proclivities, thought patterns, and ultimately identifications of the individuals within the system, despite the prevalence of myriad dystopian fantasies of posthuman communalism gone awry, from *Brave New World* to the "Borg" of *Star Trek*.¹² There is always some noise in the machine, some quirk, glitch, or resistant patch that makes the replication of identities – no matter how subject to social norms and beliefs – imprecise, messy, and thus apt to mutate over time. This is how social change takes place alongside (indeed, *inside*) of systems that perpetuate continuity.

We can trace Woolf's thinking on our singularity and connectedness throughout her works. By way of example, I focus here on one of Woolf's most abstract and philosophical texts, *The Waves*, and one of her more concrete and pedagogical texts, *The Years* (which was, after all, originally conceived as a fictional case study to illustrate the theoretical insights of *Three Guineas*). Woolf grasped both the necessity of recognizing our dependence on one another and the significance of individuation – the idiosyncratic behaviors, the unruly passions, the defiant iconoclasm which might, over time, precipitate beneficial adaptations in our social ecosystem. Her depictions of particularities and patterns, therefore, are more than fascinating observations – they illuminate the underpinnings of social stasis and the mechanisms of social change.

INVISIBLE PRESENCES AND IMMENSE FORCES

Describing the process of memoir writing, Woolf muses in her own (posthumously published) memoir:

Yet it is by such invisible presences [the influence of others] that the "subject of this memoir" is tugged this way and that every day of his life; it is they that keep him in position. Consider what immense forces society brings to play upon each of us, how that society changes from decade to decade; and also from class to class; well, if we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir, and again how futile life-writing becomes. I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream.¹³

Reading this passage as evidence of Woolf's relinquishment of "such analysis, such discriminations" to the "historian," Beer juxtaposes it with Woolf's "picturesque" representations of history in *Between the Acts*, notably in the village pageant depicted near the end of the novel.¹⁴ In such "picture-book" representations, Beer argues, "History is stationary, inhabited by replaceable figures whose individuality is less than their community with other lives lived already, 'with the blue and sailing clouds behind.'"¹⁵

I read Woolf's fish-in-a-stream passage differently, as a continuation of her meditation on the "pattern" behind the "cotton wool," and, more specifically, her contemplation of a philosophical question that goes back at least to the Oracle at Delphi's injunction to "know thyself": What is the self and its proper relation to the world around it?¹⁶ In this context, individual people are not "replaceable figures" overwhelmed by the static inertia of history, but rather relatively small figures inundated by influences that exceed the self. Attempting to describe the influence of her mother – and, simultaneously, the loss of her mother – on her subsequent life, Woolf therefore spins her theory of "invisible presences" that buffet and waft the seemingly isolated/insulated self:

Until I was in the forties . . . the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day's doings. She was one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life. This influence, by which I mean the consciousness of other groups impinging upon ourselves; public opinion; what other

people say and think; all those magnets which attract us this way to be like that, or repel us the other and make us different from that; has never been analysed in any of those Lives which I so much enjoy reading, or very superficially.¹⁷

“The consciousness of other groups,” “public opinion,” and what contemporary scholars call discourse (“what other people say and think”) are thus part of the system (the stream) surrounding the fish of the self.

The stream might also be likened to the background noise of conscious living. Rather than a steady state of awareness, Woolf describes consciousness as “moments of being” that flare up against a backdrop of mere living:

This leads to a digression, which perhaps may explain a little of my own psychology; even of other people’s. Often when I have been writing one of my so-called novels I have been baffled by this same problem; that is, how to describe what I call in my private shorthand – “non-being” . . . A great part of every day is not lived consciously. One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done; the broken vacuum cleaner; ordering dinner; writing orders to Mabel; washing; cooking dinner; bookbinding. When it is a bad day the proportion of non-being is much larger.¹⁸

Consciousness is not without its peril, for Woolf, however. Her first experiences of “moments of being” come “like a blow from an enemy behind the cotton wool of daily life,” but she gradually comes to appreciate such “shocks” through *poesis*, the act of making:

It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together.¹⁹

Poesis, for Woolf, thus entails finding the relation between the part and the whole. Hence, in *A Sketch of the Past*, both of the extended conceits she uses to describe the relation between self and the world – singularity and pattern, fish and stream – depict the oscillation between a particular and a system.

