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**Neurodiverse Modernism:
Cognitive Disability and Autism in the Works of
Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Joseph Conrad and Samuel Beckett**

A Dissertation Presented

by

Anthony Matthew Dotterman

to

The Graduate School

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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This dissertation argues that the form and context of the modernist novel allows for the representation of a wide range of cognitive and neurological differences. Building on Patrick McDonagh's work "Autism and Modernism," my dissertation elucidates how the formal elements of the modernist novel—criticized by Georg Lukács for its potential to put readers in the mind of the mentally ill—paved the way for the conception of cognitive differences like autism since they demonstrated the isolating effects of deficits/differences in the individual's conception of time, sensory experience, mind reading and language. While the works under study do not present a homogenous attitude towards disability—they collectively present a spectrum of ability levels and often conflicted attitudes towards cognitive difference—they all prominently feature autistic characters and deem judgments regarding cognitive normality as inherently problematic. Furthermore, physical and neurological difference is often figured as inherently valuable—in terms of testing the aesthetic possibilities of the novel and in critiquing society's standardized conceptions of normality as it relates to such varied concepts as gender, sexuality and behavior—in these novels. While these works occasionally demonstrate a concern with the biological influences and primitivism of the "other" in a cosmopolitan society, I argue that these texts demonstrate as much of an interest in intellectual disability and deviance as a product of the racial and intellectual mainstream as they do racialized difference. These works, then, suggest an aesthetic and philosophical commitment to cognitive variance and deviance, as well as an anxiety regarding the changing nature of human experience and the individual's ability to adapt to a modern world. This project presents an important counter-point to critical perspectives that view modernist writers and novels as presenting homogenous attitudes towards cognitive difference and pathology.

For Angela Ridinger-Dotterman

Jack Cooper Dotterman

Sam O'Connor Dotterman

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Introduction:

From Virginia's Sister to Murphy's Chair

On November 11, 2012, around the same time I began putting together the prospectus for this dissertation, I sat in on an Autism Studies panel at a regional MLA conference. My motivations for attending the panel for twofold: 1) I had presented a paper the previous year on Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*—a work which prominently employs an autistic character and autistic modes of narration--and I was just beginning to think about how I might bring my literary research interests into dialogue with Disability Studies. 2) Since the time was son was diagnosed with autism at the beginning of my third year in my PhD program, I have been trying to consider how exactly his way of seeing the world is different from mine. As one of only two other people motivated enough to get up for a 9:00 a.m. Sunday panel, I eagerly leaned in to listen to the panelists discuss their personal and professional perspectives on autism.

It was during this panel that I first heard the term neurodiversity.¹ In fact, the panel opened my eyes to a great many issues which intersected between the personal and professional. As an instructor in a writing intensive first year program, my classes have seen a spike in adult, autistic students over the past three years. Their difference (s) in my classes have often stood, and have not always been accepted—by fellow faculty and students alike—in the university. Autistic identity is not simply defined by the individual's academic ability, the range between high and low functioning can be quite vast, as a matter of fact, but often by his or her unconscious refusal to adhere to society's tacit conceptions of normality. In my classes, I have

¹ Neurodiversity is an approach to learning and disability that suggests that neurological disorders like autism are a result of natural human variation and not a pathology. Rather than looking for cures for neurological disorders, neurodiversity advocates work to promote social support systems and stress the value (s) of neurological difference for society.

seen some of these students talk endlessly about their own interests, find humor in seemingly sober situations, and often act as if they were oblivious to their academic and social peers.

Indeed, autism has become so ubiquitous in popular culture today that one tends to forget that autism is concurrently a concrete, neurological identity and a cultural construction. The use of the term autistic to describe a student, be it in grade school or college, is often an implicit affirmation of artificial epistemological lines that separate normal from abnormal behavior, accepted thinking from pathologized identity. An autistic student in one of my writing classes, for example, was once described as “being quite defensive” about expressing his opinion that a learning strategist at the university was giving him incorrect instruction on how to plan a research paper (the student was correct and the learning strategist was wrong). The simple truth is that using the term “defensive” to describe a difference of opinion is a product of the artificial nature of language in respect to disability as the learning strategist interpreted a natural and encouraged aspect of development—independent thinking—as a marker of “autistic pathology.” These issues are widespread. ABA therapists and special education teachers consistently give “compliance work” to autistic students in special education classes, forms of social conditioning that are all too often unquestioned even as schools progressively instruct their neurotypical students not to use more blatantly derogatory terms like “retarded” in the classroom.

It is within the framework of this schism—the gap between a designated pathology or label of disability founded on artificial notions of normality and abnormality and more dynamic conceptions of neurological difference that often celebrate human variation—that I approach the Modernist texts in this work. During one of my early meetings with my dissertation committee, I was asked how I intended to account for the fact that the writers I intended to study—Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Joseph Conrad and Samuel Beckett—all wrote before Leo Kanner’s

and Hans Asperger's separate, pioneering studies on autistic children in 1943 and 1944.² My answer to this question now is that in all likelihood, autism has always existed as a form of neurological and cognitive difference. The one thing that has definitely changed is society's ability to identify and categorize this difference from the early years of an individual's life to adulthood. While I would contend that there are very legitimate arguments to be made that the rate of autism is increasing in society, I do not intend to address those issues in this dissertation. Rather, I simply contend that the outward signs of autistic difference as we identify them today, have always existed to varying extents in society and the writers under study here rather definitively, even if accidentally, represent autistic modes of being and thinking.³ Autism might just as soon be replaced by another term for cognitive difference in twenty years, disappearing from our medical lexicon in the same way neurasthenia did in the twentieth century. Yet, the underlying physical and cognitive characteristics of this identity will most likely remain fundamentally unchanged.

What are autistic modes of being and thinking, then? Perhaps the most important thing to mention—in relation to my proceeding analysis of these Modernist authors and their texts—is that autism is an embodied form of cognition. It is a difference, or dysfunction depending on how one views this issue, grounded in neurology. To explain, many of the outward signs of autism—be it delayed or “abnormal” speech, idiosyncratic behavior like hand flapping or

² Prior to Kanner and Asperger, Eugene Bleuler coined the term autism in 1908 to describe “the most severe schizophrenics, who have no more contact with the outside world” and “live in a world of their own” (63). Autism does not exist a category separate from schizophrenia until the works of Kanner and Asperger.

³ Rob Houston and Uta Frith have notably done some work identifying the presence of autistic difference prior to the work of Asperger and Kanner. In their work, *Autism and History*, Houston and Frith examine the case of Hugh Blair, an eighteenth century Scottish landowner “whose marriage was annulled do to his mental incapacity.” Using contemporary understanding of autism in conjunction with witness statements from court records, the authors conclude Blair would have been diagnosed with autism today.

echolalia, or failure to interact in socially “appropriate” ways—have physical causes. Language delays, for example, are often issues of “processing”⁴ not intelligence.

In a fashion, then, modernist aesthetics are naturally aligned with the cultural and scientific construction of autism because of the genre’s reverence for depicting the dynamics of sensual and intuitive experiences at the expense of rational and objective modes of narration. Indeed, Harold Segel perhaps explains the “modernist preoccupation with physicality” best in terms of the genre’s “widespread disenchantment with [an] intellectual culture” that stressed “rationalism” over “intuition” and “spontaneity” in art as these ideas were connected to questioned ideas of “epistemological authority.”⁵ The body, therefore, becomes the site of an aesthetic stance that seeks to contest traditional forms of art founded on intellectual theories of rationalism and epistemological certainty. “The campaign against tradition was dynamic and aggressive, and it sought to subordinate the virtues of the mind to those of the body. Passivity yielded to activism, the rational to the irrational, the conscious to the unconscious” (Segel 1). Embodied forms of cognition and cognitive difference, such as autism, dramatize the body’s relationship with modernity and its more standardized, objective conceptions of truth and value.

This links the construction of autism with the formal aspects of Modernism in a couple of additionally significant ways: First, since the Modernist movement is often summed up by the slogan “make no compromise with the public taste,” Modernist aesthetics are figuratively autistic

⁴ Processing disorders are any disorders that directly affect the brain’s ability to process information that comes from any of the senses properly. A processing disorder is grouped into one of four categories based on which area of processing has problems: sensory, visual, auditory, and language. Each of these areas can lead to different processing deficiencies.

⁵ Segel explains this idea further with regards to the failure of language. Yet, where language failed to convey meaning, Segel argues that Modernist writers “thought that the body, too, was language and, hence, semantically worthy” (1).

since they obey their own narrative impulses without regard to social or cultural pressures. Second, the formal aspects of Modernism stress a spectrum of ways to interpret the physical world. Both Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner explore, through the formal aspects of their fiction, the concept that people will naturally experience the same event in entirely different ways. *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, essentially covers the same chronological and narrative ground through its four sections, but the characters' differences of perception—embodied most explicitly in the autistic cognition of Benjy Compson—very much shape the reader's conception of truth. Similarly, *To the Lighthouse* explores the differences between the private, sensory worlds of Mrs. Ramsay and the other characters in the novel.

Since cognition is figured as embodied in so many Modernist texts, then, outwardly disabled characters like Benjy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* or Stevie, another autistic character, in *The Secret Agent* often transcend the time period's rigid definitions of idiocy.⁶ In one respect, the extraordinary bodies and minds of characters like Stevie or Benjy are valued by Modernist writers because they represent modes of cognition that exist below the level of culture. In effect, the prominent employment of these characters in Modernist texts supports James McFarlane's argument that Modernist aesthetics were "a repudiation of [one of] the most cherished beliefs of the nineteenth-century liberal mind-- that society at large and not the individual was the real custodian of human values" (McFarlane 80). In effect, I would argue that Modernism's focus on the truth of individual experiences, the fragmentation of knowledge and the destruction of comprehensive systems of epistemology define Modernist aesthetics as autistic

⁶ I am using the term idiocy as it existed in its 19th and early 20th century medical sense. According to the 1845 Lunatics Act, an "idiot" was defined as "every person, whose mind from his birth by a perpetual infirmity is so deficient as to be incapable of directing him in any matter which requires thought, or judgment, is, in legal phraseology, an idiot" (Newman 19).

in nature. While society today commonly refers to autistic individuals as being “mind blind,” because autistic individuals are perceived as not having the ability to interpret how individual actions are motivated by unstated mental processes and emotional states, Modernist literature as a whole questions the individual’s ability to accurately gauge internal realities.

There is an acknowledged link, then, between the autistic dynamic present in certain works of Modernist literature prior to the studies of Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger and the construction of autism as a distinct neurological identity and medical pathology. This link, which Patrick McDonagh explores in his essay “Autism and Modernism” acknowledges that “aesthetic modernism” not only “grew in parallel with psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis,” but that it “has been critical in articulating cultural perceptions of the modern identity” (101,108). Certainly, Hans Asperger’s description of autistic subjects being “egocentric in the extreme” and “obeying only spontaneous impulses and never paying attention to social demands” (75) could apply to characters in many a novel from the early decades of the twentieth century.

While McDonagh is the first literary scholar to specifically connect the contemporary conception of autism to modernist aesthetics, early critics of modernism have noted how its writers have not simply employed elements of the “pathological” mind in narrative, but have argued that modernist aesthetics blur the lines between the normal and the abnormal mind. Reflecting on Samuel Beckett’s and William Faulkner’s “glorification of the abnormal” in “The Ideology of Modernism” (1956), Georg Lukács (1885-1971) argued that Modernism—in contrast to “traditional realism”—presents “eccentricity” without the benefit of its “necessary complement of the average.” Since mental pathology functions as an integral part of the stylistic discourse of modernism—in the sense that modernist writers like James Joyce present “reality as

an incoherent stream of consciousness” (31) that is matched only by the “disintegration of” a sense of truth as it is observed in “the outer world” (25)—mental pathology is presented less as a “distortion” than as the natural state of reality. Hence, modernism prefigures autism and the neurodiversity movement since its formal elements suggest the subjective and natural human variation of the mind.

This is the first full length study to examine the role of autistic characters in Transatlantic Modernism, then. As I will argue, the works and writers examined in this dissertation are not overtly political in their approach to cognitive disability. On the contrary, while some of the authors—Virginia Woolf, most notably—were influenced by their personal experiences with disability, their works do not explicitly advocate for any kind of legal or social reform regarding the treatment of the disabled. Rather, the disabled and/or autistic characters analyzed in this work are conduits for broader concerns and issues in these novels. Furthermore, the works under study do not present a homogenous attitude towards disability. Instead, they collectively present a spectrum of ability levels—ranging from Cam’s autistic eccentricity in *To the Lighthouse* to Benjy’s extreme autistic isolation and cognitive disability in *The Sound and the Fury*—and often conflicted attitudes towards cognitive difference. In employing “cognitively othered” characters, though, these novels challenge wider judgments regarding society’s standardized concepts of normality as it relates to such varied concepts of gender, sexuality and behavior. These authors, therefore, embrace the concept of neurodiversity and its ability to challenge mainstream culture.

In a sense, the works here deconstruct or challenge the idea of the “normal man” –in Lukács’s literary and cultural sense—in that all the characters in these works are part of the racial and cultural mainstream. Indeed, the reader of this dissertation may notice that there are very

little in the way of ethnically or racially marginalized characters in these novels. There are no African American characters in these works; where racial or cultural “foreignness” is presented—as it is in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*—these epistemological categories are dynamic and unstable. In its place, these works use neurological difference to symbolize a range of cultural and racial identities present within the mainstream. Here, national, racial and cultural definitions collapse as characters that outwardly represent the racial mainstream engage in modes of cognition—animalized sense perception, as one example—that society interprets as racialized or foreign modes of perception. These works, then, suggest an aesthetic and philosophical commitment to cognitive variance and deviance, as well as an anxiety regarding the changing nature of human experience and the individual’s attempt to adapt to a modern world.

The Chapters:

This dissertation begins with a close reading of Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*. As the title of this introduction alludes, my reading of the novel is informed by the biographical details of the life of Virginia Woolf’s half-sister Laura Stephen and her influence on the Stephen family. While Hermione Lee argues that Laura Stephen, Virginia Woolf’s “hardly ever referred to half-sister” was a source of “fearful opposition, not identification” for the author, I contend that because Virginia Woolf and Laura Stephen saw many of the same doctors, and since Woolf struggled with a variety of physical and cognitive ailments in her lifetime, Laura is a source of interpretative possibility in Woolf’s fiction. Specifically, where previous critics have noted the absence of a clearly disabled figure in *To the Lighthouse*—a novel that models most of its characters on real life counterparts in the Stephen and Duckworth families—I contend that Cam is a representation of Laura Stephen in so far as the author gives Cam atypical speech and mannerisms as well as Laura’s documented “fierce” or “wild” personality. Viewed from the

standpoint that Laura's described behaviors are consistent with contemporary models of autistic difference, Cam represents an autistic identity at the center of Woolf's novel.

Instead of viewing Cam as profoundly disabled, however, my analysis of Cam--and *To the Lighthouse*, more generally—is grounded in the context of Leslie Stephen's attempts to “normalize” his first born daughter. As I explain, while Laura Stephen's learning difficulties were most likely exacerbated by Leslie Stephen's demanding and often oppressive intellectual expectations, Cam, like Laura Stephen, is presented as a source of deviance that needs to be controlled or mollified in the novel. Instead of depicting Cam as a one-dimensional, biographical representation of Laura Stephen, Virginia Woolf imbues Cam with aspects of her own biography so that Cam becomes a figure that represents the author's belief that "in health meaning has encroached upon sound," but in illness "the words give out their scent and distil their flavor" (“On Being Ill” 21). In other words, Woolf sees creativity and intellectual potential in those states of being that society labels as sickness or disability.

Where previous scholars have ignored the ways in which Woolf destabilizes binary Victorian notions of ability and disability, my reading of *To the Lighthouse* aligns Woolf's critical reputation as an iconoclastic writer with contemporary notions of neurodiversity. Of particular note, Woolf's novel reveals an author profoundly, if implicitly, interested in destabilizing previously unexamined notions of ability and disability as it relates to gender and race. Most prominently, Virginia Woolf marks her novel's heroine Lily Briscoe's with "Chinese eyes," a reference that not only associates Lily Briscoe with the Orient, but places the character in a racialized, medical context. Similarly, by associating Mrs. Ramsay with emotional and intuitive ways of thinking, Virginia Woolf feminizes a "theory of the mind" at the same time as she pathologizes Mr. Ramsay's unemotional and non-intuitive male intellect. Since autism is

defined today as an extreme form of male intelligence, Woolf's fictional work prefigures both the pathologization and cultural epistemology of a gendered, autistic intelligence.

My second chapter crosses the Atlantic to read William Faulkner's 1929 novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, through the lens of “an intense world”⁷ theory of the mind. Where Virginia Woolf explored her interest in the innumerable thoughts and feelings that exist beneath the surface of speech and action—symbolized most potently by the feminized intellect of Mrs. Ramsay—Faulkner deploys his own proto-autistic character, Benjy Compson, to explore a “theory of the mind” founded on extreme neurological or sensory difference. As I contend, Benjy's sensory-based, animalized intelligence aligns Faulkner's character with not only autism, but also symbolizes “new structures of thought [. . .] and instinctive, almost telepathic communication” (Mizuta 2). Faulkner novel, then, attributes Benjy's “animalized” autistic cognition with aesthetic creativity and ideological truth as opposed to more “normalized” or “standardized” notions of physical and cognitive ability that define capitalism and American modernity.

In terms of methodology, my chapter on *The Sound and the Fury* analyzes how the growing visibility of all kinds of disability after WWI, as well as the rise of intelligence testing and narrowing conceptions of able-bodiedness in The United States, informs Faulkner's novel and paves the way for contemporary narratives of autistic difference and impairment. More pointedly, since intelligence testing and battlefield injuries brought instances of “white” disability into the public consciousness, this chapter argues that Benjy's mental impairment is

⁷ According to the “intense world” theory of autism, autistic individuals do not lack empathy—seen as a crucial component of mind reading—but often are often over-whelmed by emotion and have a hypersensitivity to experience. Hence, what outwardly appears to be a coldness or indifference to the outside world in autistic individuals is in effect the result of an oversensitivity to experience as autistic individuals engage in repetitive actions or other self-soothing behaviors as a way to combat or control these overwhelming experiences.

framed concurrently as “equalizing” or “democratizing”—since this type of disability has the potential to effect any and all people or groups—and exclusive to “white culture” as the rhetoric of Benjy’s impairment highlights the condition’s effect on white society’s “previously cemented code of authority” or ideology. Indeed, as Valerie Bann explains: “the ideology of whiteness wove together arbitrary traits of hair color, eye color, skin color, religious belief, language, morality and class into a network of standards against which those defined as different could be measured” (169). Autism, therefore, becomes visible as a category of pathology in the novel because it is framed as destabilizing for hitherto invisible aspects of white identity and privilege. As such, autism is both a specific form of cognitive and neurological difference, and a specific type of cultural rhetoric that figures the effect and characteristics of this difference specific to a particular population.

My third chapter looks at representations of disability and autism in *The Secret Agent* (1907) in the context of degenerate London and Joseph Conrad’s cosmopolitan identity as a writer. Where Faulkner focuses on the aesthetic and cognitive potential of atypical modes of cognition as it is embodied in Benjy, Conrad aligns larger questions of national and racial identity with his own proto-autistic character, Stevie. In contrast to Faulkner, however, Conrad forgoes any attempts to explore the inner, neurological world of Stevie as the American author did with Benjy. Rather, in exploring the ways in which society attempts to label or name a variety of outward behaviors and appearances as “degenerate” and/or foreign—influenced in part by Max Nordau’s and Cesare Lombroso’s theories of innate criminality and disability—Conrad employs a clinical or proto-behaviorist narrative and impels the reader to question social and scientific pretensions of diagnostic certainty in regard to a host of epistemological constructs of difference: racial, cultural and neurological.

Stevie, in *The Secret Agent*, represents an extreme form of foreignness. Where Benjy Compson's difference or "foreignness" represented a certain naturalized or authentic neurological identity in *The Sound and the Fury*, Stevie is a paradoxical representation of cognitive difference in *The Secret Agent*. Although Stevie represents modes of thinking that exists below the level of dominant culture, the character is a colonized subject insofar as he is a product of Great Britain's "excellent system of compulsory education" (7) that instructs Stevie to mimic acceptable behavior. These points align Stevie's neurological identity in the novel with Conrad's critical reputation as a writer who "performs" ⁸ the identity of an English writer. Furthermore, since Conrad situates Stevie's intellectual and physical disabilities—and non-racialized identity—within the context of *fin de siècle* cosmopolitan London, Conrad's novel reflects British society's anxieties regarding the effect of a foreign contagion within England's midst since concrete epistemological concepts of difference collapse in a London environment where individuals can outwardly adapt the customs and practices of English culture without clear detection. This chapter stands as an important critical intervention, then, to ubiquitous readings of cosmopolitanism as an acknowledged universal good in Modernist prose.

My dissertation concludes with an analysis of Samuel Beckett's 1938 novel, *Murphy*. While the title character of Beckett's novel is the most classically autistic—insofar as the character's fluent, yet one-sided and mechanistic speech aligns the character with Hans Asperger's 1944 description of autistic children as "little professors" ⁹—of the characters under study, Beckett's novel is the least didactic work examined in this dissertation. In fact, my

⁸ As Rebecca Walkowitz contends, Conrad's reputation as a Polish-born writer who published in his non-native English called into question deeply held notions of national literary identity and "natural" ability (20-21).

⁹ Asperger called the children in his study "little professor" due to their "aristocratic appearance," ability to talk endlessly and in great detail on subjects that interested them as well as for "their rare maturity of taste in art" (68-73).

approach to analyzing *Murphy* functions as much as a litmus test for figurative characteristics of autism in High Modernism as it does for examining the author's views on what models of neurodiversity offer to teach the reader. As a late Modernist, Beckett does not explicitly advocate for the transvaluation of certain forms of cognitive difference in art so much as he turns his gaze on the entire spectrum of society and its varied attempts to condition or control behavior across a continuum of social and literary practices.

