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Virginia Woolf

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CHAPTER 6

SCIENTIFIC AND MEDICAL CONTEXTS

If one were to take *Mrs Dalloway*'s Dr Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw as typical scientific men, one might assume that Woolf viewed science as authoritarian and inhumane. If one were to take the clocks of Harley Street as representations of the scientific spirit (*MD*, p. 87), one might assume that she saw science as obsessed with quantity at the expense of quality, and believed it was capable of seeing the world only in analysed fragments, never as a whole. One might conclude that the scientific ideas of her time were of little relevance to her writings. The assumption that literature and science are fundamentally opposed has a pedigree stretching back to romanticism: the clocks of Harley Street, '[s]hredding and slicing', might be taken to illustrate Wordsworth's phrase 'we murder to dissect'.[1] As Gillian Beer remarks, for many years, critics saw modernist writing as 'separated from, or even inimical to' the science of the 1920s and 1930s, with the Bloomsbury Group being seen as particularly 'remote' from the discipline.[2] More recently, however, critics have recognized that Woolf was receptive to certain aspects of scientific thinking, and that the popular science writing of the period offered accessible and imaginatively stimulating accounts.

The passages in *Mrs Dalloway* describing an aeroplane may illustrate the contention. To Mr Bentley, who is 'vigorously rolling his strip of turf at Greenwich', the aeroplane becomes a symbol 'of man's soul; of his determination . . . to get outside his body, beyond his house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory' (*MD*, p. 24). For one critic, writing in 1973, not only did Mr Bentley symbolize scientific man, for whom 'Nature is a strip of turf to be vigorously rolled', but the physicist and the geneticist, Einstein and Mendel, were instances of such men.[3] However, to speak of 'science' and 'scientific man' as unchanging archetypes is misleading. As Mr Bentley's own thoughts remind us, science in Woolf's era was rapidly changing. If Bentley represents

the old scientific mentality, the aeroplane might equally represent the liberating possibilities of the new.[4]

Given that scientific ideas are scarcely ever expressed in literary works as coherent theories, but nearly always in fragmentary, allusive form, it is difficult for the reader to determine the extent to which the author was incorporating them consciously. Exceptionally, Woolf's near-contemporary Aldous Huxley included scientists as characters in several of his novels, and allowed them to provide coherent expositions of new theories and their philosophical implications.[5] But Woolf was more reluctant to allow ideas to obtrude. The reader needs to recontextualize her writings to rediscover which scientific ideas might have been taken as common knowledge at the time of writing. Given the range of scientific disciplines that had emerged by the early twentieth century, it is impossible to be comprehensive. Instead, this chapter will examine ideas of mental illness and of physical vitality; theories about the nature of matter; ideas drawn from astronomy and relativity theory; and ideas associated with telecommunications.

Mental Health: *Mrs Dalloway*

What has caused Septimus Warren Smith's breakdown? On a first reading of *Mrs Dalloway*, we may be inclined to agree with Sir William Bradshaw's diagnosis, that he is an example of 'the deferred effects of shell-shock' (*MD*, p. 155). However, there is something awkward about granting diagnostic authority to a man who attracts such suspicion, not only from his patient, but also from Clarissa. Moreover, Bradshaw in June 1923 appears to be out of touch with the latest thinking: in September 1922 a government committee on 'shell shock' had said that the term was misleading.[6] More generally still, in this period, there was no universally accepted system for understanding mental illness. Its different causes and different forms, always a matter of disagreement, had been newly thrown into question by Freudian psychoanalysis. *Mrs Dalloway* suggests quite explicitly that Septimus might have been treated more humanely, and suggests more subtly that other diagnoses might have been made.

Sir William Bradshaw recognizes as soon as Septimus walks into his consulting room, that it was 'a case of extreme gravity', and

decides within minutes that it was 'a case of complete breakdown—complete physical and nervous breakdown' (*MD*, p. 81). However, his diagnosis does not explain the cause of the illness, but merely groups the symptoms under a convenient label. Bradshaw's repeated reference to Septimus as a 'case' suggests that, unlike psychoanalytic practitioners, he will not be interested in listening to his patient as a person. Bradshaw's distinction between 'physical' and 'nervous' breakdowns betrays the recent separation of the 'nerve specialist' from the more general doctor. The phrase 'nervous breakdown' was a relatively new one: the earliest known examples date from 1904, one of them being in a letter by Woolf (*Letters*, i. 148). It differentiates the specifically nervous illness from a more general 'breakdown' of physical health. As such it reveals the connections between the two conditions, which were still considered important in the 1920s, and indicates the growing specialization of medical treatment: such breakdowns had become the domain of the 'alienist', later the 'nerve specialist', and later still the psychiatrist.