THE WAVES, COMPLEXITY, AND THE SELF-IN-SYSTEM

This oscillation, or dynamic interplay, between singularity and stasis is a hallmark of what scientists and social scientists call “complex adaptive systems.” Describing the field of complexity theory, John Miller and Scott Page suggest that the field’s “interest is the in between”:

It is the interest in between stasis and utter chaos. The world tends not to be completely frozen or random, but rather it exists in between these two states . . . It is the interest in between control and anarchy. We find robust patterns of organization and activity in systems that have no central control or authority . . . It is the interest in between the continuous and the discrete. The behavior of systems as we transition between the continuous and discrete is often surprising. Many systems do not smoothly move between these two realms, but instead exhibit quite different patterns of behavior, even though from the outside they seem so “close.”²⁰

Woolf did not have the language of complexity theory available to her, although the “patterns of organization” or “patterns of behavior” Miller and Page describe above would have been ripe for observation, especially in early twentieth-century Europe, when “stasis and utter chaos” or “control and anarchy” were lived experiences of populations enduring revolutions such as the Russian Revolution or Irish Uprising, totalitarian dictatorships such as Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy, and/or the continuity of empires – the Russian or the Austro-Hungarian – unraveling in the span of decades. Moreover, Woolf would have been familiar with the basic theories of Adam Smith, whom Miller and Page consider an early theorist of complexity, through her friendship with John Maynard Keynes.²¹

“The person is evidently immensely complicated,” Woolf wrote in her memoir.²² “Biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand,” the biographer-narrator of *Orlando* contends (O 226). The world around that person, too, for Woolf, is awash with “invisible presences” and “immense forces.” Building on these insights, *The Waves*, arguably Woolf’s most poetic text, provides a breathtaking anatomy of the self as complex adaptive system existing

and adapting within a yet larger and even more complex adaptive system: the world.

Complex and evolving themselves, each of the six voices of *The Waves* interacts in relation to the other five. All six orbit, as many critics have noted, around the absence of a seventh friend, Percival, who, like Virginia Woolf's mother, dies early in the lives of the protagonists and yet remains an "invisible presence" who shapes and guides the others' thoughts and movements. Kane notes the symmetry between the carbon atom, which James Jeans describes as "six electrons revolving around the appropriate central nucleus, like six planets revolving around a central sun," and the structure of *The Waves*, with its six characters revolving around Percival.²³ Beer reads Percival as "the principle of death as well as of immediate living. He is the seventh, 'Septimus', who converted the six into a magical prime number and who continues to make possible the seven-branched candelabra of friendship after death."²⁴ These six characters are, for Beer, semi-permeable, with "words and thoughts" that "move freely between people."²⁵ "In *The Waves*," Beer concludes, "Woolf explores a new form of communality and impersonality."²⁶

More than communality and impersonality, I see Woolf exploring the oscillation between precarity and continuity in *The Waves*, an undulation that exposes the self's simultaneous dependency on and isolation from others around it. That is, the self is a singularity caught up in a system, like the ocean waves which break on the shore in the interludes that separate the chapters or strophes of the novel. Each wave is part of the sea and yet recognizable as an individual entity with a particular wavelength, crest height, and trough depth. Only under certain circumstances – tidal forces, wind velocity, distance from the shore – will a wave be formed from water (deep ocean swells being made from energy moving through water molecules), gravitate toward the shore, break, and eddy back into the ocean.²⁷

The first glimpse of this interplay between precarity and continuity is in the early childhood section of the novel, after the second interlude, which shows the sun beginning to differentiate shapes from each other: "It sharpened the edges of chairs and tables and stitched

white table-cloths with fine gold wires. As the light increased a bud here and there split asunder and shook out flowers, green veined and quivering" (W 19). Also differentiating from each other – becoming clear as individual entities – the six protagonists are sent off to school (one for the girls, one for the boys) in this section. Rhoda, seemingly the most insular and precarious of the six voices, does not find herself reflected to herself as a discrete person:

"That is my face," said Rhoda, "in the looking-glass behind Susan's shoulder – that face is my face. But I will duck behind her to hide it, for I am not here. I have no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world. The things they lift are heavy. They say Yes, they say No; whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second." (W 29)

Not only does Rhoda find herself un-mirrored, without a face, but she also lacks the capacity to react to others authentically, relying instead on a conscious effort to mirror others in order to act intelligibly within culture. Her compatriots, Jinny and Susan, "know what to say if spoken to. They laugh really; they get angry really; while I have to look first and do what other people do when they have done it" (W 29). Rhoda is unable to externalize herself enough to navigate the world successfully. Without connectivity, she cannot negotiate the pattern and thus is overwhelmed by her interiority, her particularity.

The drama of precarity and continuity is illustrated further in the next interlude, where the beautiful birds singing "emulously in the clear mourning air" and "lovelily . . . descending, delicately declining" begin to grub "down the dark avenues into the unlit world where the leaf rots and the flower has fallen" (W 53). Representing the brutal side of natural continuity alongside the bucolic,

one of [the birds], beautifully darting accurately alighting, spiked the soft, monstrous body of the defenceless worm, pecked again and yet again, and left it to fester. Down there among the roots where the flowers decayed, gusts of dead smells were wafted; drops formed on the bloated sides of swollen things. The skin of rotten fruit broke, and matter oozed too thick to run. (W53).