This chapter begins, then, with an analysis of the publication of *Murphy* within the context of the author's struggles to get his work published under Ireland's 1929 Censorship Act. As I argue, the explicit images of obscenity that appear in Beckett's novel align the author with the Modernist doctrine that "no art ever grew by looking into the eyes of the public" (Pound Qted. in Cooper 2). Yet, while Beckett's work is figuratively autistic in that it is self-directed and ignores the will of the public, Beckett uses images of disability to refract clear meaning in the text as it is imagined by a middle class reading public. Most explicitly, the novel's images of Murphy tied naked to a chair, aligned as these images are with the character's attempts to control his body and calm his mind—explicitly un-obscene goals—call into question the reader's abilities to properly interpret Modernist literary forms and aesthetics.¹⁰ As I argue, however, concerns about the meaning of obscenity are not entirely the driving force of Beckett's narrative. On the contrary, my analysis moves beyond Beckett's concerns with the meaning of obscenity to discuss how the novel's treatment of disability and cognitive difference complicates efforts to "normalize" Murphy and other related practices in the text.

¹⁰ As I explain in greater detail in the chapter, Beckett's use of disability in *Murphy* is motivated, in part, by the Hicklin Rule (1868), which established that material could be declared obscene on the basis of its effect on the most susceptible readers. But, images of sexuality that were incomprehensible to middle and lower class readers, and the presence of disability could make images of sexuality incomprehensible, were not deemed to be obscene.

Re-Reading Modernism and the Humanities:

What do reading these texts through the prism of autism and disability studies do to Modernism? As the reader of this dissertation can clearly see, the authors I have picked for this analysis are not taken from the ideological margins of the Modernist canon. This dissertation, however, shows that the application of contemporary ideas about disability and autistic difference to the analysis of canonical Modernist authors offers a broader dimension for the analysis and teaching of these texts. As such, my methodology does not so much deconstruct more traditional readings of Modernism—and the works of Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Joseph Conrad and Samuel Beckett, specifically—as it puts Modernist concerns in a fresh context. The Modernist writers under study in this dissertation value the extraordinary minds and bodies of these characters for their ability to challenge a host of unexamined ideological concepts: time, gender roles, racialized concepts of ability and disability. In this regard, analyzing Modernist writers in terms of their commitment to neurodiversity is a logical extension of previous readings of these authors in relation to other types of diversity.

At a time when Humanities departments are contracting, these readings give educators and scholars new and diverse ways to teach these canonical writers. As more and more autistic students age into adulthood and enter into college, Modernist texts have the potential to allow these students to wrestle with complex constructions of cultural and biological identity. Ideally, these texts illustrate the ways culture refract and reinforce medical and social models of disability as well as the ways neurological difference is embedded with Modernist aesthetics.

Chapter 1:

Searching for Laura Stephen:

Autistic Narrative and Pathology in Virginia Woolf's Fiction

In her 1996 biography of Virginia Woolf, Hermione Lee remarks that Laura Stephen—Virginia Woolf’s “hardly ever referred to” half-sister, who failed to appropriately respond to “Leslie’s forced attempts to educate and normalize” her—was a source of “fearful opposition, not identification” (103) in Virginia Woolf’s life and fiction. Certainly, as Lee notes, Laura Stephen and Virginia Woolf’s lives followed very different trajectories: Laura’s “half-sisters regarded” Laura as ““a joke,”” which was “an entirely characteristic way to refer to the idiot in the family.” Virginia Woolf, conversely, was the daughter “who repeatedly overcame” a variety of physical and mental illnesses—“which were quite different from Laura’s”—to live independently and achieve literary and intellectual recognition in her lifetime (Lee 103). With all due respect to Hermione Lee, however, Laura Stephen was much more than an oppositional figure in Woolf’s fiction. On the contrary, while Laura may have been an object of “fear” for Woolf, in the sense that Laura’s lifelong institutionalization and cognitive disability stood as a possible alternative fate for Woolf, Laura was also a source of empathy for Woolf since Laura’s cognitive and social “abnormalities,” which I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, existed in an intellectual and cultural climate that viewed her difference not simply from the perspective of “ableism,” but equated the behaviors associated with her disability with a kind of moral “perversity” (Lee 100). This chapter, then, will examine how Virginia Woolf aligns cognitive difference and disability with other types of perceived difference in her fiction as a challenge to previously unexamined cultural norms.

Before going any further, I would like to draw attention to Woolf’s professed fascination with the role of the “disabled” or sick body on the imagination and society’s attempts to control

this dynamic. In her essay "On Being Ill" (1926), for example, Woolf continually refers to "the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed" when one is sick (3). As a partly autobiographical essay, "On Being Ill" documents the author's "persistent, periodic illnesses, in which mental and physical symptoms seemed inextricably entwined" (xiv). Placed next to Julia Stephen's—Woolf's mother—"Notes from Sick Rooms," however, "On Being Ill" implicitly questions society's attempts to control or suppress the "great wars which the body wages with the mind" (5). As Kimberly Coates notes, Julia Stephen's "Notes from Sick Rooms" is "a service manual for young nurses in training" that avers that "they [nurses] are to rein in and control their patients' vivid imaginations" (3). While Julia Stephen's use of the word "imagination" in the context of illness implies the condition of an individual suffering from hallucinations or delusions, Julia Stephen's text acknowledges cases where illness brings not hallucinations, but heightened perception. "There are, of course, patients who, without meaning to be exacting, are so delicately organized, or whose senses have become so acute through suffering, that they can detect a draught or a smell where even careful or discerning nurses can find neither" (77). It is this aspect of illness that Virginia Woolf focuses on in "On Being Ill." Instead of hallucination, illness induces "a childish outspokenness" (11) as well as sharpened sense perceptions to the individual. "Lying recumbent, staring straight up" the afflicted individual "discover[s]" . . . "the sky [. . .] to be something so different" (13). While Woolf does not equate illness with madness, she tells the reader that that the "fact[s]" observed during a prolonged illness "seem(s) to call for comment and indeed for censure" (14). Doctors and nurses, furthermore, are referred to as "deit[ies]" who come to "[r]inse the mouth" (3) of the patient, an allusion to a common treatment of illness as well as a symbol of the role of medical

pathology in censorship.¹¹ Indeed, Roger Poole has previously examined the “battle of wills” between Virginia Woolf, Leonard Woolf, and her doctors, whereby Virginia held “her premises”—over the reasons and validity of her thoughts and behavior(s)—to be “sane” assertions (163).¹²

Certainly, Woolf was aware of cognitive difference(s) and her writing reflects an interest in the politics of the “medically abnormal.”¹³ In her 1919 essay “The Eccentrics,” for example, Woolf praises the individuals who “never for a moment . . . believes themselves to be eccentric” (38). Here Woolf describes an “Aunt—I forgot her name—who knew for certain the world is shaped like a star fish” (39). On the one hand, the aunt is “eccentric” and praised by the author for her cognitive difference. Yet, Woolf tells us that “her name” is “forgot[ten],” an implicit reminder of how Laura Stephen’s existence was erased from family discussion and correspondence in Woolf’s lifetime.¹⁴ “It is extremely rare to find a full and satisfactory biography of an eccentric. His family generally contrives to forget all about him; he only crops up, in our experience, as if by accident in the biographies of his relations, like a weed picked by mistake with the roses, or a dandelion that the wind has wafted to a bed primly sown with prize

¹¹ Medical professionals of the Victorian Age “believed there was a connection between mental health and the condition of a person’s mouth,” a theory that explains why “Earlswold Asylum” paid so much attention to the “state of Laura” teeth between 1893 and 1894 (Newman 26). As Hermione Lee notes in her introduction to “On Being Ill,” images of “a visit to the dentist” in Woolf’s essay, “[are] not a change of subject” as “teeth pulling . . . was recommended as a cure for a persistent high temperature—and also for ‘neurasthenia.’” Additionally, Lee argues that “it may be possible that the drugs she [Virginia Woolf] was taking, for both her physical and mental symptoms, exacerbated her poor health” (xv). Either way, Woolf had a deep distrust of doctors.

¹² Poole contends that Woolf saw her husband, and the mental specialists and nurses enlisted in her care, to be “in conspiracy against her.” While Woolf specifically objects to prescriptions of “enforced rest and overfeeding,” she more generally challenges the notion that she needs a “mental specialist” and that they [Leonard Woolf and her doctors] did not have the right to call her “insane.” “He [Leonard Woolf] refuses to allow even a possibility that Virginia’s ‘premises’ as he calls them, might have their own validity, a validity created for the position in space which Virginia occupied.” For more on this, please see Poole: 159-166.

¹³ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson avers that the “female body” and “the disabled have been imagined as medically abnormal—as the quintessential ‘sick’ ones” (359).

¹⁴ As I will discuss later in this chapter, Laura Stephen, once an integral part of the Stephen’s household, was moved to an idiot asylum in 1893. Here, Leslie Stephen remarked that Laura “fills less of my life than she used to do” (Leslie Stephen Qted. In Lee 101).

specimens of the double aster” (39). Indeed, one may read the preceding passage and imagine Laura Stephen “crop[ping]” in the biographies of her half-sister, Virginia.

Still, as I will argue more fully later in this chapter, Woolf’s attitudes towards Laura—and Laura’s neurological difference—were complex. While Woolf states that neither “[g]overnment offices [. . .] nor the Houses of Parliament” are made for eccentrics, “if they appear in any of these places it is in some menial capacity, to sweep stairs, or to collect the waste paper,” Woolf also identifies “Margaret Fuller” as an example of the “eccentric” who has defied this trend. Therefore, Woolf clearly saw Laura’s neurological difference as a different type of “eccentricity” from the individuals whose cognitive difference she praises in her work. It will be the argument of this essay, rather, that Virginia Woolf’s prose anticipates our present understanding of neurodiversity even while the author attempts to intellectually distance herself from her half-sister. Taken in total, Woolf’s prose resists her age’s clinical attempts to uniformly define abnormal behavior as a sign of biological or psychological pathology that needs to be controlled.

The Life of Laura Stephen:

In order to adequately discuss the role of neurodiversity in Woolf’s fiction, I must first discuss the particular nature of Laura Stephen’s cognitive difference and disability as well as its effect on the Stephen’s family. Although scholarship on Laura Stephen, who was committed by her father and died in a mental asylum in 1945, has been sparse for many years, there have been a few significant attempts to trace the influence of Laura on Virginia Woolf’s writings recently. In addition to Hermione Lee’s analysis of Virginia Woolf’s half-sister, and her effect on Virginia Woolf and the Stephen’s family, Hilary Newman has done the most complete study of Laura

Stephen to date, documenting Virginia Woolf's half-sister's early life through letters and journal entries from the Woolf family, and filling in some of the details of her later institutionalized life through her surviving medical records and case notes. Based on many of these same letters and journal entries, which described Laura's childhood behavior--her "'fiendish' bursts of temper and 'dreadful fits of passion' . . . [combined with] 'queer squeaking or semi-stammering or spasmodic uttering'"—Stuart Murray and Hermione Lee concurrently argue that “it seems clear” that Laura Stephen “had some form of autism” (Murray 242).¹⁵ While Murray may contemporarily argue that Laura had “some form of autism,” however, I would make an important distinction.

Autism—as a spectrum of cognitive difference and (dis)abilities—is a very broad medical diagnosis and one dependent on a host of “sociopolitical factors” that develop after the Second World War.¹⁶ More specifically, autism is both a cultural construction and a biological identity. Therefore, if Murray and Lee diagnose Laura as being autistic, we must temper their judgment with the knowledge that Laura’s cognitive difference—while pronounced—would have been poorly understood in Laura’s lifetime both in terms of its biological basis and how best to foster the intellectual and/or physical gifts she did have.

To explain, while family correspondence indicates that Laura struggled to learn to read--though she is described as “reading *Alice in Wonderland*” in 1886, and “could not learn to write, and could not concentrate” (Lee 100)--more than a few Woolf biographers have noted that it is possible that Laura’s intellectual disability might have gone undetected in another setting, but in the high achieving Stephen’s family, her learning difficulties stood out.¹⁷ As a case in point,

¹⁵ Also see Lee 102.

¹⁶ Patrick McDonagh argues that “the growth of psychology and psychological discourses and the development of the idea of childhood” as well as “the theme of exclusion” and “aloneness” fostered by WWII, contributed to the recognition and construction of autistic identity (100-101).

¹⁷ Lee and Newman both note Leslie’s Stephen’s high intellectual standards and impatience with his daughter’s learning difficulties.

Leslie Stephen described Laura as "exceedingly pretty"—a remark that seems to discount the existence of any physically apparent or obvious disability--and added that "her head [seemed] indicative of remarkable intelligence; her hands were obviously framed to grasp the pen and her feet show that she will be a first rate mountaineer" (8-9). While family members noted that she "learnt to run before she could walk" (9), and later records acknowledge that she "'talk[ed] sensibly' but that her way of speaking [was] peculiar" (Newman 23), nowhere does it seem that Laura's behavior was viewed as anything beyond eccentric in her early life. More to the point, Laura's first noted difficulties are initially figured as more of an issue of temperament, not intellect for the family. In May of 1877, for example, Leslie Stephen states that "she [Laura] is well & grows slowly in wisdom and stature. The wisdom, however, includes a certain development of wilfulness [sic] wh. I respect because it reminds me of myself" (Qted. in Newman 11). Leslie's description of a roughly seven year old Laura is interesting in so far as Laura's "wilfulness" (sic), while standing as an element of Laura's personality that needs to be subjugated or controlled, also serves as evidence of the child's intelligence and future prospects.

Of course, reading the available evidence, one gets the sense that Laura's behavior moved past mere willfulness and that the family's sense of her intellectual and social prospects decreased over time. In *Moments of Being*, Virginia Woolf refers to her half-sister as "a vacant eyed girl whose idiocy was daily more obvious, who could hardly read, who would throw the scissors into the fire, who was tongue tied and stammered and yet had to appear at the table with the rest of us" (160). While it is impossible to definitively know what caused Laura's regression,

her challenges were no doubt exacerbated by the social and behavioral limitations imposed by her gender in society.¹⁸

Indeed, while there was most certainly a biological, and possibly an environmental (her premature birth), cause for Laura's difference, a great deal of her disability was most likely exacerbated by the cultural expectations of her father and Victorian society. As Lee notes, while there was not a "sadistic patriarchal conspiracy" at work in Laura's upbringing, her father demonstrated "a great deal of unexamined egotism in his demand for her [Laura] to be lovable, in his constant complaints that she would never be able to make people 'fond of her'" (Lee 102). If the reader accepts the premise that Laura was somewhere on the autistic spectrum—and her speech and language delays as well as "her uncontrolled gestures like spitting out or choking on her food" (Lee 100) support such a theory—the observed behaviors of such a neurological identity would have been particularly bad match for the social expectations of her sex. After all, Victorian society held that women had two identities to play in regard to illness or disability. They could be caregivers of the disabled, as Julia Stephen was, or they could be docile patients who reinforced the medical and social trope of women "as medically abnormal—as the quintessential 'sick ones'" (Garland-Thomson 358). As a social role, then, the "female, disabled" body is "supposed to be dependent, incomplete" and "vulnerable" as a counterweight to the idea of the "ideal" and dominant "male body" (358-359).¹⁹ Without a doubt, this

¹⁸ Since autism involves cognitive deficits in "mind reading" or emotional intelligence, cultural expectations can exacerbate these problems since women are expected to possess an intuitive social intelligence. Temple Grandin, as one example, describes her childhood social interactions as a kind of scripted performance, performances doomed to failure as a result of the autistic individual's inability to implicitly understand the neurotypical world. "I was always observing, trying to work out the best way to behave, but I never fit in. I had to think about every social interaction" (Grandin 153).

¹⁹ Patrick McDonagh makes a similar argument in stating that "women with intellectual disabilities serve[d] to validate the sovereignty of the masculine over the feminine in the binary opposition that structures understanding of gender over much of recorded Western history" (127).

paradigm informed medical theories that held that “education and exercise of the intellect was bad for women” (Jouve 250).²⁰

As a neurological and cognitive disability, however, autism would subvert just such a socially constructed paradigm. Uta Frith, among others, discusses the “autistic child’s apparent enjoyment of the distress that he or she provokes” (25). The “distress” Frith mentions refers to a variety of socially unacceptable or “repugnant behavior” committed by autistic individuals. This “distress,” which may be the result of a “single-minded pursuit of a special interest” or “the result of a panic-induced action and sometimes the consequence of a complete lack of common sense” (25), is difficult to control as the autistic individual does not “typically . . . seem to feel guilt, does not try to conceal nor excuse what he or she did, and may even describe details with shocking openness” (25). In short, the autistic individual outwardly resists attempts at social control or conditioning.

It is perhaps unsurprising then that Hilary Newman’s archival research into Laura Stephen’s life reveals so many references to Leslie Stephen’s frustration with his daughter’s recalcitrance. Leslie Stephen recounts “los[ing]” his “temper” with Laura along with his “fear[s]” that he may have been “over-exacting” with his daughter (Newman 14). Additionally, records indicate that the Stephen’s family sought out Dr. Langdon Down, an early proponent of “what the Victorians called the ‘moral treatment of idiots’” (Newman 21) to consult about Laura’s condition. As a result, Laura was sent to the Earlswood Asylum in 1893. In addition to training disabled individuals to read and write, institutions like the Earlswood Asylum attempted to address the widespread assumption that the behaviors evident in the mentally disabled were

²⁰ One of the practitioners of this theory was Dr. Savage, one of many physicians under whose treatment Virginia Woolf fell. Nicole Jouve argues that Savage forms the basis of Woolf’s “attacks upon psychiatrists” in *Mrs. Dalloway* (251).

connected to issues of individual and social virtue. Hence, doctors such as Langdon Down “based” their treatments of the mentally disabled “on a clear system of rewards and punishments that were dealt out to resident children and teenagers” like Laura (Newman 21). Ultimately, the goal of institutions like Earlswood was for patients to be “discharged back into the communities from which they had originally come” (21), most likely after they exhibited the proper amount of behavioral control as well as intellectual progress. Still, Laura seems to have resisted Leslie Stephen’s “attempts to control her” (Lee 100) and Laura gradually fades from family correspondence.

It is Laura’s disappearance from the Stephen’s family and lifelong institutionalization that most likely informs some of Woolf’s more disturbing prose regarding intellectual disability. Encountering a group of individuals seemingly institutionalized for abnormal mental development in 1915, Woolf remarks:

we met & had to pass a long line of imbeciles. The first was a very tall young man, just queer enough to look at twice, but no more; the second shuffled, & looked aside; and then one realized that every one in that long line was a miserable ineffective shuffling idiotic creature, with no forehead, or no chin, & an imbecile grin, or a wild suspicious stare. It was perfectly horrible . . . They should certainly be killed (Qtd. in Childs 23).

Reading the above passage, it is easy to infer how the sight of the institutionalized individuals must have reminded Woolf of her half-sister and her removal from all visible connections to family and society. As Woolf scholars have pointed out, "during the first year of Virginia's life, her parents were extremely involved with Laura Stephen . . . as Julia [Stephen] continued to take trips away from home after Virginia's birth" (Love 215). While Virginia Woolf was almost ten

years younger than her half-sister, Virginia's earliest memories of Laura probably concerned "the decline of Laura's centrality in the household" (Newman 8) and her later institutionalization. Finally, while Virginia Woolf's statement that "they should all be killed" probably strikes the contemporary reader as offensive, it is quite possible Virginia Woolf simply construed this remark as a humane solution to their suffering, one consistent with Woolf's thoughts about her own life when mental "disease" robbed her of her ability to "read" and "write . . . properly" (Qted. in Lee 744).

Yet, Virginia Woolf's attitudes towards cognitive difference and disability cannot be placed within the vacuum of Laura Stephen. Woolf lived and wrote at a time when the sudden and pervasive appearance of physical and intellectual disability fostered new concerns regarding the nature of cognitive difference as well as subsequent questions regarding how to contain it.²¹ As Daniel Pick remarks in his work, *Faces of Degeneration*, WWI "with its mass mobilisation (sic) crystallized a new concern for crowds and madness" as "victims" of shellshock "displayed a bewildering range of disabilities—paralyses and muscular contractions of the arms, legs, hands, and feet, loss of sight, speech, hearing [. . .] catatonia and obsessive behavior, amnesia, severe sleeplessness and terrifying nightmares" (231-32). While WWI brought a range of physical and mental disabilities into the public eye, it also merely "consolidated perceptions of civilization's degeneration" (Pick 232). Paradoxically, the artistic expression of the fragmentation of mental and physical (dis)abilities listed above held promise for Modernist writers like Woolf for their potential to challenge absolutist notions of normality as it relates to an entire set of social, physical and mental actions.

²¹ As I discuss more fully in my subsequent chapters, especially as it relates to my study of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, the increasing public appearance of disability fostered a number of scientific and pseudo-scientific attempts to contain physical and cognitive difference.

Laura's story, then, is important in examining Virginia Woolf's complex attitudes towards neurological difference as expressed in Woolf's autobiographical writing and fiction. Looking at Virginia Woolf's autobiographical writings first, we may discern that she perceived her cognitive and social development as being something less than typical. As she recounts her early life in the unfinished work that became parts of *Moments of Being*, her childhood is characterized by powerful sense memories. Some of Woolf's reminiscences describe synesthetic experiences as "instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, [she] shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen in to the past." Interestingly, Woolf takes these sense memories and figures them as a possible cause of an early fractured identity and atypical cognitive development: "I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation" (67). While Woolf's admission that she lacked awareness of a private identity as a child strikes one as slight hyperbole--if Woolf notes deficits in this regard, wouldn't that signal a developing awareness of self--her quotation seems to point towards an anxiety regarding how she may be cognitively "othered" from her peers. While this observation does not place Virginia Woolf in the same category of disability as her half-sister, the passage above point to a writer who is aware of an entire intellectual spectrum that exists between the "cognitive norm" and Laura's institutionalization.