The treatment which Bradshaw prescribes indicates the continued importance of the connection between 'physical' and 'nervous' breakdown. Septimus is required to rest in bed for six months, in solitude, 'without friends, without books, without messages' (*MD*, p. 84). Importantly, he is required to eat well, and to drink milk, to the extent that a man who begins the cure weighing 'seven stone six' comes out 'weighing twelve'. The treatment is the rest cure, devised by the American neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell, and introduced in Britain in the 1880s.[7] Weir Mitchell's description of it as involving 'a combination of entire rest and of excessive feeding' closely matches Bradshaw's prescription. Weir Mitchell's female patients 'were expected to gain as much as fifty pounds on a diet that began with milk and gradually built up to several substantial meals a day';[8] the increases of weight in Bradshaw's system are greater, but comparable.

The rest cure was invented as a treatment for neuraesthenia, one of the two or three accepted categories of mental illness in women in the late nineteenth century. Doctors distinguished between anorexia nervosa, hysteria, and neurasthenia, with some taking anorexia to be a subcategory of hysteria.[9] Hysteria and neurasthenia had many symptoms in common, but while the former condition tended towards disruptiveness and violence, the latter tended to produce

temporary disabilities such as the loss of the voice or the paralysis of a limb. A distinction of social class was at work: neurasthenia was the 'more prestigious and attractive form of female nervousness'; neurasthenics 'were thought to be cooperative, ladylike, and well-bred'.[10] When the First World War began to produce cases of mental breakdown, the categories were extended to include men. The social distinction continued: hysterical conditions tended to appear in the ranks, while neurasthenic ones were more prominent among officers.[11] Military neurasthenics tended to suffer from symptoms such as 'nightmares, insomnia, heart palpitations, dizziness, depression, [and] disorientation'.[12] Septimus's symptoms—'headaches, sleeplessness, fears, dreams' (*MD*, p. 77)—place him in this category, and to this extent Bradshaw's rest cure is the appropriate one.

The rest cure imagines the body to have reserves of energy which are easily depleted and difficult to restore. The concept has its roots in physics, specifically in mid-nineteenth-century theories of thermodynamics. According to physicists, energy continually disperses from all bodies: the sun dissipates its energy continuously, like a steam boiler; so too does the human body. The philosopher Herbert Spencer used these concepts to explain differences between the sexes. In his *Principles of Biology* (1867), *Principles of Sociology* (1876), and other works, he argued that each human being had a fixed 'fund' of energy to expend, and that as women needed to preserve their energy 'to meet the cost of reproduction', it was not available for the mental or physical growth of the individual.[13] In Spencer's account, women were simply less completely evolved than men. As Conway notes, Spencer's theory gave 'scientific authority' to the view of women as 'intuitive and irrational'.[14] In 1874, the greatest psychiatrist of his day, Henry Maudsley, argued that adolescent girls expended a great deal of energy in puberty, and had 'little vitality to spare' for other functions.[15] Maudsley's term 'vitality', which might now appear to be part of everyday language, carried the authority of a supposedly scientific theory. Maudsley concluded that girls' education should be sharply differentiated from that of boys; it should be less demanding, physically and mentally. Spencer's theory was taken further in 1889 by the biologists Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson in *The Evolution of Sex*. They argued that sexual differences could be traced back to basic differences in the metabolisms of male and female cells. Male cells

had the tendency to dissipate energy, while female cells stored or built it up. The 'active' qualities of sperm and the 'passive' qualities of ova derived from this distinction. So too did male aggression and female passivity.[16] While Spencer and Darwin saw women's qualities as 'acquired' characteristics of the species, Geddes and Thomson believed them to be so profoundly rooted in metabolic differences that they could never be altered by evolution, still less by legislation. 'What was decided among the prehistoric *Protozoa*', wrote Geddes, 'can not be annulled by act of Parliament'.[17]

Such ideas persisted into the twentieth century. Geddes and Thomson repeated their claims about male and female metabolisms in *Sex* (1914), a non-technical book in the Home University Library series. In 1925 the Hogarth Press published *Woman: An Inquiry* by Willa Muir. Muir claimed to be interested not in purely physical differences between men and women, nor those created by a difference in social power, but in the underlying 'spiritual' differences. Nevertheless, she drew upon Spencer's biological discourse, which had in turn embodied the mid-Victorian relations of men and women. 'Motherhood', wrote Muir, is a 'greater tax on vital energy than fatherhood'. This led her to speculate that there was an 'essential difference' between men and women in 'the distribution of energy'. As all women are 'potential mothers', they need to maintain a 'reserve' of energy. Men therefore have more energy 'at their conscious disposal', while women's energy is 'diverted more into unconscious life'.[18] Though it was refracted through a Freudian terminology of the 'unconscious', the Spencerian idea lived on. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Miss Kilman has told Elizabeth that '[w]hen people are happy, they have a reserve . . . upon which to draw' (*MD*, p. 110). Miss Kilman feels herself to be like a wheel without a tyre: she is not only depleted, but deflated. The rest cure aimed to recharge depleted vitality, but it did not claim to alter the fundamental metabolic differences between men and women.