Continuity, at the system level, entails death, decay, and fertilization. In the grand scale of the ecosystem, the loss of individual life is a

relatively insignificant step in a larger process. Immediately after this interlude, Bernard, who is on the other side of the continuum from Rhoda regarding his individuation from others, remarks:

The complexity of things becomes more close . . . Every hour something new is unburied in the great bran pie. What am I? I ask. This? No, I am that. Especially now, when I have left a room, and people talking, and the stone flags ring out with my solitary footsteps, and I behold the moon rising, sublimely, indifferently, over the ancient chapel – then it becomes clear that I am not one and simple, but complex and many. Bernard in public, bubbles; in private, is secretive. That is what they do not understand, for they are now undoubtedly discussing me, saying I escape them, am evasive. They do not understand that I have to effect different transitions; have to cover the entrances and exits of several different men who alternately act their parts as Bernard. (W 54)

Unlike Rhoda, who is so withdrawn that she does not have a legible self to show the world, Bernard is too external, too much a part of the pattern, and thus has not the hard edge of self with which to distinguish himself from the world. “The truth is that I need the stimulus of other people. Alone, over my dead fire, I tend to see the thin places in my own stories” Bernard admits (W 57). Recalling his day, he remembers himself as different people depending on the situation: “But now let me ask myself the final question, as I sit over this grey fire, with its naked promontories of black coal, which of these people am I? It depends so much on the room. When I say to myself, ‘Bernard,’ who comes?” (W 57).

To varying degrees, the other four protagonists oscillate between the particularity of self and the pattern of the world. Louis, for example, is both “clear-cut” and connected to history – something more substantial that he feels through the earth:

“I have signed my name,” said Louis, “already twenty times. I, and again I, and again I. Clear, firm, unequivocal, there it stands, my name. Clear-cut and unequivocal I am too. Yet a vast inheritance of experience is packed in me. I have lived thousands of years. I am like a worm that has eaten its way through the wood of a very old oak beam. But now I am compact; now I am gathered together this fine morning.” (W 121)

Susan finds a similar connection to continuity through the earth and its reproductive cycles (human as well as plant). She punctuates her place in the natural cycle much like Louis does his place in the

economic cycle of trade and ownership – with “I” and “I” and “I” again:

I have had peaceful, productive years. I possess all I see. I have grown trees from the seed. I have made ponds in which goldfish hide under broad-leaved lilies. I have netted over strawberry beds and lettuce beds, and stitched the pears and the plums into white bags to keep them safe from the wasps. I have seen my sons and daughters, once netted over like fruit in their cots, break the meshes and walk with me, taller than I am, casting shadows on the grass. (W 138–39)

Neville and Jinny, less grounded by earthy pursuits, are pulled out into the world by eros. Comparing himself to Bernard, Neville asserts, “I am one person – myself. I do not impersonate Catullus, whom I adore. I am the most slavish of students, with here a dictionary; there a notebook in which I enter curious uses of the past participle. But I cannot go on forever cutting these ancient inscriptions clearer with a knife” (W 62).

This sharpness, this absorption in the details of a dead language, almost damns Neville to a life of desiccated pedantry, but he is carried away and compelled to connect with those outside himself by his love for another man. Speaking to Bernard, he comes out of the closet by sharing with him the love poems written for the unnamed beloved (perhaps Percival):

I am asking you (as I stand with my back to you) to take my life in your hands and tell me whether I am doomed always to cause repulsion in those I love?

I stand with my back to you fidgeting. No my hands are now perfectly still. Precisely, opening a space in the bookcase, I insert *Don Juan*; there. I would rather be loved, I would rather be famous than follow perfection through the sand. (W 63)

The exchange between the two men transforms both of them, at least momentarily, for if Neville is called out of himself, Bernard is called in by the interaction with his friend:

O friendship, how piercing are your darts – there, there, again there. He looked at me, turning to face me; he gave me his poem. All mists curl off the roof of my being. That confidence I shall keep to my dying day. Like a long wave, like a roll of heavy waters, he went over me, his devastating presence – dragging me open, laying bare the pebbles on the shore of my soul. It was humiliating; I was turned to small stones. All semblances were

rolled up. "You are not Byron; you are yourself." To be contracted by another person into a single being – how strange. (W63)

Woolf's figurative language in "like a long wave, like a roll of heavy waters, he went over me" evokes the image of a tidal force. Bernard and Neville can be seen as separate moons or planets orbiting an unnamed center. Neville's outward movement – his gift of his poems, his sharing of his confidences – represents his low tide, with the waves pulling away from him and pouring into Bernard's corresponding high tide. The motion not only "contracts" Bernard, but complements him: if he is diffuse and bubbly when he is out in the world, Neville brings him back to a discreet sense of himself.