To make one last point in this regard, while I have discussed Virginia Woolf's struggles with mental and physical illness as an adult, Woolf also dealt with a fair degree of developmental delays, some of which mirrored the life of Laura Stephen. Quentin Bell, for one, notes that Virginia Woolf "took . . . a very long time to learn to talk properly; she did not do so until she was three years old" (22). Although there are a multitude of possible reasons for this delay in the Stephen's household, it seems as if Woolf—judging from her recorded memories in *Moments of Being*--leans to the side of innate neurological difference as the cause of her atypical or delayed

development. This position is seconded by Jean Love who argues that Woolf's "predilection for sense imagery . . . in her novels" support the theory that language "delay [s]" in precocious children often "result from the extent of the child's awareness of what is going on around it and the nature of the events that it must learn to symbolize with language" (Love 216).

Ultimately, however, any discussion of the difference between desirable cognitive difference and disability in Woolf's fiction might best be framed by referring to Rita Charon's "Afterword" to Virginia Woolf's "Notes on Sick Rooms." As Charon explains: the difference between Virginia Woolf's and Julia Stephen's perspective on the connection between observed behaviors and medical interpretation is one based on the limits of epistemology. "Mother and daughter disagree about knowability. The mother asserts that the ill person is knowable down to their toes" (113). Woolf, though, "[a]sserts that no patient is like any other patient. No predictions can be made on the basis of the evidence of the other's experience" (113). Keeping this distinction in mind, my proceeding analysis of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) will focus on how Virginia Woolf implicitly examines the "unknowability" of certain types of cognitive difference through the influence of Laura Stephen on Woolf's text. This analysis highlights not only Woolf's commitment to representing a range of cognitive experiences, but also society's attempts to pathologize and regulate these differences.

Cam in *To the Lighthouse*:

Traditional readings of *To the Lighthouse* have focused on the sexual politics of Woolf's text. As Annis Pratt described the novel in 1972: "A survey of the critical assessments of the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay reveals a range of opinion from one extreme of sexual politics to the other . . . At one extreme we have those who see Mrs. Ramsay as a

Prototypical Mother and Mr. Ramsay as Tyrannical Male; . . . We [also] have those who see the marriage as an anatomy of complementary male and female attributes” as well as “those who take it as an anatomy of sexual warfare” (417). Going further, Brenda Silver explains that Mrs. Ramsay has been read both as an “idealized” female figure and a “superficial” individual, a character who clings to her traditional social role as a maternal figure in contrast to the more progressive and liberal identity of Lily Briscoe (260-261).²² As a family and generational story, *To the Lighthouse* partly explores the concept of Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay as antithetical models of female identity available to the Ramsay children.

This critical history and debate has been enriched by the connection between the location and characters of *To the Lighthouse* and the details of Virginia Woolf’s childhood. Woolf scholars have continually remarked that *To the Lighthouse* is “the novel of her [Woolf’s] childhood in Talland House” (Lee 23) in St. Ives. After all, Woolf seems to recreate all the individuals in the Stephen and Duckworth families in the novel with critics interpreting Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay as being fictional versions of Leslie Stephen and Julia Duckworth Stephen. Yet, Woolf scholars have not to this point discerned evidence of Laura-Stephen in Woolf’s novel despite the fact that when Talland House was “found[ed]” in 1881 it would have been inhabited by Leslie Stephen’s “‘backward’ eleven year old daughter Laura” (Lee 25).²³ It will be the argument of this section that this perceived omission or textual absence, however, has more to do with readers’ expectations regarding the nature of disability than Woolf’s unwillingness to tackle

²² Sue Roe locates this paradox in Woolf’s model for Mrs. Ramsay: Julia Stephen. Particularly, while Julia Stephen was “acknowledged” for her “great beauty” and “gift for encouraging and nurturing the vitality of others,” she was also “active in the anti-Suffrage Movement, a group of women who firmly believed that their power” was “derived from their position within the household” (65).

²³ The setting of *To the Lighthouse* would be an exceptionally apt location for Woolf to attempt to represent Laura Stephen as Laura continued to “join the rest of the family at St. Ives during the summer months” even after she ceased to be “a permanent member of the 22 Hyde Park gate household” (Newman 17).

this issue. On the contrary, when one closely examines the speech and behaviors of Cam in *To the Lighthouse*, he or she can see Laura's implicit and explicit influence on the text. This reading of Cam as a representation of Virginia Woolf's autistic half-sister does not so much upset as it brings added dimensions to the traditional readings of the themes of gender and familiar identity in *To the Lighthouse*. After all, if one entertains the premise that Cam is an autistic character, then the question of Cam's future—in terms of her social and cognitive identity—becomes not just whether she will follow in her mother's footsteps and be more of a traditional Ramsay-like woman or be a socially rebellious woman like Lily Briscoe. Instead, the reader must ask whether Cam could ever occupy either identity since its successful performance presumes the individual's ability to conform to existing social archetypes.

While Cam is identified as the youngest Ramsay daughter, the character's described personality and behaviors closely align with the case of Laura. Nicknamed "Cam the Wicked" because of her "wild and fierce" personality," her behaviors recall Leslie Stephen's difficulties raising Laura. Cam "clenche[s] her fist" and "stamp[s]" when the "nursemaid" instructs her to "give a flower to a gentleman" (21), an incident that echoes Hermione Lee's summary of Leslie Stephen's failures to "manage" or "control" his daughter as well as the age's theories regarding the moral treatment of insanity.²⁴ For the reader of *To the Lighthouse*, these aspects of Cam's personality have been interpreted in much the same way as Laura-Stephen's initial "wilfulness" was by her father: Cam's "fierceness" is simply the byproduct of a headstrong, challenging and precocious child. The preceding analysis of Cam might be entirely correct if not for the way Virginia Woolf describes other aspects of her difference. Cam's speech, for example, is

²⁴ The connection between disability and theories of criminality and vice or morality will be more fully explored in my discussion of *The Secret Agent*.

described as needing excessive prompting as well as having a "parrot-like" ²⁵ quality whereby she can reproduce "words quite accurately but in a "colourless singsong" while "shifting from foot to foot." When Mrs. Ramsay attempts to read to her children, Cam "fidget [s]" until she "shot off" (55-56). Certainly, there are elements of Laura's perceived disability or idiocy in Cam. She struggles with speech, often--as when she "graze[s] [Lily Briscoe's] canvas by an inch"-- shows no awareness of others, and appears to resist her mother's attempts to teach her to read. ²⁶

Cam's challenge (s) to the Ramsay family in *To the Lighthouse* fit within concurrent biological and cultural concerns over "inheritance," however. Particularly, while the notion of "inheritance," or the problems of "inheritance," occupies a prominent place in much of Virginia Woolf's fiction, *To the Lighthouse* examines "the splits between husband and wife, parents and children, past and present" which "generate a violent sense of conflict and a painful desire for resolution" (Lee 50). In other words, the reader of Woolf's novel doesn't necessarily need to compare Cam to Laura to recognize the author's concern over the character's personal development because Woolf's fiction broadly deals with the author's mixed feelings regarding the individual's commitment to the lineage of nation, culture, and patriarchy as embodied by the family.

To the Lighthouse doesn't simply wrestle with its author's ambivalence over a cultural lineage. Rather, the Ramsay children are figured as claiming or not claiming their father's intellectual and cultural identity based on a dynamic biological heritage. In fact, there is an

²⁵ Beckett will use a similar term to refer to non-disabled society in *Murphy*. I would argue that Modernism views the inability of disabled characters like Murphy and Cam to accurately mimic or copy the speech of "normative" society as indicative of an individual whose disabled or "othered" body places him or her outside the tired conventions of traditional speech and society.

²⁶ Elizabeth Abel has previously argued that Cam's silence is the product of her inheritance of the mother's middle position between the son and the father/husband (172). Hence, Cam's speechlessness symbolizes women's inability to find a voice within the dynamic of the family and larger society.

overlooked “eugenical” meditation in Woolf’s novel as it relates to the future prospects of the Ramsay children. Within the novel's first few pages, James, the Ramsay’s youngest son, is described as having a "high forehead" and "fierce blue eyes" (4), physical characteristics that situate James as the child with the most intellectual potential in the story. Later, Mrs. Ramsay contemplates what life has in store for each of her children, reassuring herself that "all . . . were full of promise" (58). Still, Mrs. Ramsay continues to evaluate her children's future prospects by categorizing their intellectual talents and physical gifts as well as their perceived handicaps. "As for Rose, her mouth was too big, but she had a wonderful gift with her hands. . . . Jasper should shoot birds; but it was only a stage; they all went through stages." ²⁷ Of particular note, Mrs. Ramsay does not contemplate the future for Cam in the same way that she does for her other children. While Mrs. Ramsay avers that "she never wanted James . . . or Cam either" to "grow a day older" (58), Cam's talents and intelligence do not receive the same scrutiny or analysis. Her place in the family's intellectual and cultural line is conspicuous—much like Laura Stephen’s position--by its textual absence. Laura's presence in the character, then, complicates our conception of Cam as an adult in the future because Mrs. Ramsay--and the reader--does not know how to interpret her eccentricity. Is her difference the sign of a future artistic genius or of pathology?

What makes Cam an interesting character for analysis, therefore, is how she straddles the boundary between eccentricity and Laura's idiocy: in fact, Virginia Woolf’s depiction of Cam at times closely resembles Laura and at other times—as in the last section of the novel—appears

²⁷ In Woolf’s essay “Body and Brain” the author laments the tendency to ignore the role of the body in cognition during the Victorian Age. Woolf professes that the “body” is “a companion and equal” to the brain (224) and this no doubt explains why Woolf spends so much time drawing connections between physical and intellectual gifts in *To the Lighthouse*.

closer to the author herself. As I have already established, Laura's pathologization transcended issues of "ablesism" or disability as her refusal to adhere to the standards of normality imposed by her father and patriarchal society in general marked her as cognitively defective. Furthermore, scholars who have interpreted Cam as being representative of Virginia Woolf's position in the Stephen and Duckworth families by way of their shared childhood eccentricity and willfulness miss the analytical possibilities of Cam also functioning as a version of Laura. In fact, when one looks at Virginia Woolf's fiction, it is important to note that Woolf continually refashioned aspects of her own illnesses—her hallucinations and depression as two examples—to blur the distinctions between "normal" cognitive difference and mental illness or disability. In Woolf's introduction to the 1928 version of *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, she instructs us that Septimus is intended to be the double of Clarissa. While the interior and eccentric nature of Septimus's inner narrative is more obviously figured as one of mental illness or disability—since Septimus's hallucinations are the result of shell shock—they also exist on a spectrum with Clarissa's own varied mental states and sense impressions in the novel. In short, then, Cam is a composite of Virginia Woolf and Laura Stephen in *To the Lighthouse* as the character obscures the distinctions between "normal" cognitive difference and disability.

A Changing Individual and National Character:

As I hope I have made clear, *To the Lighthouse* should not be read as an extended meditation on Laura Stephen or Cam as an entirely unique kind of outsider. Instead, Cam— Influenced as the character is by the real disability and cognitive difference of Virginia Woolf's half-sister—is the embodiment of the intellectual anxieties that arose from approximately the turn of the century up until WWI, anxieties which produced a different conception of the mainstream individual. As James McFarlane states: "The wanderer, the loner, the exile, the

restless and rootless and homeless individual were no longer the rejects of a self-confident society“(82). In short, McFarlane points to a modern dynamic where certainty—certainty of identity, of knowledge, and of heritage—has given way to highly subjective and varied forms of epistemology.

Virginia Woolf acknowledged this idea of a changing cultural character in her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1923). Here, Woolf argues that: "[I]n or about December, 1910, human character changed. . . . The change was not sudden and definite [. . .] but a change there was nevertheless" (320). Furthermore, In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Peter Walsh says that the "five years--1918-1923--had been . . . somehow very important. People looked different" (71). While there were a great many causes for this outward sense of a change in human character and appearance—WWI, the changing relationships between masters and servants, the rise of science and the decline of religion—these changes essentially symbolized growing skepticism regarding “the relationship between the individual and the ‘whole’ (however variously that might be conceived)” (McFarlane 82). Hence, Cam’s iconoclastic and willful behavior in *To the Lighthouse* is properly read as representative of a changing cultural character that has lost “faith in social convention” (McDonagh 111) at the same time as the character is implicitly “pathologized” as disabled.

It is precisely because of Modernism’s interest in extreme subjectivity that Patrick McDonagh draws a connection between the rise of Modernist aesthetics and Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger’s 1943 and 1944 studies on autistic children.²⁸ Particularly, McDonagh argues

²⁸ In 1943 Leo Kanner published his “Autistic Disturbances in Affective Contact” where he suggested that the “fundamental [symptom of the] disorder [autism] is the children’s inability to relate themselves in the ordinary way to people and situations from the beginning of life.” Notably, “their parents refer to them as having always been ‘self-sufficient;’ ‘like in a shell:’ happiest when left alone’ and acting as if people weren’t there” (41). Although the two men did not know one another or share research, Kanner, like Asperger, suggested a “disturbance of contact” at

the themes of “silence” and “exile” became “almost clichés to modernist writers, entering the cultural consciousness so effectively that they spoke to pervasive concerns over social and individual identity” (111). Therefore, “modernity and modernism made possible the recognition of autism [as a diagnostic category and as a neurological identity]” (McDonagh 110) in 1944. Looking at the formal aspects of *To the Lighthouse*, then, I would go further by saying that Woolf’s novel betrays an autistic dynamic because it concurrently documents the internal, or subjective nature of reality in relation to the modern individual’s attempts to impose order, meaning and relationships in an anarchic world.

Since the very early part of Laura’s life was not read as disabled, Woolf no doubt viewed neurological difference as existing on a complex continuum. Even today, “autism may appear a secure, natural category” but it can alternately be defined as a disability or a desirable cultural identity depending on the degree and range of physical and cognitive differences present in the individual, an idea that is represented across Woolf’s fiction. At times in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf appears to equate the extreme subjectivity of the individual mind with a kind of authenticity or truth, as when Mr. Tansley describes Mrs. Ramsay. “[S]he was the most beautiful person he had ever seen [. . .] with stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets.” Although Mr. Tansley acknowledges the difference between his subjective and outer reality—“what nonsense [. . .] she was fifty at least; she had eight children” (14)—Woolf’s overall prose acknowledges the commonplace nature of this experience. The “Time Passes” section of Woolf’s novel, for example, draws attention not simply to the way the

some deep level of affect or instinct. Collectively, these two works form the basis of our contemporary conception of autistic difference.

perception of time changed for society at large through the forces of modernity and WWI,²⁹ but also to the subjective conception of the passage of time for the individual mind.

While it is somewhat hyperbolic to say that no two people perceive time in exactly the same way, the narrative structure of *To the Lighthouse* stresses the subjective nature of time. In the first section of the novel, the trip to the lighthouse occupies the majority of James's thoughts so that time seems to almost stop for the youngest Ramsay child. But, a different sense of time is imposed on him from without—from Mr. Ramsay. “No going to the Lighthouse, James,” he said, as he stood by the window, speaking awkwardly, but trying in deference to Mrs. Ramsay to soften his voice into some semblance of geniality at least” (14). As Jane Duran contends, Mr. Ramsay's attempt to impose “grown-up time” (301) on James effectively reflect society's attempts to condition him. Leaving aside Mr. Ramsay's attempts to condition James, though, *To the Lighthouse* displays an awareness of a biological basis for James's individualistic sense of time. Specifically, Jane Duran links Virginia Woolf's prose with Simone de Beauvoir's observation that “an internally felt disparity between the past and present . . . is a frequently-remarked upon aspect of old age” (301). Indeed, reading *To the Lighthouse* chronologically, one gets a sense of the biological changes which occur with age in the human brain as time seems to move slowly in childhood, then speed up in adulthood—changes which occur absent of societal intervention or conditioning.

Once again, Cam stubbornly resists social conditioning in Woolf's novel, though. Quite simply, Cam follows her own sense of time in *To the Lighthouse* as she moves in and out of the

²⁹ Sara Danius argues that modernist inventions such as the automobile transformed “the perception of time and space” (124). In attempting to represent “life in the modern age,” then, many modernist writers attempted to capture “the overwhelming experience of speed and an equally overwhelming mass of visual stimuli” (126-127). The “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse* signals this passage into modern life through its formal approach.

purview of the other characters in an entirely self-directed manner. I would be remiss not to note that Laura Stephen's case records at Earlswood asylum reveal "an odd quirk of her condition" was that even though "she c[ould] read and write," at some point, "she c[ould not] tell time" (23). Granting that Laura Stephen would most likely be diagnosed as autistic—in a medical, not cultural sense—today, her inability to tell time points to autistic differences in thinking and association. Specifically, as Temple Grandin explains, many autistic individuals struggle with linear conceptions of time since their brains make meaning through "personal associations" (9). On a macro level, we can say that Virginia Woolf's narrative structure in *To the Lighthouse* is autistic in that it resists purely linear and objective conceptions of time in favor of ones based on subjective experience.

Woolf's interest in the subjective nature of reality, then, and its connection to neurological difference point the reader to an autistic aesthetic in *To the Lighthouse*. Autism is not the only cognitive and epistemological aesthetic in the novel, however. Just as James's sense of time is contrasted with Mr. Ramsay's in the first section of the novel—and later with the terse reports of the deaths of Mr. Ramsay, Prue and Andrew—autistic cognition is contrasted with the Victorian epistemology of "categories, abstract concepts and general laws" (McFarlane 83) as represented by Mr. Ramsay. As Woolf informs us, Mr. Ramsay "pursue[d] truth with [. . . an] astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings" (32). As Woolf scholars have noted, Mr. Ramsay's denial of "feeling" was at least partly modeled on her relationship with her father, Leslie Stephen and the "demands" he placed on the children in the Stephen's household.

³⁰ These intellectual demands, of which Laura-Stephen was least able to satisfy and Virginia

³⁰ In his analysis of *To the Lighthouse*, Roger Poole contends that Mr. Ramsay is both modeled on Leslie Stephen and a more general archetype of the "arrogant, hard, conceptualizing, nature denying absorption" of the "young [male] intellectuals she met at Cambridge and London" (10).

Woolf was the most outwardly successful, are figured as aesthetically and cognitively oppressive in *To the Lighthouse*.

Tempting as it may be to read the novel's description of Mr. Ramsay strictly in terms of Woolf's biography, the issue of the Ramsay intellectual heritage more comprehensively represents modernist concerns regarding Victorian beliefs in the progressive nature of intellectual thought. "It was a splendid mind. For if thought is like [. . .] the alphabet [which] is ranged in twenty six letters all in order, then his splendid mind [. . . had] reached Q" (33). Although Woolf praises the acuity of Mr. Ramsay's intellect, her prose hints at a certain epistemological futility and creative bareness in Mr. Ramsay's thinking. While "very few people in the whole of England had ever reach[ed] Q," Mr. Ramsay laments that "Z is only reached by one man in a generation" (33-34). More troublingly, Mr. Ramsay's system of general laws and abstract concepts threaten to collapse under the accumulating weight of acquired knowledge. "He dug his heels in at Q," Woolf tells us. "Q he was sure of. Q he could demonstrate. If Q then Q-R-" (34). Rather than standing as a model of the intellectual achievements of a self-confident British society, Mr. Ramsay symbolizes an oppressive intellectual outlook that attempts to impose its methodology on the world even while it silently doubts itself.

By the time the reader arrives at the last section of the novel, the veiled doubt of Mr. Ramsay's Victorian and patriarchal intellectual tradition become abundantly clear. Standing on a boat traveling to the lighthouse as an adult with Mr. Ramsay, Cam, lost in the moment, "gaze[s] . . . vaguely" (167) at the island in front of them. Cam's meditation is interrupted, however, by the remonstrative voice of her father: "Didn't she know the points of the compass, he asked? Didn't she know the North from the South? [. . .] He wished she would be more accurate, he said: 'Tell me—which is East, which is West?'" (167). Mr. Ramsay's instructions

that Cam should be “more accurate” or exact mirrors the type of demanding intellectual instruction Leslie Stephen gave his children, a pedagogical method to which Laura Stephen was especially ill-suited. As an adult, however, Cam’s anger at her father gives way to pride as she thinks “He was so brave, he was so adventurous” (165). It is on this last point that the novel attempts to resolve the author’s feelings on her father and her intellectual heritage more generally. While James and Cam concurrently resolve to “resist tyranny to the death” (168), and Mr. Ramsay’s rather condescendingly describes his daughter—and women in general—as having a “vagueness of [the] mind [that] is hopeless” (167), Cam acknowledges that “no one attracted her more; his hands were beautiful [. . .] and his words, and his haste, and his temper, and his oddity” (169). Yet, his “tyranny” is also mollified in the last section of the novel by the reader’s knowledge that Mr. Ramsay’s commanding or overpowering nature has been fostered by his ability of “making people pity him and praise him all these years” (167). Hence, the overt confidence of a British aesthetic and intellectual tradition is revealed to stand on the shoulders of an intricate cultural performance.

Autistic Culture:

So far, then, I have discussed how Laura Stephen influenced Woolf’s representation of Cam in *To the Lighthouse* and how Leslie Stephen’s rigid and demanding intellectual outlook influenced her depiction of Mr. Ramsay. Next, I would like to explain how the presence of autism, as a shared intellectual and cultural identity, becomes visible in Woolf’s text through its resistance to Mr. Ramsay’s version of Victorian epistemology and patriarchy.