Sir William Bradshaw's mantra of 'proportion' carries connotations that are rooted in the same patriarchal construction of the female body. 'Sir William said he never spoke of "madness"; he called it not having a sense of proportion' (*MD*, p. 82). Critics have noted that Bradshaw echoes Virginia Woolf's own heart specialist, Harrington Sainsbury, who advised her in August 1922 to 'practise equanimity'.[19] However, this echo was a private matter; 'proportion'

was in the public domain. In March 1912, at the height of the militant campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), *The Times* published a long letter from the eminent bacteriologist Sir Almroth Wright (1861–1947). He condemned what he saw as the fatuousness of the aims of the suffragists, and warned of the disastrous consequences if the vote were granted. An editorial on the same day endorsed his account of 'the unchangeable physical basis upon which sex difference rests'.[20] Wright's arguments were a version of the argument from force: 'women are a class of voters who cannot effectively back up their votes by force', he wrote. Though the argument from force need not depend on an energetic conception of the body, Wright's view of physiology clearly derived from Spencer.[21] Wright dismissed the idea that a woman should receive the same wages as a man for doing the same work by stating that 'even if woman succeeds in doing the same work as man, he has behind him a much larger reserve of physical strength'. This 'reserve' was useful to the employer in 'a time of strain', and was worth paying extra for. Moreover, in Wright's view, 'woman' was physiologically unstable. His letter began from the position that for 'man' 'the physiology and psychology of woman is full of difficulties'. Men were mystified when they encountered in women 'periodically recurring phases of hypersensitiveness', 'unreasonableness', and crucially for *Mrs Dalloway*, 'loss of the sense of proportion'. He went on to describe the various 'types' of suffragist, motivated by factors such as adolescent instability, menopausal instability, and lack of sexual fulfilment. In Wright's view there was an 'element of mental disorder' in the suffrage movement; women 'as a class' were 'quite incompetent to adjudicate upon political issues'.

Wright's letter quickly achieved notoriety. It met with unequivocal condemnation in the suffrage and socialist press, as did his later pamphlet *The Unexpurgated Case Against Woman Suffrage*; the only thing that was said in Wright's favour was that he exposed the underlying misogyny and the dubious logic of the anti-suffragists.[22] Given Wright's notoriety, it is very likely that Woolf would have known his letter and his views on 'proportion'. As she had been suffering from mental illness in the early months of 1912, it would have had a particularly personal impact: though not a 'militant' suffragist, she would have been aware that she seemed to prove his argument, and simultaneously aware of that argument's reductiveness

and inadequacy. Her feminism and her mental health were certainly connected, but her politics was not pathological. Rather, her experience of the medical profession illuminated the workings of patriarchal authority. By placing 'proportion' at the centre of Bradshaw's idea of normality, Woolf hints at connections between the treatment of soldiers after the war and the treatment of women before it.

Though Bradshaw apparently diagnoses Septimus as a shell-shocked neuraesthenic, both the consultation scene and other scenes hint at other diagnoses. It is clear that ideas of masculinity are significant for Septimus: physically 'weakly' before the war, during it he 'developed manliness'. However, running contrary to his manliness is an element of physical attraction to his officer, Evans. 'It was a case of two dogs playing on a hearth-rug; one worrying a paper screw, snarling, snapping, giving a pinch, now and then, at the old dog's ear . . . They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other' (*MD*, p. 73). The poetry of the First World War often makes reference to such same-sex bonds.[23] However, when Evans is killed, Septimus cannot express his full feelings, and instead congratulates himself 'upon feeling very little' (*MD*, p. 73). Septimus cannot mourn Evans, because to do so would be to reveal a taboo sexuality; but without mourning Evans, he cannot escape from the war. Prevented from feeling for Evans, he becomes unable to feel for anyone. The novel offers enough information about Septimus and Evans for the reader to reach a Freudian diagnosis in terms of 'repression' and 'sublimation'.[24] Some opponents of psychoanalysis had taken the existence of the 'war neuroses' to disprove Freud's theory that neurotic symptoms were due to sexual forces.[25] Freud and his supporters replied that to acknowledge the importance of the traumatic experience of war was not to exclude sexual factors. Woolf knew of Freud's works—the Hogarth Press was publishing them—and would certainly have been aware of his ideas at least in outline, and possibly of the controversy over war neuroses.[26] In a draft version of the novel, even Hugh Whitbread is up-to-date enough to have 'heard of' Freud.[27] Unlike her contemporary Rose Macaulay, whose 1921 novel *Dangerous Ages* is speckled with his terminology, Woolf does not allow Freud to obtrude. However, she hints: immediately after we hear of Septimus congratulating himself on feeling very little, we are told that 'The War had taught him. It