Jinny, effervescent and polyamorous, appears at first to be conventionally feminine, defined through her physical attractiveness, perceived simultaneously as a threat and a lure. Mark Hussey suggests that "Jinny . . . is at one extreme of the scale of ways in which the body can be lived; she can imagine nothing 'beyond the circle cast by my body' (W 92). Her sense of unity projects itself through her body and affects others, as she is aware."²⁸ Jinny's embodiment, however, does lead her outward, like Plato's cave dwellers who, after having seen the world by the light of the sun, can no longer be content in a society that sits chained to the wall watching shadows:²⁹

But we who live in the body see with the body's imagination things in outline. I see rocks in bright sunshine. I cannot take these facts into some cave and, shading my eyes, grade their yellows, blues, umbers into one substance. I cannot remain seated for long. I must jump and go. The coach may start from Picadilly. I drop all these facts – diamonds, withered hands, china pots and the rest of it, as a monkey drops nuts from its naked paws. I cannot tell you if life is this or that. I am going to push out into the heterogeneous crowd. I am going to be buffeted; to be flung up, and flung down, among men, like a ship on the sea. (W 128)

Like Neville – who, in the very next monologue, says, "There can be no doubt, I thought, pushing aside the newspaper, that our mean lives, unsightly as they are, put on splendor and have meaning only under the eyes of love" – Jinny's sensual life ennobles her, gets her out of the cave and into the world, and becomes for her a form of *aretē*. This is a paradoxical version of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," given that, for Plato, the world of the senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell) is less

real than the world of the intellect. Jinny's world outside the cave is kinetic and connected, but – if we follow the Platonic allusion to its logical end – no less valuable, and, perhaps, no less wise.³⁰

THE BODY, VULNERABILITY, AND THE
“ARMY OF THE UPRIGHT”

Woolf's penultimate novel, *The Years*, is written in a much different register to that of *The Waves*. *The Waves* is poetic and tightly concentric, while *The Years* is narrative and sprawling. *The Waves*, despite Jinny's leap to embodied wisdom, is largely a novel of thought and vision, while *The Years* is a novel of bodies and social interactions. Despite its different register, *The Years* nevertheless takes up the thread of precarity and continuity Woolf spins in *The Waves*, weaving it into a plaid of atypicality and normativity crosshatched with interdependence and autonomy. To trace this weft it will be necessary to shift from metaphysics to social theory – particularly “crip theory,” a blend of disability studies and queer theory which analyzes how “bio-power” (a networked circuit of forces allowing some people and some bodies more access to the resources necessary to have a livable life and others less access to such resources) operates by extruding norms that make some lives more culturally legible and others monstrous, freakish, or deviant.³¹ Judith Butler explains that “The norms that govern idealized human anatomy thus work to produce a differential sense of who is human and who is not, which lives are livable, and which are not.”³²

Musing on the “question of human, of who counts as the human, and the related question of whose lives count as lives,” Judith Butler brings queer theory back to the concept of “flourishing”:³³

What makes for a livable world is no idle question. It is not merely a question for philosophers. It is posed in various idioms all the time by people in various walks of life. If that makes them all philosophers, then that is a conclusion I am happy to embrace. It becomes a question for ethics, I think, not only when we ask the personal question, what makes my own life bearable, but when we ask, from a position of power, and from the point of

view of distributive justice, what makes, or ought to make, the lives of others bearable?³⁴

The answer to Butler's question goes beyond recognition or rights and touches on the concept of eudemonia, often translated as happiness (as I noted in Chapter 1). The conditions necessary for eudemonia are the conditions for ensuring a "bearable" life. Material well-being and political freedom are necessary for eudemonia, which is why Butler insists that the question of what makes "the lives of others bearable" be asked from the position of "distributive justice." As I noted in Chapter 2, Woolf recognized that material well-being – "enough money to live on . . . to buy that modicum of health, leisure, knowledge and so on" – is necessary for flourishing, "for the full development of the body and mind" (TG 97). Articulating what might be seen as an Aristotelian mean, she suggests that we need "enough," but not too much – "not a penny more" (TG 97). Material well-being is necessary for flourishing (i.e., living a "bearable" life), but it is not sufficient.

Woolf does not have a spotless record on the question of "what makes, or ought to make the lives of others bearable." Maren Linett, for example, identifies a persistent strain of ableism in Woolf's feminism, exemplified by instances in *A Room of One's Own* and *The Years*, where women whose lives have been thwarted by patriarchy are described as "twisted," "deformed," "cramped," and "like cripples in a cave."³⁵