In order to understand this concept, I would first like to borrow from Joseph Straus’s theory of autism as a cultural identity. As Straus explains, disability is “simultaneously real,

tangible, measurable” and “an imaginative creation designed to make sense of the diversity of human morphology, capability and behavior” (541). As a cultural identity, though, autism becomes visible in much the same way it does in a “minority-group model.” This is to say, autistic culture should be partially understood as a “share[d] cultural and political identity” that conveys “a shared experience of oppression” (541) in relation to perceived bodily, cultural and social norms. In short, Straus holds that autistic culture--in the form of "writing, art and music "-challenges the notion that "autism is . . . a defect or pathology" in favor of the argument that autistic culture is a marker of "naturally occurring and inherently desirable human variability" (539-40). In *To the Lighthouse*, then, the shared features of autistic culture—what Straus identifies as the "ability to attend to details on their own . . . rather than as members of a larger subsuming abstract category," "fixity of focus," and "private meanings" based on "locally coherent networks of private associations" (Straus 544-45)—counterbalance the “normative” model of Victorian epistemology.

Although Woolf’s novel was published well before Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger’s studies on autistic children, *To the Lighthouse* explores “the drive for central coherence [. . .] not as signs of normal development but as [a] feature[s] along a spectrum of possibilities” (Mills 125), thereby presenting local and private meanings as an alternate—an alternate to Mr. Ramsay’s adherence to abstract systems—methodology of knowing for the Ramsay children. This difference is contextualized through Mrs. Ramsay’s commentary on Cam’s “aberrant” behavior in the novel. "Cam was attracted only by the word ‘Flounder,’” Mrs. Ramsay tells the reader, and she “knew that in a moment she [Cam] would fidget and fight with James as usual” (56). Cam’s mercurial disposition, her “fidget[ing]” and inability to remain calm and focused,

connect to the childhood of Laura Stephen.³¹ In this part of the novel, however, Virginia Woolf does not stress Cam's behavior as being representative of any kind of "moral" perversity, but rather, Woolf highlights Mrs. Ramsay's ability to recognize the elements of language to which Cam will respond as she reads a passage from "The Fisherman and His Wife" by the Brothers Grimm. " 'Flounder, flounder, in the sea,/Come, I pray thee, here to me;/ for my wife, good Ilsabil,/ Wills not as I'd have her will'" (56). It is important to note that the source of the passage remains unnamed to the reader of *To the Lighthouse*, perhaps in deference to Cam's attraction to the isolated sounds and images of the story, and not to the narrative or moral of the folktale.

As Woolf implies just a few pages earlier in the novel, Cam does not respond to language in a "typical" or "normative" fashion and she repeats language absent an overall sense of its meaning. "What was she [Cam] dreaming about" (54), Mrs. Ramsay muses, and what sense will Cam make of the language and instructions—regarding the message Cam is to "give the cook"—presented to her. "The words seemed to be dropped into a well, where, if waters were clear, they were also extraordinarily distorting that, even as they descended, one saw them twisting about to make Heaven knows what pattern on the floor of the child's mind" (54-55). While Cam delivers the appropriate message, "No, they haven't, and I told Ellen to clear away the tea" (55) the message is repeated in the form of echolalia with Cam outwardly demonstrating little understanding of the sentence's meaning.

Significantly, Virginia Woolf does not simply connect Cam's speech to disability, though. Rather, references to the "extraordinarily distorting" nature of Cam's mind point to an

³¹ In analyzing Laura Stephen's childhood writing samples, Hilary Newman argues that—by virtue of their "brevity"—Laura Stephens was most likely "a far younger child" and had "a short[er] attention span" than would have been consistent with her chronological age.

imaginative or creative potential in her cognitive difference. The “well” of Cam’s mind removes language from its connection to the more abstract epistemological methodologies of Mr. Ramsay and Victorian society as Cam’s manner of cognition focuses on the “idiosyncratic combinations of elements and images, with as much pleasure associated with the sounds of words as with their meaning” (Straus 544). This focus on images and sounds, equivalent to the way Cam is attracted to the un-contextualized image (s) and sound of the word “flounder,” explains one of the fundamental ways autistic language construction differs from that of the neurotypical population. While metaphors require a shared cultural or historical tradition to acquire meaning, research on autistic children’s language notes that “autistic children tend to take literally metaphoric language that draws on concrete images.” Instead, autistic language construction follows “elaborate systems of correlations of tastes, sounds and sights as being based on metonymical connections” (Chew 134). To put the above concepts in laymen’s terms, autistic individuals create an “idiolect,” or “private language,” as Kristina Chew names it, when “two disparate items [are linked] on the basis of contiguity or association” (133-34). While Woolf does not reveal the private meaning of “flounder” to the reader, the term could mean any number of things to Cam, and said meanings are perhaps rooted in some tactile association (as language formation and individual experience seem to “fire” together). For example, “flounder” could mean a great many things to Cam—beyond its reference in the Brothers Grimm fairytale—depending on what activity or event that word was paired with in her life.

The concept of private meanings, though, is not specific to Cam as the novel tells the reader that “she [Cam] and James shared the same tastes and were comfortable together” (56). The reader is informed early in the novel that James ““had already his private code, his secret

language, though he appeared the image of uncompromising severity" (4).³² Additionally, the acknowledgment of James's idiolect is paired with the character's sensory experiences in much the same way Cam's are. "James Ramsay, sitting on the floor cutting out pictures . . . the wheelbarrow, the lawnmower, the sound of poplar trees, leaves whitening before rain, rooks cawing, brooms knocking, dresses rustling--all these were so distinguished in his mind" (4). How does this connect to Woolf's concept or depiction of James's intelligence? In a way, idiolect or private meanings hold an important place in Woolf's aesthetic or intellectual philosophy in that they resist the more nefarious elements of mimesis—Cam "parroting" the instructions to the cook--that afflict the individual and interested Virginia Woolf. Indeed, Maria DiBattista argues, the Woolf's "iconoclastic . . . relationship to words" stem from her belief that "writing adds something to our store of information about the world, enlarges the range of experiences allotted to us." Looking at *To the Lighthouse*, creativity comes from neurological difference in so far as James and Cam build language from a point of personal experience and originality--their sensory experience of the world around them.

Yet, private meanings do not always equal individual or isolated meanings in *To the Lighthouse*. On the contrary, since "a truly private language in the philosophical sense ceases to be a language" (Middleton 166), Virginia Woolf places emphasis on systems throughout her novel through which the reader may discern the meanings of idiosyncratic speech. The Ramsay children, as a case in point, are "all called . . . privately after the Kings and Queens of England; Cam the Wicked, James the Ruthless, Andrew the Just, Prue the Fair" (22). The Ramsays'

³² Virginia Woolf "liked inventing and combining long new words" as a child. As Hermione Lee argues, however, this inventiveness "quite possib[ly]" struck Leslie Stephen as tragically ironic since "the bright, promising daughter whose 'rigmaroles' suggested strong imagination and quick thinking" contrasted so closely with the "hopeless case" of Laura's "unintelligible, spasmodic utterances" (106).

private names for their children do not appear "odd" to the reader as their family idiom still seems to follow an internal logic. Particularly, the household--as it is run by Mrs. Ramsay--emphasizes that "all must be in order. He must get that right and right, she thought"(113). Woolf's interest in the idiosyncratic language is cultural in that it derives in part from the "breakdown of routines and tradition" in the first decade of the twentieth century "characterized in part by a sense of isolation from other people" (McDonagh 108). But, where this breakdown produces modernist texts that define the individual by his or her extreme subjectivity, this subjectivity remains a communal experience. Hence, language in modernist texts "is both florid and precise, but passes dramatically beyond simple communication" (109).

In terms of autistic culture, Woolf's representation of private meanings anticipates present conceptions of autistic idiolect. To be precise, Woolf holds that idiosyncratic or private language need not be viewed as unintelligible so long as the language is built on some apparent internal logic or system.³³ Kristena Chew similarly instructs us not to label an autistic individual's "unusual use of words and syntax" as fundamentally "incomprehensible," but acknowledge it as part of a "'system' that the user . . . has created" (135). While Woolf makes the meaning of the private names for the Ramsay children semi-transparent to the reader, Cam's idiolect appears incomprehensible as it seems to be created and used by Cam alone, once again connecting this character to the "rapid chatter" and "unintelligible, spasmodic utterances" (Lee 106) of Laura Stephen.

³³ In his initial study on autistic children, Hans Asperger remarked that autistic individuals have an "undoubtedly creative attitude towards language" as [t]hey are able to express their own experience in a linguistically original form" (71). Beyond simply language, however, Asperger argues that "autistic children have the ability to see things and events around them from a new point of view, which often shows surprising maturity" (71).

Although it is difficult to separate willed artistic intention from subconscious anxiety, we may infer that Woolf's construction of the ambiguity of Cam's idiolect may come from the author's concern that private languages—as in the case of her half-sister Laura—might not be understood might have no inner system of logical coherence. With respect to her aesthetic voice, Woolf is a bit more explicit about her fears as she states in a 1914 letter to Molly McCarthy that "she was relieved to find that one sentence 'more or less followed another'; that her book 'though long and dull' was not, as she sometimes feared, pure gibberish" (Woolf Qted. in Bell 28).³⁴ Her supposition that her own idiosyncratic speech could be undecipherable might be likened to aphasia, in the sense that Woolf fears the signals could be literally mixed up in her brain and the words she hears in her mind are not the words she puts down on paper. These types of passages hint at Woolf's more ambivalent feelings about neurological difference. While Woolf acknowledges the intellectual and aesthetic possibilities of eccentric thought, these possibilities bring peril with them.

The above discussion of language in Woolf's texts does a great deal to explain Woolf's ability to challenge static meanings of genre and tradition. If we look at her dialogue--when it flows through her most intellectually privileged characters--we may concretely observe that "her fictional language remains relatively unaffected by either the slang heard in the streets or the specialized jargon of scientific or social elites" (DiBattista 128). As a case in point, Charles Tansley's intellectual and aesthetic philosophy is figured as stale and repetitive by Mrs. Ramsay because--starting at the level of language construction--Tansley mimics the speech patterns and

³⁴ Victoria Glendinning also discusses Virginia Woolf's "conversational . . . flights" in her biography of Leonard Woolf. As Glendinning describes them: "They were the brilliant middle stretch of a continuum which began in rills of wickedly creative gossip and free association and ended in the dark waters of incomprehensible gabble, when she was insane" (196).

vocabulary of the intellectual circles into which he wishes to be admitted or accepted. "Mrs Ramsay did not catch the meaning of the words, here and there . . . dissertation . . . fellowship . . . readership . . . lectureship. She could not follow the ugly academic jargon, that rattled itself off so glibly" (12). Mrs. Ramsay's punishing assessment of Tansley's dry and clinical sounding speech acknowledges the limits of our reliance on shared cultural or historical communities for language construction in that it reproduces, but does not create or add to, society's knowledge base.

In one regard, the autistic dynamic evident in *To the Lighthouse* disputes all systems of philosophy and aesthetics that ignore the private worlds created by differing sensory experiences. While Virginia Woolf describes Mr. Ramsay's intellect in far more favorable terms than she does Mr. Tansley's, she stills reminds the reader that his "definite contribution to philosophy" came "when he was only five and twenty; what came after was more or less amplification, repetition." In this passage, Woolf seems to infer that Mr. Ramsay, in making his defining "contribution" to an English intellectual tradition, becomes creatively limited by the language and approach of that tradition until his work becomes almost mechanistic in its production. Interestingly, Mr. Ramsay's intellectual commitment to the tradition of abstract thought in philosophy is measured against the aesthetic philosophy of Lily Briscoe's in the same section of the novel. As Andrew explains his father's art to Lily Briscoe: "His father's books were about . . . 'subject and object and the nature of reality' . . . 'Think of a kitchen table' . . . 'when you're not there.'" Tellingly, Lily Briscoe does not so much reject Mr. Ramsay's intellectual and philosophical approach as she fails to understand it, remarking "heavens" when "she had no notion of what that meant" (23). This missed point or connection distinguishes Lily Briscoe's thinking from Mr. Ramsay's as the characters essentially belong to different discursive communities.

Mind Reading, Neurology and the Idealized Feminine Intellect:

Although *To the Lighthouse* reflects Virginia Woolf's distrust of the abstract thought of Mr. Ramsay and Victorian society,³⁵ the novel also expresses an interest in the synthesis of knowledge. Where Woolf's depiction of Cam is influenced by the cognitive difference of Laura Stephen, and Laura's inability to conform to the rigid intellectual and behavioral standards of Leslie Stephen, Woolf's portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay as an almost mythical source of intuitive intelligence and societal connections fits neatly within the pseudo-scientific discourse of the early twentieth century. To briefly explain, while Woolf's idea of a changing "human character" was grounded in intellectual and cultural anxieties, pseudo-scientific theories regarding evolution supported widespread fear that the stresses of modern civilization, especially those contained in urban environments, could exhaust the central nervous system. Vike Plock, quite thoroughly, traces how "the relatively young discipline of neurophysiology had revolutionized the perception of physiological and psychological ailments" around the "turn of the century" as a variety of modernist writers and intellectuals clung to the popular belief that "the nervous system" could become "damaged" due to environmental stress. This discourse figured the human nervous system as a "complex" mechanism "vulnerable" to malfunction as "nerve impulses could be misdirected and cause havoc in the human nervous system" (Plock 89)

To the Lighthouse provides a number of implicit references to these anxieties, especially as the novel treats Mrs. Ramsay's concerns over the "inequity of the English dairy system" (103). Indeed, while Mrs. Ramsay's dinner conversation with Mr. Bankes, which includes Mrs. Ramsay seizing on the opportunity provided by Mr. Bankes's complaint about "that liquid the

³⁵ As Roger Poole states: Virginia Woolf had a "lifelong distrust of the male mind—its thrusting, pushing, deadening, analytic quality" (218).

English call coffee,” characterizes Mrs. Ramsay as an overly eager social reformer, the scene points to much more than Mrs. Ramsay’s earlier concern regarding the differences between the “rich and poor, high and low” (9). On the contrary, there is a eugenical aspect to her speech in so far as Mrs. Ramsay’s reference to the need for “real butter and clean milk” (103) connect to national concerns regarding the effects of new urban environments on the larger English population.³⁶ As Megumi Kato notes: “In late Victorian Britain, the redistribution of the population to the cities created a demand for milk far removed from its source.” More disturbingly, “in the intervening period from farmers to consumers, milk was subjected to contamination and infection”³⁷ a health issue which was appropriated by eugenicists in a 1904 article titled “Milk and Degeneration” to argue that urban environmental problems would produce ‘generations of weakly babies [. . .] with an undue proportion of defective citizens’ (908-909). Therefore, there was an increasing concern in English society that the urban environments of modernity could result in a generation of “imbeciles” like the group Woolf once observed.

If urban environments threatened to destroy the individual nervous system, a host of natural cures promised to restore physical and cognitive health. Individuals pedaled stimulants such as tea, coffee, and cocoa on the basis that they “minister[ed] to healthy activities, support[ed] the processes of life in health and restor[ed] them in disease,” a narcotic, on the other hand, was understood to be “a substance which by poisoning the nervous system produces a gradual paralysis of vital actions” such as “intelligence, volition, reason, consciousness, even life

³⁶ Max Nordau extensively dealt with these concerns regarding the changing nature of life in large cities in his work *Degeneration*. Particularly, Nordau argues that “the inhabitant of the large town, even the richest, who is surrounded by the greatest luxury, is continually exposed to unfavorable influences which diminish his vital powers far more than is inevitable.” Among these influences was “an atmosphere charged with organic detritus” and “stale, contaminated, adulterated food” (35).

³⁷ Also see Childs: pp. 33-35.

itself" (Fox 924). The fact that Mrs. Ramsay is "laughed at" (103) by her husband in this scene demonstrates that these ideas were far from universally accepted in Woolf's lifetime at the same time as it reveals the gendered power dynamic of Victorian society. While Mrs. Ramsay wishes to engage in political discourse, her perspective is ridiculed by Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Bankes.

While Mrs. Ramsay's speech is implicitly connected to a eugenic discourse, though, it more generally expresses national concerns regarding the growing sense of isolation and separation modernity produced. As Malcolm Bradbury explains: "The London cityscape" was an "important literary subject-matter" for many modernist writers as "the tide of metropolitan migration" produced "feeling[s]" "of isolation and separation, despair and hope which characterize city life" (Bradbury 181). While women like Mrs. Ramsay were for all intents and purposes subjected to the same feelings of isolation and separation that modernity produced, they also symbolized a "wholeness of experience" concurrent with a "preindustrialized world" (Felski 50).³⁸ The reader witnesses this ideological construction in the early pages of *To the Lighthouse* when Mrs. Ramsay silently reflects on the "strife, divisions, difference of opinion," and "prejudices" that define modern society. "It seemed to her such nonsense—inventing differences, when people, heaven knows, were different enough without that" (8). Mrs. Ramsay's philosophical outlook is contrasted with the gendered philosophy of Mr. Ramsay and Tansley. To explain, where the "idiolect" of James and Cam is linked to creativity, the philosophy of abstract thought practiced by Mr. Ramsey and Tansley is figured as the product of a "fatal sterility," which needs the "sympathy" of the female sentiment to make "his barrenness fertile" (37).

³⁸ In essence, Felski argues that since women were associated with home, family and nature (for their reproductive capacity), they were located outside the alienation of the modern world (38-41).

With respect to Woolf's depiction of cognitive and neurological, as well as cultural, differences, *To the Lighthouse* associates the female mind with the ability to form a natural or intuitive sense of connections. In doing so, however, Woolf also draws attention to the deficits or disability of the traditionally male mind. Looking at autism as a gendered category of cognitive difference, I would like to refer to Hans Asperger's initial description of autism as an "extreme form of male intelligence" (85):

In the autistic individual the male pattern is exaggerated in the extreme. In general, abstraction is congenial to male thought processes, while female thought processes draw more strongly on feelings and instincts. In the autistic person abstraction is so highly developed that the relationship to the concrete, to objects and to people has largely been lost, and as a result the instinctual aspects of adaptation are heavily reduced" (85)

In respect to our present cultural conception of the autistic individual, as Asperger initially described him or her, *To the Lighthouse* does a great deal to set the stage for the creation of this category of cognitive disability since the novel explores the concept of cognitive "ableism" through the dynamic lens of gender.³⁹ This lens presents the female figure of Mrs. Ramsay as an archetypal point of intellectual return for society at the same time as it highlights the essentially autistic or subjective nature of modern society. While this archetypal point of return presents a counter-narrative to Mr. Ramsay's patriarchal epistemology of Victorian abstract thought, its

³⁹ Another term for the ability to reason by way of "feelings" and "instincts" is mind reading, which is the ability to explain people's behavior "in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires." Lisa Zunshine argues that "[t]he main reason that theory of the mind has received the sustained attention of cognitive scientists over the last twenty years is that they discovered people whose ability 'to see bodies as animated by minds' was drastically impaired—people with autism" (Zunshine 195).

fundamentally mythic nature presents an unreasonable neurological standard for the similarly gendered Lily Briscoe.

Looking at *To the Lighthouse*, an autistic sentiment, both biological and cultural, is visible throughout the novel. Frequently, characters in the novel "miss" one another's points, fail to read subtle social cues or to understand the larger context of conversations. The final section of the novel witnesses Lily Briscoe, "[s]itting alone," comment that "she felt cut off from other people [. . .] as "the house, the place, the morning, all seemed strangers to her" (146). In this respect, the novel is an extended allegory for the modern conception of the human mind as imagined through neurophysiology.⁴⁰ The question of the possibility for legitimate connections—in the sense that individuals might be able to read below the surface of outward speech and actions—is centered around the feminine intellect as it is embodied, however. Building on our previous discussion, Virginia Woolf presents two models of traditional emotional or "female intelligence" in *To the Lighthouse* for Lily Briscoe: Mrs. Ramsay and Minta Doyle. While these women, on one hand, represent rejected social and gender roles for the more modern or iconoclastic Lily Briscoe, Lily Briscoe is also physically "othered" from these women. Lily Briscoe "fade[s] under Minta's glow; becom[ing] more inconspicuous than ever, in her little grey dress with her little puckered face and her little Chinese eyes" (104). Even though Mr. Ramsay concedes that "Lily at 40 will be better" (104) than she is a younger woman, Lily Briscoe's physical qualities are framed as being abnormal or atypical next to Minta Doyle and Mrs. Ramsay.⁴¹

⁴⁰ As Stephen Casper argues, "nineteenth" and early twentieth century "visions of the sciences of the nerves" transcended individual pathology as "the nervous system connected [or separated] the individual to society" (125).

⁴¹ As an aside: Simon Baron-Cohen's "extreme male brain" theory of autism does not only refer to observed behavior and manner of cognition, but to physical variance as well. Hence, physical appearance is associated with ASD in so far as males with ASD are observed to be "hyper-masculine" in appearance. While these are

As mentioned earlier, Minta Doyle--despite her overall flightiness-- is deemed by Mrs. Ramsay as a coveted marriage prospect for Paul Rayley because of the young woman's natural beauty and spontaneous character. The concept of spontaneity or social intuition as an embodied mental process, in fact, comes into greater focus when we consider Mrs. Ramsay's non-verbal or silent communication with her husband and dinner guests in the novel. "Mrs. Ramsay demanded (they looked at each other across down the long table sending these questions and answers across, each knowing exactly what the other felt" (96). Later, as the dinner progresses, "her eyes [become] so clear that they seem to go around the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and feelings, without effort like a light stealing underwater so that its ripples and the reeds in it . . . balance themselves" (106). As we can see, Virginia Woolf depicts Mrs. Ramsay's ability to read the emotions and sentiments of her dinner guests as a natural or effortless ability in the novel—a skill unlearned and most likely un-teachable.

Putting my above analysis in a larger socio-historical context, I aver that Virginia Woolf's attempts to move feminine modes of cognition into the forefront of her novel align with larger cultural trends. Berthold Schoene explains, for example, that while "the figure of the [. . .] emotionally impaired male has been haunting feminist writing since its inception" (379), the increased visibility of feminine thinking in mainstream culture coincided with the subsequent pathologization of traditionally masculine traits. Writing after Hans Asperger and Leo Kanner, Lorna Wing describes sufferers from Asperger's Syndrome as "socially odd and emotionally detached from others." Additionally, they are "highly sensitive to perceived criticism, while being oblivious to other people's feelings" (12). In our present era, these kinds of traits are

contemporary studies, physicians such as Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) began to study theorized connections between physical variance and behavior in Woolf's lifetime, and no doubt subtly influenced these implied associations in her work.

commonly diagnosed as outside the “norm” or deviant. In Woolf’s lifetime, however, similar traits were often invisible to culture as they existed as a “natural” part of the male identity.