was sublime' (*MD*, p. 73). One thing the war may have taught him is to sublimate his sexual desires.

Sir William Bradshaw asks Septimus whether he served in the war, but takes little interest in the details, and apparently never hears about Evans's death. He places the cause of the illness elsewhere, though again, the novel is far from explicit. He is reported as believing that 'unsocial impulses' are 'bred more than anything by the lack of good blood'. 'Blood' here can be read both literally and metaphorically. The 1910–11 *Encyclopedia Britannica*'s discussion of the causes of insanity gave relatively little space to 'mental stress', and none at all to the new Freudian ideas; it gave much more to speculation about toxic agents that poison the nervous system.[28] The authors of its article on insanity drew particular attention to the 'delerium of collapse' which follows infectious diseases such as typhus, pneumonia, and influenza, and which characteristically included hallucinations. Rachel Vinrace's breakdown in *The Voyage Out* can be diagnosed within these terms. It was also recognized that syphilis caused insanity. *The Times*, commenting on the Government report into shell shock, regretted that it had not fully investigated the effects of certain pre-existing 'infections'.[29] Septimus's lack of good blood could be taken to mean that there are poisons in his body. A diagnosis of insanity following an infection would suggest a parallel with Clarissa, the victim of influenza. Influenza was also recognized as causing 'debility and nervous depression': after an influenza epidemic in Paris in 1890, the suicide rate there had increased by 25 per cent.[30] The reader who was aware of this correlation might wonder if Clarissa was going to follow Septimus's example. At one stage in writing the novel, Woolf had indeed intended her to commit suicide, 'or perhaps merely to die at the end of the party'.[31]

It would be more natural to refer to infected blood as 'bad blood', rather than 'the absence of good blood', and it is more likely that Bradshaw attributes Septimus's insanity to 'blood' in the sense of hereditary factors. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* reckoned the 'hereditary transmission of a liability to mental disease' to be 'the most important among all the predisposing causes of insanity'.[32] The foundation for such views was eugenics, a science that aimed to eliminate bad hereditary factors in the human race and to encourage good ones. What counted as good and bad were of course culturally variable. There is a comical side to this: extraordinarily, one writer

believed that ' "strange first names" were symptomatic of latent family degeneracy'; on this basis, the fantastically named Septimus was doomed from his christening day.[33] There is also a deadly serious side: some eugenists advocated the sterilization or killing of 'the unfit', and in Nazi Germany, this proposal became a reality. Bradshaw does not explicitly advocate eugenic murder or sterilization, but, like some of Woolf's own doctors, he 'forbade childbirth' (*MD*, p. 84).[34]

Vitality and Women's Writing: *A Room of One's Own*

Throughout *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf remains mindful of science as part of culture, both as a part of culture which has oppressed women, and as a part to which they have contributed and can continue to contribute. One measure of the poverty of Fernham College is the very fact that Woolf is lecturing on women and fiction: were it richer, 'the subject of our talk might have been archaeology, botany, anthropology, physics, the nature of the atom, mathematics, astronomy, relativity, geography' (*ROO*, p. 27). Because women have been excluded from science, one cannot 'take an apple and remark, Newton discovered the laws of gravitation and Newton was a woman' (p. 111). While Woolf's argument is primarily concerned with the absence of a female literary canon, she is, like the suffrage campaigners, aware of the importance of foremothers in other disciplines. She also suggests that women are gaining access to the sciences. In *Love's Adventure*, the imaginary novel from which she quotes, Chloe and Olivia share a laboratory together (p. 108).[35]

Woolf also focuses on specific scientific ideas. Among the misogynist works that Woolf describes in the British Museum are some on the small size of women's brains (*ROO*, p. 37). Such works really existed: in 1887 the biologist George Romanes had stated that women's brains were, on average, 5 ounces lighter than men's, remarking that one would consequently expect to find a 'marked inferiority of intellectual power' in women.[36] The 'sages' who considered women to be 'shallower in the brain' (*ROO*, p. 38) may have been speaking metaphorically, but they may also have been speaking neurologically: Romanes had been informed that the 'grey matter, or cortex' of the female brain was 'shallower than that of the male'.[37]