In a powerful essay asking "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?" Janet Lyon analyzes "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,' [Woolf] writes. 'They should certainly be killed.'"³⁶ Hermione Lee, whose biography of Woolf is comprehensive and nuanced, attributes the violence of Woolf's reaction to seeing a group of men with

cognitive disabilities to Woolf's own experiences of institutionalization for mental illness in 1915 – "This violent endorsement of an extreme theory of eugenics, written between two very severe breakdowns, must be understood as expressing her dread and horror of what she thought of as her own loss of control."³⁷ Lyon reads the shock of recognition (Woolf's "dawning" awareness that the men she encounters along the road are wards of an asylum for "imbeciles" [a legal designation at the time]) as integral to Woolf's modernist aesthetics, while at the same time providing a glimpse for Woolf of her own sense of precarity, her affinity with the men she despises. "This kind of shock, for someone like Woolf, must surely extend to her own tenuous mental sovereignty," writes Lyon.³⁸ It is important to hold Woolf's ableism up for scrutiny, even if it contains elements of internalized oppression. As Lyon elegantly states:

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. He is her *frère*, her *semblable*.³⁹

Woolf's own precarity is part of a pattern in her plaid that runs two directions – one toward recognition and justice for those excluded or made monstrous by the norm, and another in the troubling direction of the norm.

With that said, Woolf does pen what is still one of the most cogent critiques of biopower in fiction. Linking claims about the health of the nation to masculine mental health, to heteronormativity, to war and colonialism, she satirizes the Harley Street specialist's worship of "divine proportion" in *Mrs. Dalloway*:

Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion – his, if they were men, Lady Bradshaw's if they were women (she embroidered, knitted, spent four nights out of seven at home with her son), so that not only did his colleagues respect him, his subordinates fear him, but the friends and relations of his patients felt for

him the keenest gratitude for insisting that these prophetic Christs and Christesses, who prophesied the end of the world, or the advent of God, should drink milk in bed, as Sir William ordered.⁴⁰

Sir William's fanaticism about proportion, although exaggerated, is in keeping with what disability theorist Lennard Davis calls the construction of normalcy in the nineteenth century. Davis argues that the "concept of the norm or average enters European culture, or at least the European Languages, only in the nineteenth century," and that uptake of this concept arises from the development of "that branch of knowledge known as statistics."⁴¹ Practitioners of the new field of statistics such as Adolphe Quetelet and Sir Francis Galton heralded a discursive shift from emulation of the ideal man (gender exclusivity intended) to idealization of the average man. Davis argues that, "In formulating *l'homme moyen*, Quetelet is also providing a justification of *les classes moyennes* [sic]. With bourgeois hegemony comes scientific justification for moderation and middle-class ideology. The average man, the body of the man in the middle, becomes the exemplar of the middle way of life."⁴² Davis further points out that the prominent nineteenth-century statisticians were also, not coincidentally, eugenicists. Eugenicists such as Galton reimagined the normal distribution that is part of any bell curve as a kind of hierarchy, with the low tail of the curve considered undesirable degeneracy and the high tail of the curve representing Darwinian progress.

For Davis, this "new ideal of ranked order is powered by the imperative of the norm, and then supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of deviance to create a dominating hegemonic vision of what the human body should be."⁴³ The aim of eugenicists – including many Fabians known to Woolf, such as Beatrice and Sidney Webb – was to shift that median point in the direction of the top quartile and to eliminate or dramatically reduce the number of people who exhibited traits that fell into the bottom quartile.⁴⁴ For thinkers in a milieu heavily influenced by Darwin, this shift would take place through sexual selection *for* socially "useful" traits like height and strength and intelligence and *against* socially "harmful" traits such as "feeble mindedness" or clubbed feet or dwarfism. Here sexual normativity intersects with

able-bodied normativity insofar as proper desire (i.e., sexual desire that would lead to the desired eugenicist shift in the median on the bell curve) is desire for able-bodiedness. Desire for anything else was deemed at best wasteful and at worst degenerative. In Canada and the United States, persons considered to be cognitively disabled (i.e., deemed to be “mental defectives”) were often involuntarily sterilized, as well as in more notoriously eugenicist states such as Nazi Germany. This practice apparently went on in Alberta until 1972 and in many U.S. states until the 1960s and 1970s, to cite some of the more egregious examples in North America.⁴⁵ Homosexual men were also subjected to voluntary or involuntary castration as a supposed cure for their deviant sexual desire.⁴⁶ Alan Turing, a pathbreaking computer scientist and celebrated British cryptographer, was chemically castrated in 1952 following his arrest for homosexual offenses.⁴⁷ Woolf, too, was told by her medical doctors that she must not reproduce at a time when “healthy” women of her race and class were being told that it was their primary duty to reproduce.⁴⁸ Biopower here works through the bell curve – valorizing the norm and then (re)producing it through violence and/or prohibition.