In *To the Lighthouse*, though, Woolf implicitly pathologizes the autistic-like behavior of Mr. Ramsay through its opposition to Mrs. Ramsay’s intuitive, feminine intellect. Despite Mr. Ramsay’s outwardly rational, masculine identity, Mrs. Ramsay chronicles a marriage based on her husband’s constant need for emotional reassurance. “He was a failure, he said [. . .] It was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his bareness made fertile” (37). Later in the novel, Mr. Ramsay’s constant need for reassurance—couched as it is in his inability to account for the feelings of people other than himself—are aligned with the emotional and physical burdens of care one associates with a sick or infirm parent. This radical reimagining of mental health in *To the Lighthouse* points towards systematic changes in cultural and medical definitions of normality. Indeed, as Schoene once more points out, today “many characteristically male traits, which used to constitute the gender’s strengths and thus legitimize its hegemonic status, tend now to be recognized as symptoms of a verity of pathologies, mental disorders and cognitive impairments, most notably Asperger’s syndrome or high functioning autism” (379). While Virginia Woolf certainly could not anticipate the degree to which the concepts of gender-based pathology would begin to change in and after her lifetime, her novel belongs within this historical narrative as it trades the Victorian pathology of “hysteria as the classic ‘female malady’” (Schoene 380) for an equally gendered pathology as represented by Mr. Ramsay.⁴²

⁴² Schoene observes that “at the same time as hysteria began to vanish from view as a valid clinical diagnosis in the early twentieth century, autism assumed ever greater visibility” (380). While I don’t mean to aver that autism is

As an idealized form of female intelligence, then, Mrs. Ramsay represents a different type of intellectual heritage from that of her husband who “pursue[d] truth with” an “astonishing lack of consideration for other people’s feelings” (32) and Mr. Tansley who patronizingly avers that “[women made civilization impossible with all their ‘charm,’ all their silliness” (85). Indeed, Jane Lilienfeld makes a similar argument as myself when she states that “the novel interweaves Mrs. Ramsey characteristics as a maturely beautiful, intuitively gifted mother and housewife with qualities beyond those of a mere earthly being” (349). The idealized nature of Mrs. Ramsay’s intuitive intellect comes into view only through its fractured lineage, however. Particularly, while Virginia Woolf could have used one of Mrs. Ramsay’s biological daughters—Cam, Rue, Nancy and Rose—in the novel to describe Mrs. Ramsay’s intellectual gifts of intuition, the author chooses to employ Lily Briscoe in this function. ⁴³

As I discussed in depth earlier, Cam—as a fictionalized depiction of Laura Stephen—represents the reticent and uncontrollable aspects of cognitive difference. Lily Briscoe, on the other hand, is more closely aligned with the sexual politics of Victorian society through her conscious and willed resistance to social conditioning. Certainly, the independent streak Mrs. Ramsay notes in Lily Briscoe—in contrast to the more oblivious cognitive demeanor of Cam—derives from the young artist's willingness to contest the larger cultural prejudices that women "can't paint, can't write" (159). As such, Lily's observations that her work will most likely "be hung up in a servant's bedroom" (158) one day signal Virginia Woolf's acknowledgment of "the sex and gender divisions that we now see as important parts of any study of what is called 'modernism' in the visual arts" (Gillespie 765) as well as the absurdity of this cultural or

completely a cultural construction, perceived gender traits and their cultural value, certainly play a role in autism’s emergence as a distinct category of cognitive difference and disability.

⁴³ Jane Lilienfeld situates Lily Briscoe as a “surrogate daughter” (346) to Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*.

historical condition. Yet, Virginia Woolf's interest in "sex and gender divisions"—as they appear in *To the Lighthouse*—transcend the societal prejudices Lily Briscoe encounters as a female painter.

The novel situates Lily Briscoe as a cultural and a biological outsider, a perspective given to the reader through Mrs. Ramsay. “[S]he would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; she was an independent little creature” (17). Although Mrs. Ramsay’s initial description of Lily Briscoe contextualizes her as a progressive figure for the reader—as she seemingly consciously resists the traditional feminine role of nurturing wife and mother that Mrs. Ramsay represents—her association of Lily’s independent attitude with animal characteristics take on greater meaning later in the novel. Lily Briscoe, recalling a late night conversation she had with Mrs. Ramsay in which Mrs. Ramsay intoned that “Minta must, they all must marry,” recounts how “she had laid her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s lap and laughed and laughed and laughed, laughed almost hysterically at the thought of Mrs. Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand” (49-50). Significantly, Virginia Woolf depicts Lily’s laughter as being equally the product of an involuntary, almost somnambulistic bodily response and conscious action. Furthermore, while the mythically intuitive Mrs. Ramsay stands “unwittingly entirely [as to] what had caused her [Lily’s] laughter,” the younger woman observes how “every trace of willfulness abolished” in her mind, “and in its stead, something clear as the space with which the clouds at last uncover—the little space of sky which sleeps beside the moon” (50). The passage concludes with a sense of Lily Briscoe’s natural mental clarity and not with her previous cultural combativeness.

The issue of free will and innate behavioral differences permeate the above passage, then. Assuredly, Lily Briscoe shows astute powers of cognitive discernment. She admires Mrs.

Ramsay's beauty and intuitive social intelligence but questions her ubiquitous impulse to "strongly influence" events and "people" (60) even when those events and people do not naturally conform to her traditional epistemology of home and family. Lily's "hysterical laughter," which Woolf conveys as being mechanical and repetitive ("she laughed and laughed and laughed, and laughed"), aligns Lily Briscoe's actions with late nineteenth and early twentieth century questions over the role of the body on the mind and behavior. Concurrently, while neuropsychology inspired modernist authors to delve into the aesthetic possibilities of literal and figurative neurological connections, the concept of neurological differences also prompted writers to imagine the individual body acting outside the realm of conscious thought. As Urika Maude explains: "What neurological differences such as Parkinson's disease, Tourette's syndrome and epilepsy had in common, and what was seen in the black humor of cabaret and early cinema, was the body's seemingly-mechanical ability to act outside the realm of conscious control" (Maude 15). Considering the degree to which Virginia Woolf's various physical and mental ailments were attributed to problems with her nervous system, Woolf would have certainly been aware enough of this larger cultural anxiety that it would have influenced her fiction. ⁴⁴

Similarly, Virginia Woolf returns to the theme of Lily Briscoe's conflicted body in the novel's final section. As she "look[s] blankly at the canvas" in front of her, she "screw[s] up her little Chinese eyes in her small puckered face" and begins to paint. Intriguingly, Lily Briscoe's decision to begin painting is ensconced with explicit references to her physical difference as the

⁴⁴ Woolf's stance on neurological differences and pathology were no doubt complex. While she was diagnosed with neurasthenia—a mechanical weakness of the nerves—she resisted prescribed rest cures, which involved limiting physical and "mental strain" (Lee 661). These prescribed rest cures betrayed an inherent gender bias, as many neurologists believed mental stimulation was detrimental to the "weaker" female nervous system.

image of Lily's "Chinese eyes" triggers an aesthetic action that is part involuntary action, part laborious control. "With a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first quick decisive stroke" (157-158). Reading this passage, I would note that Virginia Woolf signals the appearance of Lily Briscoe's "abnormal" or atypical features for quite a different purpose in this scene. Where her "Chinese eyes" signaled her status as a physical and cultural outsider earlier in the novel, Lily Briscoe almost mythically transfers her "abnormal" perspective onto the canvas. As her brush strokes take on a "rhythmic" or mechanical quality, she is "drawn out of the gossip, out of community with people into the presence of this [. . .] other thing, this truth, this reality" (158). Indeed, the author's allusion to the individual's ability to find "truth" through the abnormal body reminds one of her reference to the "the undiscovered countries that are disclosed [. . .] a little rise in temperature reveals" (3). "[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 raptures of transcendentalism" (6). Although Virginia Woolf does not describe Lily Briscoe as ill, her "atypical" body and the mind's relinquishment to the impulses of that body produce a "transcendental" aesthetic vision.

To be clear, I do not wish to suggest here that Lily Briscoe acts wholly without conscious thought in the novel. On the contrary, I aver that the description of Lily's laughter mentioned earlier, and Mrs. Ramsay's subsequent confusion over its meaning, alert the reader to Victorian society's interpretative biases in respect to "non-normative" behavior and appearance. Still, Woolf does connect Lily Briscoe to a cognitive and behavioral identity that is biological or innate, not simply cultural.

Virginia Woolf's depiction of Lily Briscoe's cognitive identity in *To the Lighthouse*, for example, emphasizes her innately logical and not intuitive approach to social relations. If Mrs.

Ramsay's idealized feminine intelligence represents a "preindustrial world," Lily Briscoe's intellect is closely connected to modern forms of epistemology. When Charles Tansley, as a case in point, struggles to assert himself in the dinner conversation between Mr. Bankes and the Ramsays, creating an uncomfortable situation that witnesses Tansley "fidget[ing] in his chair," Lily demonstrates not simply disdain for helping Tansley, but discerns his inner motives by adopting a figurative sensory prosthesis. "Sitting opposite him [Mr. Tansley] could she not see, as in an X-Ray photograph, the ribs and thigh bones of the young man's desire to impress himself" (91). Just as Mrs. Ramsey attempts to define the young artist as a primitive "little creature," Woolf imbues Lily Briscoe with a futuristic or heightened sense perception, figuratively peering into the body of Mr. Tansley to ascertain the motivations behind his behaviors. While Lily Briscoe's powers of perception are underestimated by the other characters in the novel due to her "non-normative" appearance, her "Chinese eyes" and "old maidenly fairness (91)," Lily Briscoe understands what is expected of her, as a woman, socially. As Lily ruminates: "There is a code of behavior, she knew, whose seventh article (it may be) says that on occasions of this sort it behooves the woman, whatever her own occupation may be, to go to the help of the young man opposite." Characterized by an almost mechanistic or emotionless meditation, Lily demonstrates awareness of her expected response to Mr. Tansley's social failure, but chooses not to comply with this code of behavior. "But what would it be, she thought, if neither of us did either of these things" (91).

Still, while Lily Briscoe resists the uncompromising gender identity as embodied by the equally "tyrannical" and "domineering" (58) Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe's innate cognitive difference becomes clearer in the absence of the family matriarch later in the novel when she attempts to assuage Mr. Ramsay's need for sympathy. "A woman, she should have known how

to deal with it. It was immensely to her discredit, sexually, to stand there dumb. One said--what did one say?--Oh, Mr. Ramsay! Dear Mr. Ramsay!" (152). Interestingly, at the very moment when Lily Briscoe most wishes to adopt Mrs. Ramsay's archetypical emotional temperament, she cannot communicate a significant sympathetic gesture. Instead, she "look[s] down at" Mr. Ramsay's "remarkable boots" and offers the small gesture of a compliment. "What beautiful boots!" she exclaimed" (153). Seeming almost to stand outside herself, Lily compares herself--and her inability to interact with Mr. Ramsay in a neurotypical fashion--with Mrs. Ramsay, who in her role as matriarch of the family, embodies the kind of "gendered" neurotypical social performance that Lily cannot master.

Considering the elegiac nature of the final section of *To the Lighthouse*, the reader need not be surprised at Lily Briscoe's inability to comfort Mr. Ramsay as his wife's death signifies the death of the preindustrial, natural world. Concurrently, as a progressive figure, Lily Briscoe represents a subjective modern world where the previous rituals of language and social intuition fail. From the perspective of the novel's overall construction of male and female intelligence, Lily Briscoe functions as a character who wishes to utilize the separate spheres of male and female thought. In this regard, Lily Briscoe is a Tiresias like figure in *To the Lighthouse* in that she does not embody essentially feminine or masculine modes of epistemology. As the novel tells us, "She liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that [marriage and family]" (50). On the other hand, Lily Briscoe yearns for a sense of that "knowledge and wisdom stored up in Mrs. Ramsay's heart" (51). Lily Briscoe's attempts to reconcile this dichotomy can be seen in the last section of the novel. Now a mature artist of "forty-four" (149), Lily Briscoe attempts to complete the painting she began ten years before. "Suddenly she remembered. When she had sat there last ten years ago there had been a little sprig or leaf

pattern on the tablecloth, which she had looked at in a moment of revelation” (147). As the reader follows Lily Briscoe’s thoughts, he or she notices the character attempting to balance the multiple impressions she has about Mrs. Ramsay. “The figure came readily enough. She was astonishingly beautiful [. . .] but beauty was not everything. Beauty had this penalty—it came too readily, came too completely” (177). At this moment, Lily Briscoe acknowledges the complexity of Mrs. Ramsay’s identity, a complexity that her beauty overwhelmed. “One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman, she thought. Among them, must be one that was blind to her beauty” (198). Significantly, Lily Briscoe’s painting does not follow Mr. Ramsay’s male-centered epistemology of abstraction, nor does her painting of Mrs. Ramsay elevate the character to the mythical source of societal connections she was earlier in the novel. Rather, Lily Briscoe draws on a multitude of subjective details and impressions over ten years to create an overall sense of objective truth. Even though “the great revelation had never come [. . .] there were daily little miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark” and “here was one” (161), Lily thought.

Lily Briscoe’s subjective gaze, then, occupies an ideological space between Mr. Ramsay’s epistemology of cold abstraction and Mrs. Ramsay’s one of personal sentiment and connection. In this respect, while *To the Lighthouse* initially explores a binary concept of male and female intelligence,⁴⁵ the “non-normative” body of Lily Briscoe simultaneously represents more progressive and primitive conceptions of gender identity and cognition. While the concept of an individual utilizing competing systems or modes of thinking was certainly influenced by a

⁴⁵ This dichotomy of intelligence in the Ramsay family that Woolf presents illustrates the difference between left and right brain thinkers, a concept that “generated widespread interest, stimulated by French neurologist Paul Broca[’s work delineating] the different functions of the brain hemispheres: the right hemisphere primitive and ‘artistic,’ the left more developed and rational” (Armstrong 189).

variety of historical and cultural developments—the rise of neurology, psychoanalysis and the general intensified subjectivity of modern life—Woolf’s novel attributes the individual’s ability to resist social conditioning as much to the subtle variance of the individual body, and its effect on the mind, as she does to an iconoclastic spirit. As Woolf states once again in “On Being Ill” “Always to have sympathy, always to be accompanied, always to be understood would be intolerable” because while “in health the genial pretense must be kept up and the effort renewed—to communicate, to civilize, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work together by day and night to sport. In illness this make believe ceases” (12). Looking at this passage, one might infer Virginia Woolf subtly criticizing Mrs. Ramsay’s, and by extension Julia Stephen’s, life built on sympathy and “genial pretense.”

Lily Briscoe’s “Chinese Eyes:” Race, “Retardation” and Eugenic Discourse

If we look at Woolf’s revered descriptions of Lily Briscoe’s aesthetic philosophy in *To the Lighthouse*, we may say that she represents the kind of eccentricity and neurological difference the author praises in her essay “The Eccentrics,” people who “have lived their lives according to the dictates of nature” (38). When Lily Briscoe gazes on her completed painting with “its greens and blues, its lines running up and across” (208), she resigns herself to the fact that she and her painting will not be recognized or remembered by society. “It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed” (208). Still, Lily Briscoe has “had [her] vision” (209), a spark of originality that sets her apart from the “spiritually decrepit” (“The Eccentrics” 38) aesthetic of Mr. Tansley and patriarchal society.

But, where Virginia Woolf situates her female painter as a representational intellectual and aesthetic ideal in the novel--the very best kind of eccentric--she does not ignore the fear-

inducing elements of her character. Indeed, there is more of Laura Stephen—and the medically pathologized Virginia Woolf-- in Lily Briscoe than is immediately apparent. As I have previously observed, the novel identifies Lily as an "independent little creature" with "little Chinese eyes" and a "puckered-up face"(17). While Lily Briscoe's atypical features mark her as a physical and cultural outsider in the novel, Virginia Woolf is also careful to remove Lily Briscoe from the realm of sexual courtship and procreation. Lily Briscoe is described as having an "old maidenly fairness" (91) even as a young woman early in the novel. Minta Doyle, conversely, has "something flying, something a little wild and harum-scarum about [her], who" wasn't "as [. . .] had [been] said about poor Lily Briscoe, ' . . . skimpy'" (99). Furthermore, as Urmila Seshagiri avers, "Woolf alludes to Lily's Chinese eyes whenever romantic possibilities arise" as a way "to guarantee Lily's exclusion from marital and sexual economies" (164).

What I would like to present here is a deeper interpretation of Virginia Woolf's reference to Lily Briscoe's "Chinese eyes."⁴⁶ The novel's reference to Lily's vaguely Asian features is far from an arbitrary marker of physical and racial difference. On the contrary, Lily Briscoe's "Chinese eyes" needs to be placed within a historical and cultural narrative regarding the medical conception and linguistic discourse of disability. More particularly, Lily Briscoe's "Chinese eyes" allude to the observed features of Down's syndrome, called Mongolism by [Dr. Langdon Down in Virginia Woolf's lifetime] . . . because he [Dr. Down] believed the syndrome to be the result of a biological reversion by Caucasians to the Mongol racial type" (Baynton 19). While Laura Stephen was never diagnosed with Mongolism, she was seen by Dr. Down who

⁴⁶ Previous to this work, Patricia Laurence has contended that Lily's "Chinese eyes" suggest [. . .] the new aesthetic voyaging in the East during the modernist period." In this way, "Chinese spaces are mapped onto British modernism to enlarge the Eurocentric discourse that presently surrounds the movement" (10). While I do not reject Laurence's reading, I argue that Lily's "Chinese eyes" represent more than simply an aesthetic vision in *To the Lighthouse*. The racialized features of Lily Briscoe, rather, hint at national fears relating to perceived intersections between race and disability.

volunteered his medical opinion to the Stephens family in 1885 that “she [Laura] will not develop much further” (Newman 20). More crucially, Laura’s Stephen’s cognitive disability fell within, and would have been seen as supporting, abstract Victorian theories of atavistic behavior and degeneration.⁴⁷ It is my final claim in this chapter, then, that Virginia Woolf diffuses Laura Stephen and her personal self into the character of Lily Briscoe in order to examine the unstable Victorian medical conception of degeneration and disability.

There are elements of Virginia Woolf in many of the characters in *To the Lighthouse*. As Hermione Lee states: “She is the child Rose, choosing her mother’s jewelry in the parental bedroom. She is the adolescent Nancy, making an empire out of a rock pool and drawing in her skirts at the sight of adult passion. She is Cam in the nursery being talked asleep by her mother [. . .] she is Lily Briscoe, painting her picture” (Lee 474). While I concur with Hermione Lee’s essential argument, I would add that Laura Stephen’s influence is discernable on more than one character in Woolf’s fiction. In order to make this connection, one must observe how much Julia Stephen’s theories of illness—in terms of how to identify it as well as how to control its “imaginative” (“Notes from Sick Rooms” 77) effects on the mind—implicitly influences Virginia Woolf’s representations of disability and cognitive difference. As Julia Stephen’s tells the reader of her work: “It ought to be quite immaterial to a nurse whom she is nursing” (55). Rather, while nurses ought not to be “indifferent” (55) to the pain and suffering of the individual patient, Julia Stephen’s identifies “[t]he genuine love of [the] ‘case’ and not the individual patient” as “the sign of the true nursing instinct” (55). While Virginia Woolf’s fiction—as I have discussed it in this work—does not explore the care of the sick, per se, Julia Stephen’s theory of

⁴⁷ Put very briefly, “undesirable whites,” like Laura Stephen were seen as “biological[ly] representative of lower [racial] groups” (Gould 165). In other words, they were proof positive that racialized, physical markers of degeneration could be identified and catalogued.

nursing is connected with a larger cultural and medical zeitgeist. Namely, Woolf lived at a time when theories of disease and illness overlapped with unstable abstract theories regarding physical and intellectual degeneration. When Leonard and Virginia Woolf were considering having children in 1913, for example, they were concerned enough about Virginia's "mental vulnerability" (Glendinning 147) and the possibility these traits would be passed on to a child, that Leonard was impelled to consult a variety of doctors. While Leonard Woolf received a great deal of conflicting advice, perhaps the most striking aspect of his venture, Victoria Glendinning notes, is "how readily doctors gave their opinion without meeting the patient [Virginia Woolf]" (148). Certainly, Julia Stephen's theory of nursing and Leonard Woolf's consultations with various doctors in 1913 point towards a medical model of disease—in Virginia Woolf's case, perceived cognitive disability and madness—that professes that illness can be objectively diagnosed based on a uniform set of physical and behavioral signs of pathology irrespective of the individuality of the patient.

If the medical observation of physical and behavioral variance was professed by many to be a stable, objectively observed dynamic, disability—cognitive and otherwise--starts to be understood as "backward" or atavistic at the turn of the century" (Baynton 50). While the terms "idiot," "imbecile" and "feebleminded" denoted different levels of cognitive disability in Victorian society, ⁴⁸ "the term [retarded]" becomes a more general, or all encompassing, designation for cognitive disability. This term, however, signaled not just learning disabilities, but anxieties that were specific to the racial and intellectual mainstream in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. "Retardation" essentially signaled the fears of intellectual, affluent

⁴⁸ Laura Stephen was originally diagnosed as "suffering from 'imbecility'" which would have categorized her as having "a milder form of 'idiocy' and a severer form of 'feeble-minded-ness'" (Newman 19).

Caucasians who worried that they were least equipped to handle the changes environmental stresses of evolution.⁴⁹ The physical and behavioral characteristics of cognitively disabled Caucasian children from upper-middle class backgrounds, like Laura Stephen, would have literally been interpreted as characteristics of an earlier—and racially classified—period of human development.

