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Recently republished by Paris Press, Virginia Woolf's meditation from the sickbed first appeared in T.S. Eliot's *The Criterion* in January 1926. In this short reflection, I want to consider how Woolf offers us an early model for a patient-centered narrative medicine that challenges reductive assumptions about sickness as a state of passive inactivity at the mercy of caretakers.

Over the course of "On Being Ill," Woolf strikingly refigures illness experience as transformative: beyond merely the effects of microbes, illness harbors the potential for "spiritual change" and the revelation of otherwise "undiscovered countries" – vast bodily territories laden with sensations and energies accessible only when the body is no longer healthy (3). She decries the persistence of mind/body dualism in the way illness experience continues to be narrated: why has Western literature been so blatantly biased toward the trials and tribulations of the mind, as opposed to the "daily drama of the body"? (5). Woolf thus invites us to "speculate carnally" on the "drama" of the sick body to bear witness to a spectacular vision of sensuous agency and activity (12). Her new cosmology of the sick, suffused with energy and resistance, calls out "the poverty of language" to do justice to illness experience. In theorizing from the sickbed, Woolf rejects what Susan Sontag will later call in *Illness as Metaphor* the "punitive and sentimental fantasies" so often attached to illness (3).

What can the sick body *do* from the sickbed?

Woolf challenges our commonsense thinking: the healthy body, confined and regulated by society, is a liability rather than the sick body absolved from such impositions. Sickness frees the invalid from the oppressive expectations or "genial pretense" of having to feign wellness (12). Capitalist society demands not only healthy bodies that participate in its economies but also the feigning of health despite bodies feeling otherwise. Health in this framework is not an inherently desirable form of embodiment but one carefully manicured to appear as such as we remain afraid of the consequences of becoming sick. Woolf anticipates familiar critiques of productivity: the constant demand for "endless activity" wastes the body's "immeasurable resources" that are not directed toward the self but instead funneled toward "some purpose which has nothing to do with human pleasure or human profit" (13-14). The tyranny of health is that it seems only to be a prerequisite condition for meaningless, unceasing labor.

Woolf proffers instead a new mode of being that is "lying recumbent" — a deliberate inactivity that involves looking up at passing clouds, the seemingly taken-for-granted to discover a

“snowfield of the mind where man has not trodden,” that exceeds routinized, desensitized ways of living (13). Because of the sick body’s intense familiarity with the arrhythmic qualities of sickness, it can inhabit the spaces between the regimented life of the healthy. It can only be the recumbent that can model this new ontology: the sick embody a direct challenge to the linear progress narrative of health in favor of idleness, which Woolf sees as so full of potential.

Woolf’s mythmaking about the sick body questions what kinds of human labors are understood as productive and valuable. In a period of widespread industrial accidents, wartime injury, and disability, Woolf dares to ask what work these forgotten bodies do behind the closed doors of their convalescence. Rather than passively waiting to die, the sick body acts; it chooses to “wriggle” instead of “stiffen[ing] peaceably into glassy mounds” (17).