The habit of “worshipping divine proportion” through the idealization of norms brought into existence not only sexual minority identities – a process Foucault referred to when he suggested that “The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form” – but also the characterization of disabled people as “personage [s],” “past[s],” “case histor[ies],” “childhood[s],” and “types.”⁴⁹ These “deviant” types, whether deviating from sexual, physical, cognitive, or behavioral norms, bolster the construction of what Rosmarie Garland Thomson calls the “normate,” a figure she analyzes in terms of physical disability, and which crip theorists such as Abby L. Wilkerson have analyzed in relation to sexual and gender norms. The concept of the normate, Garland Thomson explains, is a “neologism [that] names the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries.”⁵⁰ In *Mrs. Dalloway* the law is literally “on the side of the normal”; it gives Dr. Bradshaw the power to

commit Septimus Warren Smith against his will (and against his wife's will) to one of Bradshaw's rest cure "homes" – "It was a question of law."⁵¹

While *Mrs. Dalloway*, through the figure of Septimus, exposes the violence of the norm spectacularly, *The Years* illustrates how normativity is cultivated through continuity in the story of three generations of the Pargiter family.⁵² Very early in the 1880 portion of the narrative, we learn that the paterfamilias, Colonel Abel Pargiter (the pun on "able" may or may not be intended), lost two fingers in "the Mutiny," presumably the 1857 Indian rebellion against the British East India Company, often referred to as the "Sepoy" mutiny. We first learn of Abel's injury in relation to a sexual encounter he has with his mistress – "He drew her to him; he kissed her on the nape of the neck; and then the hand that had lost two fingers began to fumble rather lower down where the neck joins the shoulders" (TY 9) – but more often than not, his disability is associated with his role as the dispenser of money:

He put his hand into his trouser pocket and brought out a handful of silver. His children watched him as he tried to single out one sixpence from all the florins. He had lost two fingers of the right hand in the Mutiny, and the muscles had shrunk so that the right hand resembled the claw of some aged bird. He shuffled and fumbled; but as he always ignored the injury, his children dared not help him. The shiny knobs of the mutilated fingers fascinated Rose. (TY 13)

While Abel's age, retirement, and wife's illness leave him feeling gloomy and "out of it all" (Mrs. D 5), his physical deformity is no bar to his access to places of privilege, such as his club, or social and economic standing. He is not only the paterfamilias of a large Victorian household at Abercorn Terrace (a "respectable" neighborhood), he is also financially well-off, consoling himself at one point for being "richer" than his "distinguished" brother, Digby (TY 125). In other words, although Abel is not "at the top of his tree," he is a respectable – if predictable and curmudgeonly – bourgeois Victorian man.

Abel's physical deformity, obtained during military duty, is a signifier of his masculine value, unlike Sara's, which, although

acquired early when someone dropped her as a baby, somehow expresses her plainness and unsuitability for marriage; or Crosby's "rheumatics," which are a symptom of her relegation to a life of servitude as a lower class person relegated to a life of serving the upper classes (TY 122, 221). Hence, Abel's clawlike fingers seem to be always performing (fumblingly, to be sure) masculine activities – paying for cabs, caressing his mistress, and, in Edward's memory, appreciatively flourishing expensive glasses of port. These activities attest to his success, his mastery in an imperial and capitalist system.

In his history of disability and military culture, David Serlin notes that by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, men were scrutinized and measured for their body type, proper (heteronormative) sexually proclivities, and physical soundness. Based on these biometric screenings they were declared either fit or unfit "types" for military service. The fact that war is probably the most disabling of occupations is an ironic corollary to the insistence that military recruits meet high standards (we might say *the* standards) for able-bodiedness. As Serlin explains, to be disabled during a battle is proof that one once was ideally able:

Disability acquired on the battlefield, however, was another matter altogether. For many veterans of the Civil War, the amputation stump, the artificial limb, or any other overt physical evidence of injury became shorthand for military service. In certain ways, disability became part of a uniform worn by both participants in and spectators of the brutalities of war. Medical photography, and portrait photography more broadly, helped transform the popular image of soldiering and military culture in general. The material evidence of physical wounds blurred with tacit forms of democratic participation and sacrifice.⁵³

Sara, Crosby, and Nicholas, in contrast to the disfigured Abel, are depicted as unfit and extraneous to the generational throughline of the story. Nicholas, who "ought to be in prison" (TY 297) because he is presumably a homosexual, loses his patronym and is known instead as the person they (the respectable English people) call "Brown" (TY 315). The other characters, notably Eleanor and North, demonstrate their liberal "flexibility" (to cite Robert McRuer) through their tolerance for him.⁵⁴ He is a catalyst for their character development but not

a person in his own right. Similarly, Martin exercises his beneficence through his compassionate, yet patronizing attitude toward Crosby. "I'm Crosby's God," he even remarks, a little disdainfully, to Sara (TY 230). And Sara we first see described through the eyes of Abel:

She [Eugenie] held out her hand partly to coax the little girl, partly, Abel guessed, in order to conceal the very slight deformity that always made him uncomfortable. She had been dropped when she was a baby; one shoulder was slightly higher than the other; it made him feel squeamish; he could not bear the least deformity in a child. It did not affect her spirits, however. She skipped up to him, whirling round on her toe, and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Then she tugged at her sister's frock, and they both rushed away into the back room laughing. (TY 122)

Unlike Abel, Sara never gains access to the places of privilege and status. She can be her cousin Martin's guest at a "chop house," but she is not invited, as her sister Maggie is, to dine in a shiny ballroom next to a "man in gold lace" (TY 139). Nor does she have the class-based access to a home on the "respectable" side of town, perhaps due to the fact that she does not marry, whether by choice or because she is not deemed "marriageable" because of her physical atypicality.