Dr. Langdon Down explains the perceived connections between the physical characteristics of disability and racial degeneration in his 1866 essay "Observations on the Ethnic Classification of Idiots." The beginning of Down's essay unconsciously reflects Laura Stephen's family's decision to consult the medical establishment in order to ascertain her educational and behavioral treatment as well as future prospects. "The medical practitioner who may be consulted in any given case, has, perhaps in a very early condition of a child's life, to give an opinion on points of vital importance as to the present condition and probably future of the little one." Intriguingly, while Down initially frames his professional authority as being grounded in his ability to provide an objective assessment of the physical and cognitive condition of a couple's child, he moves to racially separate "idiot" children from their well to do European parents, thereby making his work a reflection of familiar and cultural anxieties regarding disability. As Down describes one of his "idiot" children:

The hair is not black, as in the real mongol, but of a brownish color, straight and scanty.

The face is flat and broad and destitute of prominence. [. . .] The eyes are obliquely placed, and the eternal cathi more than normally distant from one another. The palpebral

⁴⁹ There are subtle references to this pseudo-scientific theory in Virginia Woolf's fiction. For example, while Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* is a war veteran suffering from shell shock, the novel attributes his persistent hallucinations to "a brain made sensitive by eons of evolution" (68). Hence his cognitive disability is explained as much by theories of evolution and degeneration as it is by the effects of the Great War.

fissure is very narrow. The forehead is wrinkled transversely from the constant assistance which the levatores palpebrarum derive from the occipito-frontalis muscle in the opening of the eye. [. . .] The skin has a slight dirty yellowish tinge and is deficient of elasticity, giving the appearance of being too large for the body. The boy's aspect is such that it is difficult to realize he is the child of Europeans, but so frequently are these characters presented, that there can be no doubt that these ethnic features are the result of degeneration.

Analyzing the preceding passage, one can discern connections between Down's theory of racial "idiocy" and Virginia Woolf's representation of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*. Beyond the obvious physical parallels between Lily Briscoe's "Chinese eyes" and Landon Down's "idiot" children, mongolism—in the early part of the twentieth century-- was a "mysterious condition" that "many eugenicists" considered to be "heritable" (Childs 50).⁵⁰ In order for these theories of racial degeneration and cognitive disability to remain stable, however, heritability needed to be measured against the racial characteristics and features of one's descendants, an important diagnostic criteria Virginia Woolf omits with regard to Lily Briscoe. Lily is partially orphaned. "There was her father" (50), but the novel makes no mention of the existence of her mother. Although Lily Briscoe's filial obligation to her father further characterize her as a "motherless spinster living in shabby respectability" (Lillienfeld 347), her incomplete biological lineage connect her to dynamic and unstable conceptions of racial and cognitive difference.

It is important to note that Virginia Woolf's reference to Lily Briscoe's "Chinese eyes" in *To the Lighthouse* is not a singular literary reference in her work. Virginia Woolf's prose is

⁵⁰ Childs argues that Woolf "indirectly invokes [Elizabeth and mongolism in *Mrs. Dalloway*] as a figure for her eugenical anxieties about her own fertility" as it relates to "Woolf's longstanding personal concern about the heritability of her own mental instability" (50).

littered with suggestions to the connection between mental atavism and racial difference. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, Clarissa's daughter, Elizabeth, is described as "a queer looking girl" (56) by Peter Walsh. Furthermore, Clarissa ponders the "Oriental mystery" of her daughter by musing: "Was it that some Mongol had been wrecked on the coast of Norfolk (as Mrs. Hilbery said), had mixed with the Dalloway ladies, perhaps, a hundred years ago? [for] Elizabeth . . . had "Chinese eyes in a pale face" (122-23). Beyond Clarissa's expressed fears of past miscegenation, the above passage finds its greatest analytical possibilities in the uncertain future Woolf bestows on Elizabeth. For just as we may interpret Mrs. Ramsay's concern over her children's individual futures as grounded in the author's concern regarding childhood development and neurological difference, Virginia Woolf constructs the seventeen year old Elizabeth as a character whose cognitive development, and ensuing career prospects, have not yet been set. Not surprisingly, Elizabeth--like Cam--resists the diagnostic gaze of her mother in so far as Woolf "leav[es] unanswered the question of Elizabeth's inscrutable future (will she become the professional that Kilman would like her to become, or will she follow her mother into the role of hostess?)" (Childs 49). This uncertain racial lineage and professional future destabilize the definitive medical gaze of the early twentieth century. In effect, just as we ponder Cam's future in regard to what eccentric traits will take hold or develop, and which will not, Elizabeth's future seems to hinge on unanswered questions of biological and racial heritability.

Furthermore, even though Elizabeth Dalloway and Lily Briscoe are marked as racially "othered" in their respective texts, the representation of this difference is not entirely consistent. Particularly, while Elizabeth and Lily are both represented through Asian features that link these characters to fears of racial degeneration and mental disability, their physical and psychological characteristics are not uniform. As Donald Childs notes, "Woolf has Clarissa describe the

ostensibly Mongolian Elizabeth in terms of the very characteristics that psychologists like Savage associated with mongolism" (50-51). Specifically, Clarissa tells the reader that Elizabeth is "gentle, considerate and still" (123). Considering our association of Down's Syndrome--both today and in Woolf's time--with docile behavior, Woolf's description of Elizabeth is unsurprising.⁵¹ Also, by depicting the seventeen year old Elizabeth as still cognitively immature, in so far as her natural abilities or talents are still unclear, Woolf appears to appropriate early medical discourse which averred that "mongoloid" "patients are in fact unfinished children, and that their peculiar appearance is really that of a phase of fetal life" (Brenda 2).

Woolf does not so much aggressively critique medical classifications of cognitive disability, however, as she decentralizes or de-territorializes it by conflating the racialized discourse of mongolism with the mainstream or non-racialized discourse of schizophrenia. To explain, while conditions like mongolism represented cultural fears regarding miscegenation and tainted blood, they also represented conditions that function below the level of culture or race since they could afflict all people or "races" equally. Hence, the early twentieth century witnessed the replacement of previous terms of cognitive disability. Dementia praecox, for example, was replaced by the word schizophrenia in large part because the symptoms of schizophrenia—"indifference, creativity, passion, and even fanaticism" (Metzl 29)—were associated more with a racial, intellectual and cultural mainstream than they were with a racialized "other."⁵² Although Woolf never received a specific diagnosis of schizophrenia in her

⁵¹ As a point of comparison, while Down's Syndrome was depicted as a state of perpetual fetal or pre-formative life, Han Asperger averred that children with autism are predominantly overly developed, or mature beyond their years. He observes, for example, that his subjects "often have a brooding frown," their faces "lose baby fat" early, and "pronounced features appear that are princely or degenerate aristocratic" (68). In short, the intellectually precocious nature of the children he studies removed from the fetal identity associated with mongolism.

⁵² Like other types of disability, dementia praecox was defined as much by issues of race and power as by more objectively measured constructs of cognitive ability. For example, dementia praecox was commonly linked to African Americans in the United States after emancipation. The "appearance of praecox in [African Americans]"

lifetime, her mental illness was continually figured as a product of an intellectual, not “racialized” heritage.⁵³ The Stephen's family doctor George Savage (1842-1921), for instance, “believed that patients who came from 'neurotic stock,' especially those families that produced geniuses or ambitious intellectuals [. . .] were more likely to go out of their minds periodically for purely biological reasons” (Caramagno 11-12).⁵⁴ Not surprisingly, then, descriptions of schizophrenic patients “remained largely [. . .] free of connections to violence, invasions, crime, impurity and other eugenic staples” (34).⁵⁵

Still, while illnesses like schizophrenia came to be understood as diseases of a racial mainstream, women did not neatly fit within this category. While Virginia Woolf stated in her work *Three Guineas* (1938) that that of the many “duties [. . .] which are specifically appropriate to the daughters of educated men” they should especially seek to become the “mothers of educated men” (Qtd. in Childs 23), educated women—like Virginia Woolf and Lily Briscoe—were not uniformly seen as good candidates for childbirth. Dr. Hyslop, a man Leonard Woolf

was attributed to “the pressures of freedom—pressures which the ‘Negroes’ [. . .] were biologically unfit” (Metzl 31).

⁵³ Much like Down’s syndrome, or Mongolism, was diagnosed on the basis of its visible and representative physical characteristics, cognitive illnesses of the intellectual elite and racial mainstream functioned as medical texts to be read. In her work *Virginia Woolf Icon*, for example, Brenda Silver traces the public distribution of Virginia Woolf’s image in Celia Beaton’s 1930 *Book of Beauty*. Beaton notes that Woolf “is one of the most gravely distinguished-looking women I have ever seen [. . .] In her we do not find the conventional pink cheeks and liquid eyes and childish lips.” Instead, Woolf “is one's grandmother as a girl. . . . Her skin is parchment-coloured, she has timid startled eyes, set deep, a sharp bird-like nose and firm pursed lips. Her lank hair and aristocratic wrists are of a supreme delicacy, and one imagines her spending eternities of dreamy leisure sewing and gazing out the window” (Qtd. in Silver 93). In short, Woolf’s physical characteristics are concurrently figured as “aristocratic” and abnormal and/or sickly.

⁵⁴ Virginia Woolf’s personal experiences with Dr. Savage notably influenced her depiction of Sir William Bradshaw and his treatment of Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Septimus Smith, for example, is marked as “possessing hands [that] were educated” (84) while Sir William Bradshaw attributes his madness as “bred more than anything by a lack of good blood” (102).

⁵⁵ It is important to note that while autism did not exist as an independent diagnostic category until the late 1940s, the term was used to describe “the most severe schizophrenics . . . [who] live in a world of their own” (Bleur qtd. in McDonagh 102). *To the Lighthouse* subtly associates Lily Briscoe with this identity at one point late in the novel. Working on her painting, the novel tells us that Lily Briscoe was “[c]ertainly losing consciousness of outer things” (159). Like many of Woolf’s other references to eugenical and medical discourse, however, it is difficult to discern whether Woolf attaches a concrete meaning to the image of Lily “losing consciousness” or whether she is simply evoking the image and medical discourse for its imaginative possibilities.

consulted in 1913 about the possibility of Leonard and Virginia having a child, had written earlier that ““The Removal of woman from her natural sphere of domesticity to that of mental labor not only renders her less fit to maintain the virility of the race, but it renders her prone to degenerate and initiate a downward trend which gathers impetus in her progeny”” (Qted. in Glendinning 148). As an intellectual, as a woman who “had been to Brussels” and “had been to Paris” even if it was “only for a flying visit to see an aunt who was ill” (71), Lily Briscoe would have been widely considered an unfit individual for childbirth. Where Mrs. Ramsay is associated with the natural sphere of domesticity and childbirth, there is an implied eugenic discourse surrounding Lily Briscoe that disqualifies her as a potential traditional wife and mother. As a woman painter and intellectual, then, Lily Briscoe paradoxically represents the racial mainstream and atavistic identity.

As unstable as medical theories of disability were in the early twentieth century, individuals like Woolf who struggled with a variety of physical and mental issues that were difficult to definitively diagnose, essentially stood as texts waiting to be read by professionals, usually male doctors. Accepting the definition or name given to a particular set of behaviors or physical characteristics, however, is to accept society’s conceptions of its abnormality and treatment. Lily Briscoe’s exclusion from the world of “romantic possibilities” and procreation then, highlights the more arbitrary notions of disability and normality as it relates to gender.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe and William Bankes are described by Mrs. Ramsay as "cold and aloof and rather self-sufficing" (104). It is Lily Briscoe’s “cold and aloof” identity in this scene that separates her from Mrs. Ramsay’s normative identity as wife and mother. Not surprisingly, Mrs. Ramsay's portrayal of Lily Briscoe as socially frigid arises within the context of her attempts at matchmaking in the novel. If we look closely at this section of the novel, we

observe that Woolf set up three important concepts in regards to Lily Briscoe and her social prospects: First, Mrs. Ramsay once again notes Lily Briscoe's physical difference by noting her "little puckered face and her little Chinese eyes." Second, she eliminates Lily Briscoe as a viable partner for any of her male peers at the table as "no man would, she feared" perceive the "flare of something" Mrs. Ramsay detects in Lily. Finally, Mrs. Ramsay abruptly turns her attention to William Bankes as a suitable, if unorthodox, partner for the young painter. "Obviously [Lily would not find a suitable mate], not unless it were a much older man, like William Bankes" (104). Although Leonard Woolf was a mere two years older than his wife Virginia, there are reverberations of the Woolf marriage in *To the Lighthouse*. Particularly, the relationship between Lily Briscoe and William Bankes resembles the unconventionality of the Woolfs' union. "What marriage to Virginia seemed to offer Leonard was the sharing of passion and a creative life with a woman who was 'supreme,' light years away from the (to him) repellent, hungry womanhood of an Annie Hopfengartner and Mrs. Dutton" (Glendinning 142). As Glendinning and others note, the Woolf marriage was based more on shared creative passion than "physical seduction" (143).

Rather than reading Lily Briscoe's potential relationship with William Bankes as a direct representation of Virginia Woolf's marriage, the relationship is more properly and fully contextualized through an analysis of the relationship between perceived sexual deviance and disability. Eugenic theories, to be precise, associated a range of "abnormal" sexual identities to "defectives" or the disabled. Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) argued that "men with an appetite for crimes against nature display a moral, if not physical, femininity associated with sexual impulses" (132). While these theories—much like theories of degeneration—were unstable, they

tended to depict individuals with disabilities as either sexually deviant or asexual.⁵⁶

Furthermore, disability has continually been associated with notions of racial difference and hyper sexuality, as "the sideshow circuit . . . conflate[d] material differences among identity categories by displaying racial others alongside disabled people" (Russell 41).

As I have argued, Virginia Woolf diffuses aspects of Laura Stephen and the author herself onto the character of Lily Briscoe in order to de-territorialize medical, racial and social concepts of disability. In terms of Woolf's own life, one can discern how Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville West would have been viewed by doctors like George Savage.⁵⁷ While Lily Briscoe is not aligned with a homosexual or Victorian identity of "invert" in *To the Lighthouse*, her sexuality remains one that resists Victorian concepts of hetero-normativity.

Yet, Mrs. Ramsay's pairing of William Bankes and Lily Briscoe--as short lived as it may be in the novel--alludes to the variety or spectrum of human relationships visible through the lens of neurodiversity. As Woolf tell us in *To the Lighthouse*, the relationship between William Bankes and Lily Briscoe is built on something other than romantic love and, as such, appears strange to Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay's acknowledgment that it is merely one of "those unclassified affections of which there are many" (104) alludes to society's inability to categorize the relationship, not its invisibility.⁵⁸ To an extent, this epistemological problem arises because

⁵⁶ Robert McGruder and Anna Mollow's work *Sex and Disability* gives a very thorough historical and cultural account of the connections between concepts of heteronormativity and disability. Robert McGruer, for example, argues that "as the heterosexual norm congealed during the twentieth century, it was the 'homosexual menace' that was specified and embodied." Hence, heterosexuality "masquerades as a non-identity, as the natural order of things" in the same way that an "able-bodied identity" is essentially invisible in society by way of its perceived normality (79)

⁵⁷ Savage used the term "'neurasthenic' to describe any 'hysteric' and sexually deprived young woman given to invalidism, paralysis, masturbation, or eccentricity" (Lee 184).

⁵⁸ This concept is crucial to Virginia Woolf's overall aesthetic approach and partly explains the manner in which Woolf's work has been aligned with a variety of political meanings: feminism, homosexuality, and, here, neurodiversity. As Elena Gualtieri notes "in Woolf's earliest diaries and letters the problem of the literary canon and of [the] aesthetic and cultural values that define it is generally called up implicitly through her fascination with

the relationship between Lily Briscoe and William Bankes appears to be anchored to Mrs. Ramsay's perception of Lily's difference as she measures it through the prism of her traditional, Victorian relationship with Mr. Ramsay.

Looking at what Woolf's novel tells us, though, Lily Briscoe is legitimately fond of William Bankes, even if there is not a traditional sexual attraction. "Thanks to his scientific mind he understood--a proof of disinterested intelligence which had pleased her and comforted her enormously. One could talk of painting then seriously to a man. . . . She loved William Bankes" (176). Intriguingly, Lily Briscoe's description of her relationship with William Bankes carves out a model of physical attraction that transcends binary concepts of deviant sexuality. Lily Briscoe's sexual identity—attached as it is to a racialized disability discourse—is neither asexual nor hyper-sexualized. On the contrary, just as the reader is prepared to classify their relationship as a simple "friendship" or professional partnership, Lily stresses her "love" for Mr. Bankes. In the same way Virginia Woolf diffuses separate medical discourses regarding disability onto the character of Lily Briscoe in order to destabilize cultural constructions of difference and normality, Lily Briscoe's relationship with William Bankes creates an alternative model of love and affection to the heteronormative or "naturalized" relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay.

The idea that Lily Briscoe's relationship with William Bankes challenges concepts of hetero-normativity and resists culturally constructed notions of gender roles and sexual identity also fits within an autistic dynamic. As I explained in the first section of this chapter, Laura Stephen's perceived cognitive disability intersects with Victorian paradigms of female

figures who cannot be easily accommodated into preexisting schemes" (37). Hence, the dynamic interpretations of Woolf's work are enabled by her employment of characters who do not fit within cultural and ideological norms.

compliance and male patriarchy. As a neurological—as well as cultural—identity, however, the autistic individual eludes cultural subjugation and control. "In a sense," as Rachel Groner notes, "autistic sexuality is always and necessarily queer, even if the people involved are not gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender in identity or practice" (265) since the autistic individual remains unconscious or uninterested in the binary conceptions of identity society employs to construct meaning. In terms of Woolf's literary approach, the author's awareness of unclassified types of cognitive difference--allows her to employ characters that cross boundaries, or participate in gender and identity roles across a wide range of human experiences. Ontologically, Lily Briscoe and William Bankes' relationship is not antagonistic to that of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, then, but presents an incongruous and dynamic vision of their sexual partnership.

Based on our present understanding regarding autistic identity, the reader of *To the Lighthouse* can draw parallels between the novel's inability to definitely define the nature of Lily Briscoe and William Banke's relationship, and Temple Grandin' explanation of the non-normative dimension of autistic sexuality. "Friendship always revolved around what I did rather than who I was." As for sexual relationships, "I have learned that the autistic people who adapt most successfully in personal relationships either choose celibacy or marry a person with similar disabilities" (Grandin 153). I don't wish to imply that Lily Briscoe is autistic as the novel attaches her to several early twentieth century medical discourses. But, Lily's relationship with William Bankes is based on their shared interest and/or thoughts about painting, which moves these characters outside the world of traditional courtship and feelings. Woolf's prose is quite prescient here as she sees value in a relationship that follows the pragmatic norms derived from human difference, not the proscriptive standards of heteronormative or neurotypical society. Whether Woolf's prescience comes from the unconventionality of her own marriage to Leonard

Woolf, a general sense of the unconventionality of her own relationships in total, or some other unknown factor no one can say for certain.

It is perhaps vital to reiterate at the conclusion of this chapter that Virginia Woolf's personal attitudes towards disability and eugenic theory were not uniformly progressive. If one were to look across the range of Woolf's fiction and the author's notebooks, one would see more than a few disconcerting passages.⁵⁹ While Virginia Woolf certainly viewed neurological difference ambiguously--as it could represent the bleak, isolated and meaningless future she most likely attributed to Laura Stephen--her prose attests to the argument that disability is often simply a pejorative marker for naturally occurring human difference. Ironically, as Woolf examines and resists cultural and ideological norms regarding gender roles, sexuality and intelligence in her fiction through the perspective of cognitive difference, she may have partly contributed to our present definition of autism as both naturally occurring difference and a pathology of the male intellect.

Ultimately, this last point may explain why Virginia Woolf appears to struggle to bring many of her more eccentric characters completely into the future. Lily Briscoe, for instance, artistically matures in *To the Lighthouse*, finishing her painting in the last section of the novel, but Woolf seems unwilling or unable to integrate her character's difference inside the web of social relations as she was earlier in the work. Woolf suggests in the novel's final section that William Bankes's relationship with Lily Briscoe never progressed. "There had been some talk of her marrying William Bankes once, but nothing had come of it" (150). Whether Woolf abandons this narrative strand because she believes the character can only intellectually and artistically

⁵⁹ As Hermione Lee recounts, Woolf often seems to embrace or support eugenic discourse as when she refers to a particularly pale woman as having "the mind of an albino" (184).

mature by completing rejecting any and all models of neurotypical and heteronormative relationships, or because she sees Lily Briscoe's neurological difference as fundamentally incompatible with these cultural norms we cannot completely say. While Lily Briscoe's father is mentioned in the first part of the novel, he is absent in the final section. Presumably, if he has passed away, Lily Briscoe's social prospects—in the sense of friendships, relationships and personal independence—are left open-ended.

It is intriguing to note, however, that Woolf leaves these narrative strands open more than once. As much as *To the Lighthouse* dwelled on the question of how Cam would turn out in life, Woolf appears to lose her sense of the character's individuality in the last section of the novel. Gone is the eccentric elements of Cam's personality--her peculiar speech, physical gestures and cantankerous personality. In its place, Woolf defines Cam in this section mostly by her silence. Standing in the boat, Cam "dabbled her fingers in the water, and stared at the shore and said nothing" (169). Perhaps because Laura Stephen never had an adult identity--in the sense that she was institutionalized and removed from the larger realm of social relations at a young age—Virginia Woolf can't completely imagine a character based on Laura as a mature individual. By the same token, we might view Cam's later banality as a natural result of society's conditioning as her early neurological difference potentially was mollified through the prism of her family environment and education. Still, we are left to wonder if the character has lost the very traits that made her unique, and allusive to Laura Stephen, earlier in the novel? While these narrative gaps, in respect to character development, stem in part from the problem of representing individual progress for women without the employing the traditional tropes of marriage and motherhood, they also point to the difficulty of imagining the development of the cognitively marginalized absent the conditioning of society.