The crucial concept for *A Room of One's Own* is vitality. Vitality is

the conceptual bridge between the material conditions for literary creation (money and privacy) and the act of creation itself. On the opening page of the manuscript version Woolf had characterized fiction as an art which does not lend itself to examination 'owing to its vast size' and 'its immense vitality', though she deleted 'vitality' and replaced it with 'fertility'.[38] In the third chapter of the published version, she compares the effects of male discouragement on the mind of a female artist to the effects of a diet of 'ordinary' milk on a laboratory rat: the rat fed on ordinary milk was 'furtive, timid and small', while that fed on 'Grade A' milk was 'glossy, big and bold' (*ROO*, p. 68). Woolf explores the idea of vitality more explicitly in the following pages. She considers the effects on a girl in the nineteenth century of being told that women are supported by, and must minister to, men: such opinions 'must have lowered her vitality, and told profoundly upon her work' (p. 70). Woolf repeats the idea in the following paragraph: a woman in the nineteenth century 'was snubbed, slapped, lectured and exhorted', and in consequence her mind 'must have been strained and her vitality lowered' (p. 71). Where writers like Henry Maudsley and Willa Muir had understood vitality in narrowly biological terms, Woolf places it in a broader social context. It was not puberty that lowered the vitality of the adolescent girl, but patriarchy.

In the fourth chapter, Woolf's claim that '[t]he book has somehow to be adapted to the body' seems to grant priority to biology, but again Woolf places her biological terms in a social context. She goes on to say that 'women's books should be shorter' and 'more concentrated' than those of men, 'so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work' (*ROO*, p. 101); as her earlier account of Jane Austen has made clear (pp. 86–7), interruptions are a social and not a biological fact. She makes a claim of a more biological character, that 'the nerves that feed the brain would seem to differ in men and women'; she suggests in consequence that the methods of education best suited to one sex might not be suited to the other. The claim is surprising. Woolf's argument about the nerves that feed the brain seems to resemble reductive arguments about brain size. It leaves out the social dimension. However, there is a twist. Such arguments normally invoke the authority of specific scientists, or, at the very least, the authority of 'science'. When Woolf goes to the bookcase, she finds that there is no published evidence to support

84. For Bennett's criticism, see Majumdar and McLaurin (eds.), *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, 112.

CHAPTER 6. Scientific and Medical Contexts

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4. G. Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 162.
5. e.g. Calamy in A. Huxley's *Those Barren Leaves* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1925).
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8. Ibid. 138–9.
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10. Ibid. 134.
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13. J. Conway, 'Stereotypes of Femininity in a Theory of Sexual Evolution', *Victorian Studies*, 14 (1970), 47–62, at 48. See also J. Lewis, *Women in England, 1870–1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1984), 83–5; Showalter, *Female Malady*, 121–5.
14. Conway, 'Stereotypes', 49.
15. H. Maudsley, 'Sex in Mind and in Education' (1874), summarized in Showalter, *Female Malady*, 124–5.
16. Conway, 'Stereotypes', 50–1.
17. P. Geddes, quoted ibid. 53.
18. W. Muir, *Woman: An Inquiry* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), 13–14.
19. H. Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), 454; D. Bradshaw, in his edition of *Mrs Dalloway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 179–80.
20. A. E. Wright, 'Suffrage Fallacies', *The Times*, 28 Mar. 1912, pp. 7–8; anon., 'To-day's Debate on Woman Franchise', *The Times*, 28 Mar. 1912, p. 7. Wright's letter was reprinted (though certainly not endorsed) by *Freewoman*, 1/20 (4 Apr. 1912), 392–4, and in Wright's *The Unexpurgated Case Against Woman Suffrage* (London: Constable, 1913), 77–87.
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32. 'Insanity', 597.
33. Showalter, *Female Malady*, 179, quoting E. C. Southard, *Shell-Shock and other Neuro-Psychiatric Problems* (1919).
34. Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 334.
35. For other approaches, see S. M. Squier, 'Invisible Assistants or Lab Partners? Female Modernism and the Culture(s) of Modern Science', in L. Rado (ed.), *Rereading Modernism: New Directions in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Garland, 1994), 299–319; and C. Webb, 'The Room as Laboratory: The Gender of Science and Literature in Modernist Polemics', in Rado (ed.), *Modernism, Gender, and Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach* (New York: Garland, 1997), 337–52.
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