But Sara's story is in the middle portion of the text, not the conclusion. As a project that offers a genealogy of the "worship of proportion," *The Years* does not end without giving readers a critical opening to imagine other ways to make sense of our differences or deviations from the norm. The third generation of Pargiters, Peggy and North, hint at the possibility of those other ways. In the final, "Present Day," chapter of the novel, North has returned to England after a post-World War I stint as a farmer in Africa. He therefore bears with him the traces of colonialism and militarism, but, unlike Percival from *The Waves*, he is not frozen in that moment. In keeping with the *longue durée* of the novel (as opposed to the tight, diurnal cycle of *The Waves*), North's character is allowed to evolve. His evolution might also be contrasted with Jacob's status in *Jacob's Room* – fixed by death into the eternal youth who believes women are beautiful but brainless. North, on the other hand, demonstrates (a sometimes bemused) respect not just for his aunts and older female cousins, but also for Nicholas, the queer foreigner:

For instance, this evening at Eleanor's there was a man there with a foreign accent who squeezed lemon into his tea. Who might he be, he wondered? "One of Nell's dentists," said his sister Peggy, wrinkling her lip. For they all had lines cut, phrases ready-made. But that was the silent man on the sofa. It was the other one he meant – squeezing lemon in his tea. "We call him Brown," she murmured. Why Brown if he's a foreigner, he wondered. Anyhow they all romanticized solitude and savagery ... except this man Brown, who had said something that interested him. "If we do not know ourselves, how can we know other people?" (TY 309)

With their "ready-made" phrases and their romanticism of North's colonial experience, the guests at Eleanor's tea fall back on normalizing discourse. North, however, breaks the flow of that discourse by giving "just attention" (to return to Iris Murdoch's theory of ethical vision) to Nicholas. He may even, in this moment, be practicing the kind of self-knowledge that Nicholas (paraphrasing Plato) recommends, for he of all the guests appears open to knowing Nicholas.

Later, at another social gathering, North questions Eleanor's "sacrifice," as the eldest daughter, to a life of caring for the paterfamilias after her mother dies: "He looked at her. She had never married. Why not? he wondered. Sacrificed to the family, he supposed – old Grandpapa without any fingers" (TY 372). On the other hand, Peggy, also unmarried, is not regarded as an unfortunate spinster. She has a part in the reproductive throughline of the story, but not in the normative female role of mother. She is a doctor who helps to bring about the next generation by attending births – that is, by facilitating the births of other women's children. This is an alternative means of impacting the future, and one that is perhaps less territorial and possessive than the normative alternative posed by Milly (one of Eleanor Pargiter's sisters) and Gibbs, a friend of the family whom we first meet as an average, but healthy undergraduate, unlike the exceptional, but queer Tony Ashton. In what we might call a critically crip turn, North describes the now married and middle-aged Gibbises as "a parody, a travesty, an excrescence that had overgrown the form within" (TY 379).

Across the room in the hall where the Pargiters are gathered, Peggy muses separately on whether happiness is appropriate (if

indeed possible) when war, death, and suffering loom so close to the horizon:

The far-away sounds, the suggestion they brought in of other worlds, indifferent to this world, of people toiling, grinding, in the heart of darkness, in the depths of night, made her say over Eleanor's words, Happy in this world, happy with happy with living people. But how can one be "happy," she asked herself, in a world bursting with misery? On every placard at every street corner was Death; or worse – tyranny; brutality; torture; the fall of civilization; the end of freedom. We here, she thought, are only sheltering under a leaf, which will be destroyed. (TY 388)

She then is momentarily jolted out of her funk by the sound of her uncle and brother laughing at the portrait of a "monster" that the party guests have drawn in a game where each player depicts a part of a body without looking at the other parts that have been drawn and folded over before passing the drawing to the next player.

"I drew that – I drew that – I drew that!" said Renny, pointing to the legs from which a long tail of ribbon depended. She laughed, laughed, laughed; she could not help laughing.