All in all, unlike modernist writers such as William Faulkner and Joseph Conrad, who wrote about disability and cognitively marginalized people as "able-bodied" individuals themselves, Woolf brings a complicated individual dynamic to her work. While we may discern from her essays and autobiographical writings that she often perceived herself as "different," Woolf always seems to want to thread the needle--to distinguish the point at which eccentricity may devolve into madness, when normality becomes mere conformity, and when difference may expose or elucidate the intellectual and aesthetic limits of neurotypical society. Her work, therefore, acknowledges the existence of a category of cognitive difference that stands between idiocy and eccentricity even as it tackles the more pervasive fear inducing aspects of this difference.

Chapter 2:
“Send[ing] him To Jackson, where [he] belong[s]”:

Autism, Disability and White Identity in *The Sound and the Fury*

Holding a mirror up to nature is a common trope across Modernist literature, as the image evokes the fundamental tension or discrepancy between internal and external realities. The first section of *To the Lighthouse*, “The Window,” signals Virginia Woolf’s interest in exploring the innumerable thoughts and feelings that exist beneath the surface of speech and action. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that William Faulkner also adopts the image of the mirror for his own literary purposes in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929).

The image of the mirror first appears in Benjy Compson’s section of Faulkner’s novel. Led into the family “library” by his African-American servant Luster, Benjy touches a place on a wall where a mirror used to be. “Luster turned on the light. The windows went black, and the dark tall place on the wall came and I went and touched it. It was like a door, only it wasn’t a door” (61). While the passage implies the “dark tall place on the wall” has a special significance or association for Benjy, the spot strikes the reader as mysterious in this first section as he or she has only partial access to Benjy’s internal consciousness. This mystery is only resolved when Benjy’s brother Jason gives his account of a similar situation later in the novel. “Ben went to the dark place on the wall where the mirror used to be, rubbing his hands on it and slobbering and moaning” (255-256). Although Jason’s narrative does not clarify the individual or associative significance of the absent mirror for Benjy, the example highlights the aesthetic approach of *The Sound and the Fury*. Meaning, as it guardedly presented in the novel, is filtered through the concurrent narratives of the Compson brothers: Benjy, Quentin and Jason.

I would like to propose that the image of the mirror alerts the reader to a wider aesthetic and epistemological aim in *The Sound and the Fury*, however. Namely, Faulkner’s novel, in

turning its gaze inward towards the Compson family through the disoriented sensory perspectives of Benjy and Quentin, aims to destabilize hitherto invisible aspects of white identity and privilege. To state this more clearly, the neuro-diverse--and autistic--sensory perspectives of Benjy and Quentin highlight the effects of cognitive difference on previously cemented codes of intellectual, biological and cultural superiority.⁶⁰ Cognitive disability, in short, allows Faulkner to examine and critique white identity and privilege from the inside.

Faulkner and Disability:

In contrast to Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner did not have a personal relationship with disability. As a storyteller, however, Faulkner seemed to have been intrigued by images of disability, a point Richard Gray makes in his biography of the Southern author: "Anxious to be a pilot" as a young man in WWI, William Faulkner enlisted in "the Royal Air Force in Canada" after he was rejected by the United States Army because of his height (five foot five inches). Despite the fact that "the war was over before he had completed his training," Faulkner "proceeded to construct a personal myth" of his war exploits and injury. Specifically, in addition to writing home with stories of crashing his "plane upside down in a hangar," Faulkner "arrived at Oxford Station limping, having acquired a mythical war wound." As late as 1925, Faulkner continued his performance by claiming that he "he had been injured by shrapnel while in France and [was] severely wounded in the head" (Gray 4).

As Alice Hall correctly notes, Faulkner's "personal fantasies need to be seen in the context of a time when there was a sudden increase in the visibility of physical disability on a

⁶⁰ The image of the mirror holds intriguing interpretative possibilities in relation to autism, and Benjy's speechlessness, more generally. In his work, "No Wonder I Don't Talk," for example, the autistic and mute poet Tito Mukhopadhyay recounts how he would "stand in front of the mirror[as a child] in the hopes of seeing [his] lips move" (17), an image he associated with his mother's ability to speak. In *The Sound and the Fury*, then, Benjy's obsession with "the dark place on the wall where the mirror used to be" signals Benjy's inability to "mirror" neurotypical forms of communication.

national level" (20). Beyond the more obvious spectacle of war veterans returning home with distressing physical injuries, and more pertinent to the ideas discussed in this chapter, the war effort drew newfound attention in American society to the notion of disabilities that could *not* be seen. Particularly, mental testing--as both a profit-driven industry and a rigorous and objective diagnostic tool of the relatively young discipline of child psychology--found its foothold in American society with the administration of cognitive testing to "1.75 million recruits during World War I" (Gould 194). Advertisements for intelligence tests, like the one below, made appeals to school officials on the basis of adapting "army testing methods to school needs."

Prepared under the auspices of the National Research Council

NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE TESTS

By M. E. HAGGERTY, L. M. TERMAN, E. L. THORNDIKE
G. M. WHIFFLE, and R. M. YERKES

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Manual of Directions. Paper. 32 pages. Price 25 cents net.

Specimen Set. One copy of each Scale and Scoring Keys and Manual of Directions. Price 50 cents postpaid.

*Experimental work financed by the General Education Board
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The effect of the wide implementation of intelligence testing in American schools on the national consciousness cannot be understated. Where previous attempts--like craniometry--to rank intellectual ability focused on perceived racial and gender differences, intelligence testing in American schools threatened to label both the immigrant and native child, white and ethnic "other" as intellectually inferior.

Indeed, beyond the more benevolent purposes of intellectual testing (e.g. the opportunity for early educational intervention and training, etc.), some testing advocates like Lewis M.

Terman viewed the tests as valuable for identifying, and ultimately segregating, "high grade defectives." These individuals were presumably children of well-educated and affluent parents whose general social and financial capital hid their children's intellectual disabilities. As Terman describes one of his cases: "Strange to say that the mother is encouraged and hopeful that she sees that her boy is learning to read. She does not seem to realize that at his age he ought to be within three years of entering high school. . . . For X is feeble minded; he will never complete the grammar school; he will never be an efficient worker or a responsible citizen" (Qtd. in Gould 179). In short, Terman--and many others--viewed intelligence testing as a way to identify and label the mentally inferior child hiding in polite society as opposed to relying on the more "intuitive" powers of "sight" to "recognize the feeble minded" (168).

It is in this larger cultural and historical context, then, that William Faulkner writes *The Sound and the Fury*. As its title alludes, *The Sound and the Fury* references a well-known passage from Macbeth--"a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing"--and draws attention to the ensuing performative aspect of Faulkner's work.⁶¹ Where Faulkner once imagined himself as a wounded war veteran, the first section of *The Sound and the Fury* witnesses the writer inhabiting the cognitive perspective of Benjy Compson, a thirty-three-year-old man who experiences the world through a succession of fractured sensory impressions.

⁶¹ It's important to acknowledge that Faulkner's use of the term "idiot" has a very complicated and convoluted history. Granting that the word "idiot" was occasionally used as a berating term "it did not become predominantly demeaning until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Gabbard 375). Even at that, the term was essentially, as Stuart Murray avers in his work *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*, "abstract . . . during the first half of the nineteenth century [as] the term was heavily associated with both madness and a general idea of eccentricity." Later, the emerging "medical [as well as legal] specialization" of the new century impelled society to consider the concept of idiocy as a more heterogeneous concept, one that accounted for various kinds and degrees of intellectual disability. These discursive and philosophical changes no doubt prepared the way for a "figure such as Leo Kanner" to develop a specific diagnostic criteria to identify a condition such as autism (Murray 69). Indeed, Frederick Bateman's, a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, 1897 account of idiocy argued that the concept of idiocy might be sub divided to encompass a separate category of individuals who "simply vegetate and whose deficiencies are so decided to isolate them, as it were, from the rest of nature" (Bateman Qtd. in Halliwell 9-10). It appears that it is somewhere within this later definition of "idiocy" that Faulkner imagines Benjy.

Benjy has no language, and, by extension, represents an unknowable ontological position. While he is labeled as an idiot, or feeble minded, by other characters in the novel, Benjy's narrative contains a certain mythic quality as his disability is fundamentally idiopathic (of unknown origin) as the reader is given no concrete reasons for Benjy's disability.

Modernist Aesthetics:

The idiopathic nature of Benjy's disability is correctly placed in the context of a history of Modernist aesthetics. Writing in his essay "The Ideology of Modernism" (1956), Georg Lukács argued that--in contrast to the literature of "Shakespeare, Balzac," and "Stendhal" where "individuals embodying violent and extraordinary passions are still within the range of normal typology"--Modernist literature functions in a world where exceptional, but widely accepted traits have been jettisoned in exchange for a social ideology founded on an "abstract polarity" between "the eccentric and socially average" (31). Lukács use of the word "eccentric" to describe one side of a Modernist character "polarity" bears resemblance to Virginia Woolf's praise of an "Aunt [. . .] who knew for certain the world was shaped like a starfish" (39). Indeed, the aesthetic approaches of Woolf and Faulkner are founded on a similar ideological basis, the notion that modernity's drive towards social and intellectual conformity—represented in one regard by cognitive testing and "life under capitalism" (Lukács 33) more generally—requires a new literary and individual "typology." As Lukács explains, Modernism "leads straight to the glorification of the abnormal" (through "'experimental' stylistic distortion) because "normal is no longer a proper object of literary interest." Furthermore, Lukács argues that "to present psychopathology as a way of escape from this distortion is itself a distortion. We are invited to measure one type of distortion against another and arrive, necessarily, at a universal distortion"

(32-33). Hence, mental pathology in Modernism is presented as less of a distortion than as the natural state of reality.

Aesthetically, *The Sound and the Fury* does encourage the reader to measure one “distortion” against another as Benjy’s pathologized narrative is measured against Quentin’s similarly “distorted” narrative. Yet, pathology itself, as I will argue later, is not a stable concept in *The Sound and the Fury*, as the “distortions” of Benjy and Quentin’s narratives are filtered through the context of each character’s alienation from their society’s limited notions of normality and competitive accomplishment. As a Southern American writer living after the Civil War, Faulkner was astutely aware of the alienating aspects of modernity, especially as it related to industrialization’s effect on the agrarian economy and the white, planter class of the Old South. *The Sound and the Fury*, certainly, is a story of the decline of a white Southern aristocratic family after the Civil War, which is most powerfully symbolized by Benjy’s cognitive disability, and their inability to transcend their static, pre-modern Southern identities.⁶² While Faulkner rejects the ideologies of the Old South and the industrial North, *The Sound and the Fury* employs the neurological or sensory distortions of Benjy and Quentin to reveal the intellectual limitations of these competing ideologies. The title of Faulkner's work, then, signals a method of storytelling or narrative different from that of Shakespeare in that the disabled or "idiot" figure has a greater potential to represent the exceptional intellectual and emotional traits of the individual than his or her "normal" counterpart.

⁶² Joel Williamson notes that while Faulkner indicted “Southern culture” and the “race and sex roles” it “assigned to individuals,” the modern world of the North and beyond did not offer compelling alternatives to Southern ideology. In *The Sound and the Fury*, “three of his white characters [. . .] had escaped, but not necessarily to a better world. Caddy went to Hollywood and Europe, Quentin to Harvard and death, and the girl Quentin to an unknown but predictably awful end with the carnival man” (413).

An “Unstable Set of Meanings”: Autism and “Mindblindness”

It is through this lens, then, that I wish to examine the "autistic dynamic" evident within Faulkner's novel. Where the autistic dynamic within Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* was influenced by Laura Stephen's cognitive difference and the author's interest in exploring neuro-diverse modes of cognition, *The Sound and the Fury* places cognitive difference and disability at “center-stage.” The first section of the novel is told almost entirely from Benjy's perspective. Since Benjy is essentially non-verbal, the character cannot be “normalized” by society and his narrative is defined by the character's extreme subjectivity and the “private meanings” he gives to the objects in the world around him. Certainly, Benjy Compson is a character contemporary readers would identify as a “low-functioning” autistic.⁶³

Although Faulkner writes about cognitive disability as a non-disabled white male in the 1930s, Benjy's “disabled” or pathologized narrative in *The Sound and the Fury* blurs the lines between society's definitions of cognitive ability and disability. Particularly, while Benjy's section of the novel often threatens to descend into complete incoherence, his narrative, to borrow the words of Donald Kartiganer, “celebrates invention, the freedom of a prose that communicates yet will not be controlled into what normally passes for a stable set of meanings” (Kartiganer 72). Similar to how Cam and Laura Stephen symbolize pathologized identities that cannot be “normalized,” Benjy's narrative equates cognitive disability with artistic and epistemological freedom. In this regard, Benjy's narrative challenges modernity's evolving standardized conceptions of creativity and intelligence.

⁶³ As a spectrum of neurological difference, low-functioning autism refers to individuals that demonstrate the behavioral markers of autistic identity—impaired or non-typical speech, developmental delays and obsession with self—but on the more extreme or severe end of this spectrum.

As many Disability Studies theorists have pointed out, disabled characters permeate literary fiction as “a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device” (Mitchell and Snyder 222). Since Faulkner did not suffer from any type of pronounced cognitive disability in his lifetime, Benjy essentially serves a prosthetic purpose⁶⁴ in *The Sound and the Fury*. While Faulkner uses Benjy’s disability for his own narrative purposes, he is not a stock character either. Rather, Benjy’s narrative creates a disparity between the lived experience of cognitive difference and disability and the series of questions and assumptions the presence of disability raises for a non-disabled audience.

Much like the mirror symbolizes Benjy’s alternate ways of seeing as well as a society examining itself, then, Faulkner creates an internal disparity between Benjy and the other characters in *The Sound and the Fury* in regards to “mind reading.” To briefly review the concept of “mind reading” and its connection to autism, I would like to refer to Simon Baron-Cohen’s 1995 work, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of the Mind*. In short, Simon Baron-Cohen asserts that autists lack the ability to “attribute mental states to oneself and to others and to interpret behavior in terms of mental states” (55). *The Sound and the Fury* presents contradictory images of Benjy’s consciousness, however, as the reader continually questions the limits of Benjy’s awareness: awareness of himself, of others, and of his and their multiple states of being. While there are obvious deficits in Benjy’s ability to complete traditional or typical intellectual tasks, the reader is impelled not to simply write Benjy off as feeble-minded—in the sense that he is completely unable to attribute thoughts and feelings to

⁶⁴ David Mitchell’s and Sharon Snyder’s term “narrative prosthesis” refers to the “perpetual discursive dependency upon disability” in literary texts. As Mitchell and Snyder explain, “[d]isability lends a distinctive idiosyncrasy to any character that differentiates the character from the anonymous background of the ‘norm.’” While stories that rely heavily on images of disability use “physical and cognitive anomalies [. . .] to lend a ‘tangible’ body to textual abstractions” (222), these texts tend to say very little about the lived experience of the disabled. One rare exception to this rule, as Mitchell and Snyder note, is the Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King*, as “the experience of disability momentarily serves as the source of Oedipus’s interpretative mastery” (232) of the riddle of the Sphinx.

himself and others—in Faulkner's novel. On the contrary, while Benjy's African American caregiver Luster dismisses his charge as "deef and dumb [. . .] been that way thirty three years today [. . .] Born looney" (49), the novel presents a series of internal contradictions in regards to Benjy's labeled idiocy. While Frony, as a case in point, argues at one point in the novel that Benjy "don't know nobody's name"⁶⁵—seeing him as lacking the ability to make any larger sense of the world by virtue of an innately deficient mind—Roskus, Dilsey's husband, answers that "he knows a lot more than folks think . . . He could have told you when his [time is] coming, if he could talk" (31-32). Furthermore, as I will discuss shortly, Faulkner continually draws attention to the unperceived connections Benjy makes that hint at his larger degree of social awareness in the novel.

Considering the attention Faulkner gives to the unimaginative absolutist rhetoric of Frony and Luster that denies the presence of meaningful consciousness in Benjy, I would aver that Faulkner wishes to disabuse neurotypical society of their perceived intellectual superiority. More to the point, Frony and Luster's attempts to label Benjy as "deef and dumb" highlight the cultural aspects of disability as they wish for him to signify a binary ideology of intelligence. In terms of Autism Studies, Frony and Luster's view of Benjy reminds one of Melanie Yergeau's essay "Circle Wars." Written in response to Ann Jurecic's essay "Mindblindness," Yergeau's essay argues that autism cannot be "placed within an all-defining circle or even within

⁶⁵ Frony's use of a "negative ultimate[s]" (don't know nobody) to describe Benjy should be read as especially suspicious. Indeed, as Florence Leaver explains, "negative ultimates" are "a vocabulary practice frequently encountered in Faulkner." Rather than creating a concrete sense of meaning, "negative ultimates [. . .] variously suggest other areas of meaning," which highlight a character's "own ignorance, impotence or bafflement in an incomprehensible world" (202-203).

overlapping circles” of ability since these discursive communities always “oversimplify” neurological difference (6).⁶⁶

Indeed, Yergeau’s exasperation with the collective impulse to “oversimplify” distinctions between cognitive ability and disability/health and sickness align with Virginia Woolf’s argument regarding the linguistic and aesthetic challenges presented by disability in her essay “On Being Ill.” “English . . . which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear has no words for the shiver or the headache . . . the merest schoolgirl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in her head to a doctor and language at once runs dry” (6-7). In the context of Woolf’s life, the passage refers to the author’s association of the physical symptoms of illness with alternate and heightened forms of perception, forms of epistemology that exist outside of the linguistic tradition of Shakespeare and Keats. More emphatically, the passage criticizes what Woolf interprets as a lack of empathy on the part of neurotypical society, as the description of “pain [. . .] to a doctor” results in a breakdown of communication.

It is on this last point that Faulkner’s novel challenges standardized conceptions of intelligence. Namely, while this chapter will discuss the connection between autistic forms of cognition and sensory processing disorders in the proceeding section, I would be remiss not to acknowledge that contemporary representations of autism figure these neurological differences as physically and emotionally distressing for the individual. Contemporary self-reports from the autistic community suggest that the autistic nervous system often suffers from “over-responsiveness” (Grandin 83) as the sensations of light, sound, and smell become overwhelming

⁶⁶ Yergeau uses the title “Circle Wars” to refer to discourse communities that separate autistics from neurotypicals, low-functioning autistics from high functioning autistics. Fundamentally, Yergeau argues that these circles will always overlap on some level, as these categories are fundamentally artificial rhetorical constructions.

to the individual. Today, we understand a great deal of autistic “behaviors” as the result of this neurological difference. Even Asperger’s syndrome, long seen as a “pathology” defined in part by the individual’s marked lack of outward emotion, is now beginning to be understood as a condition characterized more by “an excess of empathy” than “a lack of it” (Szalavitz).

In terms of mind reading, present research on autism posits “an intense world”⁶⁷ theory of the mind, which suggests that the fundamental problem in autism-spectrum disorders is not a social deficiency, but rather a hypersensitivity to experience, which includes an overwhelming fear response. Ironically, the ability to express “empathy”—a fundamental part of mind reading—has long been aligned with “normative” models of cognition and intelligence.⁶⁸ In *The Sound and the Fury*, however, Faulkner challenges these stereotypes.

Throughout his section of the narrative, Benjy “moans,” “bawls” and “cries” in response to a variety of internal and outward stimuli. On one level, these scenes reinforce Benjy’s status as an “opportunistic metaphorical device” since they draw the reader’s attention to ethical or moral disorders within “normative” society. Luster, for example, not only fails to grasp Benjy’s capacity to feel emotional as well as physical pain, attributing the character’s “cries” to random stimulus and devoid of cognitive cause, but his denial of Benjy’s basic humanity betrays society’s moral decay. “What are you howling for now [?]” (57). Additionally, Faulkner alerts the reader to Jason’s overall moral cruelty by recounting an incident where Jason “cut up all the [paper] dolls” Benjy had made. Protestingly that Jason “did it just for meanness” (65), Caddy’s defense of her brother further situates Caddy as the heroine of Faulkner’s novel as she recognizes the

⁶⁷ Proposed by Henry and Kamila Markram, the intense world theory of autism proposes that autism is the result of hyperfunctioning neural circuitry, leading to states of over-arousal.

⁶⁸ In his 1892 work *Degeneration*, for instance, Max Nordau argued that the emotional “faculties” of degenerates were either “completely stunted” or “morbidly exaggerated” (18).

fundamental aspects of humanity, and human emotion, as present in Benjy—something the other characters do not.

Still, Faulkner does not simply use Benjy's suffering as a way to tell us that Jason is just as villainous as Caddy is heroic. When neurotypical people assume that another person's mind works like their own—as opposed to considering the effects of neurological diversity on observed behavior and communication as it exists across collective human experience--and they attempt to decipher what another person is thinking or feeling, they have a much better chance of being right. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner explores Benjy's intense sensory worlds as a check against homogenous theories of ability/disability in regards to mindblindness, as the author connects Benjy's "howls" and "cries" (which are presumed to be senseless) to concrete and emotional events in the outside world. In this manner, Faulkner's depiction of Benjy's alternate forms of cognition reveal as much about the lived experience of cognitive disability or difference as it symbolizes the limits of empathy for neurotypical or "normative" society.

“A Rational Disordering”

As mentioned earlier, the Stanford-Binet intelligence tests profoundly influenced American thought regarding the nature of cognitive disability. These tests, in addition to "stress[ing] conformity with expectation [over] original response" essentially divided or fractured the idea of intelligence into a list of separate attributes (175). Instead of viewing intelligence as a unified whole, cognitive testing draws attention to the components of intelligence, impelling society to take note of what is and/or isn't present in the individual mind. In this way, intelligence testing--even as it attempts to categorize cognitive ability/disability definitively--paves the way for the concept that the nonspeaking, outwardly disabled individual may possess competencies and abilities previously thought impossible, but which, due to his or

her isolation and alienation, he or she is unable to reveal to a neurotypical society. What we would define as a "low functioning autistic" today, then, symbolizes a gap between how society judges the atypical mind and what that mind actually experiences.