"The face that launched a thousand ships!" said North, pointing to another part of the monster's person. They all laughed again. She stopped laughing; her lips smoothed themselves out. (TY 389)

It is not clear whether the "monstrosity" of the chimeric drawing or North's allusion to Helen of Troy and therefore war – "the fall of civilization" that has been preoccupying Peggy – causes her to stop laughing. We do know, however, that Peggy is compelled to speak at this moment, and that her halting speech turns into a critique of heteronormativity: "'Look here . . . ' she began. She wanted to express something that she felt to be very important; about a world in which people were whole, in which people were free . . . But they were laughing; she was serious. 'Look here . . . ' she began again" (TY 390; ellipses in original). Valuing wholeness, Peggy's speech is far from whole; rather, it is delivered in bits and starts, heavily punctuated by ellipses. Her relatives are, she says, discussing her brother North, "' . . . How he's to live, where he's to live,' she went on. ' . . . But what's the use, what's the point of saying that?'" (TY 390; ellipses in original). The gist of their conversation lacks meaning, she suggests, because what he will do seems predetermined by the logic of heteronormativity:

"What's the use?" she said, facing him. "You'll marry. You'll have children. What'll you do then? Make money. Write little books to make money . . ."

She had got it wrong. She had meant to say something impersonal, but she was being personal. It was done now however; she must flounder on now.

"You'll write one little book, and then another little book," she said viciously, "instead of living . . . living differently." (TY 390–91; ellipses in original)

"Little books" and children are ironically juxtaposed here, as one might think that for a writer the production of books would have some value, even if the traditional throughline of heteroreproductivity is deemed pointless.

Peggy's outburst at a party filled with guests, especially given the philosophical question – how to live – embedded near the beginning of her halting oration, calls to mind Socrates' speech in Plato's *Symposium*. Repeating the words of his female mentor, Diotima (the only female perspective offered in *The Symposium*), Socrates claims that "the object of love is not beauty" but rather "birth and procreation in a beautiful medium."⁵⁵ Procreation does not, for Diotima, have to refer to the birth of physical children; it can also result in the birth of "virtue, and especially wisdom."⁵⁶ Diotima explicitly describes love as a form of continuity:

Why procreation? Because procreation is as close as a mortal can get to being immortal and undying. Given our agreement that the aim of love is the permanent possession of goodness for oneself, it necessarily follows that we desire immortality along with goodness, and consequently the aim of love has to be immortality as well.⁵⁷

Woolf, through Peggy, seems to be taking an even stricter tack than Diotima, for, in her symposium, neither physical procreation nor intellectual creation is sufficient to ensure happiness (as eudemonia) or "a livable world" (to cite Butler). Perhaps the concept of beauty, so undone by the monstrous chimeric drawing that incited Peggy's speech, needs to be re-envisioned, or procreation – which needs to take place "in a beautiful medium," as Diotima suggests – cannot take place in "a world bursting with misery . . . or worse – tyranny; brutality; torture; the fall of civilization; the end of freedom" (TY 388). In either case, the norm has grown freakish by the end of *The Years*. This

is not the ending, however, for Woolf seems to suggest that such a recognition is a starting place for a new way of perceiving the richness of "living differently" (TY 391). For that reason, the novel ends not with Peggy's agonized call to live differently, but with an allusion to the sun cycle that shapes the interludes of *The Waves*. The last scene belongs to Eleanor, who, from a Platonic point of view, is not as barren as North (thinking only of marriage and childbearing), imagines her to be. Turning to her siblings as the party ends:

"And now?" she said, looking at Morris, who was drinking the last drops of a glass of wine. "And now?" she asked, holding out her hands to him."

The sun had risen, and the sky above the houses wore an air of extraordinary beauty, simplicity and peace. (435)

This ending, coming so soon after Peggy's anti-normative outburst, gently but firmly pries the fissures in heteronormative ideology open further, ending with siblings rather than procreative couples, expanding beyond the family (already expanded beyond biological kin in the large, intergenerational gathering that Eleanor is now leaving), and leaving the readers with the image of open air – signifying for Woolf a "freedom from unreal loyalties."⁵⁸

The sprawling gathering highlights the characters' interdependence, but not without the specter of precarity ushering them out the door (into the open air). Just before the guests leave, Delia, the Pargiter sister who has hosted the party, brings the two children of the caretaker up to the drawing room to give them each a piece of cake. They become something of a spectacle for the middle- and upper-middle-class partygoers: "They looked awkward and clumsy" in front of the guests, and "frightened" as the hostess commands them to eat (TY 428–29). None of the partygoers can understand the cockney accent with which the two children sing as the behest of Martin, who has essentially bribed the children out of their silent staring by asking them to "sing a song for sixpence!" (TY 429). This penultimate scene hearkens back to the epistemic arrogance that Woolf counters in *Three Guineas*, the sister text to *The Years*, as the privileged partygoers have no impetus to understand cockney speakers from the working class, although the working class must necessarily understand the

language of the middle and upper classes in order to exist as laborers. Perhaps for this reason the children are addressed primarily in imperatives such as "Eat!" "Speak!" and "Sing!" (TY 429). Considered together as twin aspects of the novel's ending, this scene of precarity amidst a scene of interdependence makes Eleanor's question "And now?" a gesture signifying a fragile but perceptible futurity.