Looking at Benjy's narrative in the first section of *The Sound and the Fury*, the reader notices: 1) the character's inability to construct a traditional narrative order; 2) the absence of any formal spoken or written language in Benjy, and 3) his inability to attach any abstract concepts or specific ideology to his sensory experiences. While the four sections of Faulkner's novel essentially cover the same narrative material in terms of time, plot, and characters, we are unable to construct an overarching sense of this narrative without the subsequent voices of Quentin, Jason and Dilsey to fill in the blanks left from Benjy's fragmented, disorganized--and at times senseless--section of the story.⁶⁹ Yet, as I hope I have made clear, Faulkner does not intend for Benjy's narrative to be read as senseless. On the contrary, Benjy's narrative is filled with rich, distinct combinations of sounds and smells that alert the reader to the presence of highly developed savant-like modes of perception in the character. Connected as these sensory impressions are to Benjy's cognitive difference, I would argue that Faulkner is writing in a neurological vernacular in the first section of *The Sound and the Fury* that is not very different, in approach, from a writer like Mark Twain adopting African American vernacular in his fiction. While Benjy cannot participate in a traditional mode of storytelling that is based on abstract language, Faulkner draws attention to the value of this neurological vernacular in relation to its potential to transcend the subjective limits of neurotypical language and thought. Faulkner's neurological vernacular, then, re-situates language within a continuum of atypical sensory impressions.

⁶⁹ This approach is not entirely specific to *The Sound and the Fury* as there is often one character in Faulkner's fiction that does not make sense on his or her own, such as Vardaman uttering "my mother is a fish" in *As I Lay Dying*.

The connection between Faulkner's depiction of Benjy's sensory difference and society's contemporary understanding of autistic cognition is an important one. While autism "is far too complex a phenomenon to be explained [entirely] by differences in sensory experiences, sensory perceptual problems do play an important role in autism" (Bogdashina 25). Particularly, sensory processing disorder--a condition in which the brain has trouble receiving and responding to information that come in through the senses--produces many of the hallmark symptoms of autism in individuals: uncoordination, an inability to tell where your limbs are in space, and difficulty with language and social interaction. Although Faulkner writes *The Sound and the Fury* prior to Hans Asperger and Leo Kanner's studies of autistic children, intelligence testing, along with late nineteenth and early twentieth century "neurological discoveries" impressed upon modernist writers like Faulkner that "the mind was not entirely its own entity, independent of the body, but itself embodied and that its functioning depended upon and could be radically limited by the body" (Maude 46).

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner explicitly stresses the embodied nature of Benjy's cognitive difference and disability. Benjy not only requires the physical assistance of the family's African American servants to bathe and get dressed, but, after Caddy gives him a "box" filled with cut-out "stars," Benjy remarks that "when I was still, they were still. When I moved, they glinted and sparkled" (41) suggesting the character's inability to distinguish between his body and the outside world. While sensory processing disorders are not always confined to autistic difference, Temple Grandin hypothesizes that "there is a continuum of sensory processing problems for most autistic people" (Qted. in Bogdashina 27). Furthermore, sensory processing problems can result in "all sorts of distortions [. . .] such as fragmented perception,

hypersensitivity, fluctuations between hyper and hyposensitivity, delayed processing, etc. (48-49). Certainly, all these traits are evident in Benjy's narrative at one point or another.

While intelligence testing and neurological science brought many of the individual symptoms of sensory processing disorder and autism such as "hand-eye coordination, orientation in time and space" (Gould 175) into focus, Modernist writers championed this very same neurological dysfunction for its aesthetic, creative and cognitive value. Arthur Rimbaud, for instance, considered the aim of the poet to be to "make[s] himself visionary by a long, immense, and reasoned derangement of all the senses" (Translated in Ahearn 138). Indeed, the concept of "reasoned derangement" or disordering applies to both Benjy's narrative and the construction of autism as Benjy does not hear voices, or see things that do not exist in time and space, symptoms that would characterize the schizophrenic mind. Rather, the disordering of his senses allow him to achieve transcendental states of seeing unavailable to his neurotypical counterparts in the novel. ⁷⁰

One element of this disordering is the recurrent synesthetic experiences in Benjy's narrative. Again and again, Benjy silently remarks that he "could smell the cold" (6) and "smell the clothes flapping" (14), synesthetic experiences that combine olfactory and tactile experiences in the character's mind. In the novel's early pages, these sensations often appear as disconnected and scrambled cognitive impressions, senses recounted or remembered but lacking any concept

⁷⁰ The connection between Benjy's disordered sensory perceptions and his transcendental modes of seeing can be aligned with Elaine Scary's theory of the body in pain. As Scary explains it, "[w]hen the body is comfortable, when it has ceased to be an obsessive object of perception and concern, that consciousness develops other objects, [. . . and] the external world comes into being and begins to grow" (39). Although the world around us is essentially an extension of our bodies as it is a construction in our minds as filtered through our senses, the individual differentiates his or her body from the outside world in moments of physical calm. Yet, as we witness in *The Sound and the Fury*, Benjy's abnormal body and sensory perception result in the disintegration or erosion of individualized identity. Therefore, while his abnormal—and at times discomfiting sense perception—prevent Benjy from constructing traditional forms of narrative, the novel implicitly avers that Benjy can perceive things the neurotypical mind cannot.

of larger meaning for Benjy. “I squatted there, holding the slipper. I couldn’t see it, but my hands saw it, and I could hear it getting night, and my hands saw the slipper but I couldn’t see myself” (72). Here, Benjy’s consciousness seems to fade into his outward environment as he seems to lack the ability to discern where his body begins and ends.

With respect to our contemporary understanding of “brain physiology,” Benjy’s narrative suggests “right hemisphere” thinking in that it seems to privilege traits such as creativity and holistic thinking over logic and language. Not insignificantly, these traits may concurrently characterize present conceptions of “low functioning” autistic thinking as well as artistic innovation in neurotypical individuals. Or, as Ralph Savarese states:

Autistics functioning at the low end of the spectrum are increasingly believed to rely heavily on the right hemisphere (as opposed to most neurotypicals), and [. . .] new work on creativity [. . .] reveals the crucial role of the right hemisphere in the generation of fresh figurative language (something neurotypical writers accomplish through the temporary inhibition of the normally dominant left hemisphere) (275).

At the risk of reading *The Sound and the Fury* completely anachronistically, I would point out that some early nineteenth century research had already underscored the neurological and physiological basis of cognition, especially as it relates to the body’s influence on “certain states or conditions of the mind” (Bell 88). Charles Bell’s work *Anatomy and Philosophy of Human Expression* (1806) emphasized the communicative role of facial expressions, an idea that situates some forms of communication as existing below the level of culture and acquired or learned language. This point is underscored by Bell’s theory that “the mind must owe something to its

connections to an operation of features which precedes its own conscious activity, and which is unerring in its exercise from its very commencement” (180).⁷¹

How, then, do these ideas connect to Benjy Compson’s synesthetic experiences? In short, as a non-neurotypical individual, Benjy symbolizes a pre-modern, natural form of cognition. Sir Francis Galton, as a case in point, documented that “synesthesia seemed to be frequent in children” (106).⁷² While I do not have time here to properly situate Galton’s observations within his era’s overarching theories regarding craniology and the ranking of the groups of humanity, one important facet of my reading of *The Sound and the Fury* is how the theory of “recapitulation” influenced “late nineteenth century science.” In short, the theory of recapitulation held that in his or her physical development, the individual “reconstructed evolutionary lineages.” So, “the gill slits of an early human embryo represented an ancestral adult fish; at a later stage, the temporary tail revealed a reptilian or mammalian ancestor” (Gould 114). Therefore, in the course of typical development, the individual moves through different stages of evolution along with its attendant perceptual wiring or abilities.

As we know from the novel, Benjy does not “evolve” or cognitively develop according to the standards of recapitulation theory. As a disabled adult white male individual, then, Benjy inverts the pseudo-scientific and cultural theories of Faulkner’s time since his narrative embodies pre-cultural, primitive forms of communication. Furthermore, I should note that Benjy’s cognitive difference is made “strange” by Faulkner since it implicitly contests American post-bellum theories of race and disability. By the turn of the twentieth century, “medical doctors” in

⁷¹ As Wesley and Barbara Morris argue, the idea of a “core of creative expression,” existing below the level of culture and subsequently threatened by “the destructive forces of public dissemination” is “embedded in modernist aesthetics” (398). Benjy, therefore, represents a purity of expression since his intellectual disability inoculates him from the deleterious effects of public discourse.

⁷² Benjy cognition is explicitly linked to child-like modes of perception in the novel. As Faulkner explains: “The idea struck me to see how much more I could have gotten out of the idea of the blind self-centredness of innocence, typified by children, if one of those children had been truly innocent, that is an idiot” (Qtd. in Hall 36).

America “were still arguing that African Americans were disabled by freedom and therefore in need of greater oversight” (Baynton 21). From a social Darwinian perspective, American society continually argued during Faulkner’s early lifetime that African Americans were naturally suited for slavery and that freedom produced disability. ⁷³

Like Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner’s fiction does not embrace binary notions of ability and disability. In terms of disability and American society, then, Faulkner's technique in *The Sound and the Fury* “challenge[s] widespread assumptions [fostered through eugenics discourse] that equated mental impairment with complete sensory alienation” (Hall 32). ⁷⁴

Although Benjy is defined by an extreme subjectivity and aloneness in the novel by virtue of a mind that is “wired differently,” he is not completely unaware of his world or any more of a static individual than some of the other characters in the novel. More so, Benjy's pronounced sense memory--separated as it is from the traditional intellectual markers of abstract language and linear thought--speak to an aspect of creativity and cognition unavailable to the non-disabled characters in the novel. Benjy, then, symbolizes an internal paradox between disability and insight, creativity within pathology.

Animal Perception:

In order to more properly contextualize my reading of Faulkner as writing in an autistic vernacular—both in terms of a history of Faulkner criticism and the time period of the novel—I would like to explain the connection between animal perception and autism. As Temple Grandin expounds: “[A]nimals and autistic people are different from normal [neurotypical]

⁷³ As Baynton argues: “Race and disability intersected in the concept of the normal as both prescription and description. American blacks, for example, were said to flourish in their ‘normal’ condition of slavery, while the ‘free or abnormal’ negro inevitably fell into illness, disability, and eventually extinction” (21).

⁷⁴ Alice Hall remarks that *The Sound and the Fury* “must be read against a background of on-going debates about the nature and definition of idiocy” (28). More to the point, “the animalistic insults hurled at Benjy,” Hall argues “echo eugenics discourses in which policies of breeding aimed to create an idealized norm” (30-31).

people. Animals and autistic people don't have to be paying attention to something in order to see it. Things like jiggly chains pop out at us; they grab our attention whether we want to see them or not" (51). Where Temple Grandin, as a contemporary voice on autistic difference, champions the value of an "animalized" form of cognition, American society in the 1920s had begun to reassess the previously unquestioned superiority of human cognition. Akira Mizuta Lippit, for example, argues that at about the same time as animals began to vanish in large numbers from humanity's habitats, they came to symbolize "not only new structures of thought but also the process where those new thoughts could be transported. Animals—and their capacity for instinctive, almost telepathic communication—put into question the primacy of human language and consciousness as optimal modes of communication" (2). In terms of Faulkner scholarship, literary critics have consistently noted how animal imagery in the author's novels paradoxically express "affects and states 'too profound . . . for even thought'" (White 82) and eugenical discourse in that these animalistic traits are "stigmatized" by society since they are associated with a "feeble-mindedness" contained in the body of the racial "other" (White 35). Certainly, Faulkner creates much of his narrative tension in *The Sound and the Fury* by giving Benjy "animalistic" forms of cognition since it is contained within the body of a white, adult male. ⁷⁵

While, as I mentioned above, Faulkner's association of Benjy with animalistic forms of cognition has positive implications for the reader as it symbolizes authentic and instinctual forms of cognition, American culture has—historically—pejoratively "defin[ed]" the disabled "in

⁷⁵ Faulkner's insights into the instability of "whiteness" or the "normative white body" in *The Sound and the Fury* overlap with "paradigm shifts in the theorization of race" in America. Particularly, "[T]he decade of the 1920s [. . .] marks a turning point in the orientation of American racial projects, when 'biologistic' accounts of race rooted in nineteenth century science began to give way to new models grounded in ethnicity. Race, in other words, began to 'soften' conceptually, from a natural absolute to a more culturally contingent phenomenon, a matter of affiliation and practice" (Watson x).

terms of their animal nature” (Carlson 132). In *The Sound and the Fury*, the reader is drawn not simply to Benjy’s “natural primitivism” but also to images of his implicit status as a non-person in the novel. As Dilsey alludes in the novel, Benjy is a source of shame to the Compson family and, as such, an object who must be kept out of obvious sight. “Go on now, fore Quentin see you and you have to go too” (10). Later in the novel, Jason rebukes Caddy for allowing Benjy to eat at the same table as the rest of the family. “Why don’t you feed him in the kitchen. It’s like eating with a pig. If you don’t eat the way we eat, you’d better not come to the table” (70).⁷⁶ Clearly, Benjy is relegated to the status of a “non-person” in the novel by means of his linguistic and physical treatment at the hands of the family’s non-disabled characters.⁷⁷

The conflation of disability, particularly intellectual disability, with something sub-human or even monstrous has a long social history. Jonathan Andrews remarks that the “overarching cultural and epistemological paradigms [in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries] stressed the monstrousness or animalism of idiocy, its kinship with brute nature, and its lack of soul or rational will” (195). In *The Sound and the Fury*, we see these fears expressed by a variety of characters. First, Faulkner tells us that Benjy had his name changed as a child after his family learns of his disability. “Benjamin came out of the bible. . . It’s a better name for him that Maury was” (58). Translated as “right hand of God,” the name Benjamin evokes the concept that the character’s intellectual disability is both a punishment from God, and stands as a way to protect the family against the perceived threat his disability brings with it.

⁷⁶ This scene unintentionally recalls Virginia Woolf’s description of Laura Stephen, “Thackeray’s grand-daughter, a vacant eyed girl whose idiocy was becoming daily more obvious [. . .] yet had to appear at the table with us.” As in life in general, meaning, as it relates to the dinner table, is defined by who is present and who should be absent.

⁷⁷ Benjy’s caregiver Versh similarly contends at one point in the novel that he “couldn’t keep” Benjy “in [the house]” (7-8). These scenes concurrently align Benjy with animalistic characteristics as well as his more general association with the natural world.

Later in the novel, Versh explains the reasons for Benjamin's name more fully: "They making a bluegum out of you. . . . Mammy say in old time your granpaw changed nigger's name, and he turned preacher, and when they look at him, he bluegum too" (69). According to African American folklore, "blue gum" has two pertinent definitions for our reading of Benjy. One, "blue gums" were African American men who refused to work, and Versh's employment of the term to refer to Benjy highlights the infirm nature of the character; he lacks the ability to work, and is therefore seen as a burden to society.⁷⁸ Second, "blue gums" were also understood to be devilish beings, devoid of a soul, that threatened to kill you in the night. Hence, Benjy's disability represents—to the other characters in the novel—not simply something sub-human or animalistic, but a monstrous, irrational and soulless condition. Taken further in that direction, the character represents something monstrous: a punishment from God that has no degree of benevolence, reason or humanity.

To interpret Versh's association of Benjy with a character from African American folklore strictly in terms of the character's perceived monstrosity misses larger interpretative opportunities. Specifically, when Faulkner's narrator has his name changed from Maury to Benjamin, the character becomes a literary marker of intersecting racial and linguistic cultures. Although "Mrs. Compson, by removing her brother's name from her son (when his retardation

⁷⁸ This disability is also represented through the character's association with prolonged or permanent childhood. During one of the novel's flashbacks, for instance, Benjy's mother scolds Caddy for carrying Benjy into her room, arguing that "he's too big for you to carry. You must stop trying. You'll injure your back. . . . A five year old child. No, no. Not in my lap. Let him stand up"(63). While the reader may be tempted to interpret this passage as evidence of the Compson matriarch's frigidity—and it does function as that on one level—he or she must also acknowledge that Faulkner intends to depict Benjy's childhood development as impaired even before the family is explicitly aware of a disability. While Faulkner situates this scene within the context of the Compson family home, however, it is a more a product of a growing sense of the importance of children completing their developmental milestones at the "appropriate times," a concept born from intelligence testing. "Binet decided to assign an age level to each task, defined as the youngest age at which a child of normal intelligence should be able to complete the task successfully" (Gould 149). Clearly, Faulkner means to imply that Benjy possesses a mental age far below his "typical" peers.

becomes apparent) blackens her child, making him a slave to her willful preoccupation with the purity of the Bascomb blood” (Godden 103), the character remains more of a symbol of unstable racial and cultural paradigms than racial “other.” It is not enough to note the animalistic nature of Benjy’s intellect; instead, the reader must consider Benjy’s association with racialized forms of communication as well. To be more precise, while Mrs. Compson’s “rechristening” of her son as Benjamin alludes to the attempts to “civilize” and “control” African American slaves in the South, Benjy becomes a part of multiple cultural discourses as he is essentially given a “black mask” by his mother. Therefore, Benjy’s physical and cognitive difference—while aligned with various subaltern cultures—calls into question racial hierarchy and order.

If Benjy’s “animalized” autistic cognition is stigmatized by society, however, Faulkner appreciates the aesthetic potential of the non-normative body. More specifically, *The Sound and the Fury* reverses Benjy’s ability to see and hear things without conscious intent. To explain, the first section of *The Sound and the Fury* is recognized for its abrupt chronological shifts as Benjy’s hearing, smelling or seeing something in one setting sends his mind somewhere else, cognitive events which are reminiscent of Temple Grandin’s description of “inattentional blindness” (51).⁷⁹ In the novel’s first few pages, a thirty-three-year-old Benjy gets himself “snagged on . . . [a] nail” passing through a “broken place” on a fence walking with Luster (4). This physical sensation immediately transports Benjy--and by association the reader--back in time to when Benjy crawled through a fence as a child with his sister Caddy. Crucially, the power of comprehension is attained through indirect methods since Benjy does not consciously focus on the object of the nail or the fence for any pre-determined purpose. This technique is

⁷⁹ As Grandin explains: “for a normal human being, almost nothing in the environment pops,” in the sense that “a human being walking through an alley won’t see, much less be bothered by, sparkling puddles or shiny spots on metal or jiggling chains.” In effect, this “means it’s practically impossible for a human being to actually see something new in the first place [. . .] because they don’t notice it when it’s there” (51).

repeated again and again by Faulkner in Benjy's section as the physical sensations of the character's environment move him back and forth through time.

Admittedly, the inter-connective potential of Benjy's sensory based narrative comes with limits. Immediately prior to Benjy's recollection of him and his sister crawling through a fence as children, Faulkner gives us a glimpse of the incoherent and unconnected sounds of society in his narrator's mind as the words "here, caddie" (3) are shouted in the golf course. Unable to assign multiple meanings to the sound he hears, Benjy connects the golfer's words with the one object and context he knows--his sister. He understands the name or word as a specific object in nature (his sister) and not an abstract concept, as his brothers Quentin and Jason do. While this may seem a limitation since Benjy is incapable of forming abstract concepts of time and race or nation and honor, he is not limited by those preconceived notions.

While our first impression of Benjy's narrative in *The Sound and the Fury* support the viewpoint that the character is devoid of the potential for intellectual and emotional growth, his outward changelessness appears less pronounced when it is compared to the narratives of Quentin and Jason and their rigid, abstract conceptions of Caddy. As Olga Vickery argues, the "consciousness" of all the characters in Faulkner's novel are primarily "static" since their narratives are built around rigid conceptions of a "central situation," Caddy and "her loss of virginity." Caddy, however, "means something different" to each of the characters: "For Benjy she is the smell of trees; for Quentin, honor; and for Jason, money or at least the means of obtaining it. Yet [. . .] these intense private dramas are taking place in a public world primarily concerned with observable behavior" (Vickery 280). In total, then, the conflicting ideologies of Benjy, Quentin and Jason are all static in so far as these characters do not allow for refinement or revision of their particular world view.

Comparing these three narratives strictly in terms of their internal logic and mutability, I would contend that Benjy's narrative demonstrates the greatest inward potential to perceive the presence of outward changes that conflict with more abstract notions of Caddy. For example, while Quentin and Jason possess a language structure that connects them to the outside world unavailable to Benjy, they essentially view Caddy as an object—a symbol on which to place their rigid conceptions of the world. Ironically, the abstract labels most commonly placed on Caddy by Quentin and Jason—sexual innocence and guilt—mirror the one-dimensional conceptions of Benjy, since, as an intellectually disabled individual, Benjy is viewed as either a symbol of innocence or guilt, punishment from God or “sacred” charge requiring care.

But, Faulkner asks us to consider another possibility by stressing the relationship between Caddy and Benjy. As we witness in the novel, Caddy demonstrates the most compassion for Benjy, arguing with Jason that Benjy should not be sent away to live at an institution. More than possessing simple compassion, however, Caddy continuously attempts to interpret the meaning of Benjy's behavior, to function as a bridge between Benjy's non-verbal intellect and the verbal world of which stands outside. Yet, it should not be lost on the reader that both Benjy and Caddy are limited by language since it is employed by Jason and Quentin as not only a manner of judgment, but a method of supporting an artificial world view. Or as Mr. Compson explains the use of the term virginity: “Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature . . . and I said that's just words and he said so is virginity” (116). Taken together, Benjy and Caddy demonstrate the stale nature of acquired language.

Considering Benjy's narrative as whole, then, he is a character that neither “just vegetates” nor relies simply on his senses and instincts. While Benjy perceives his world in the absence of acquired language, and does not possess the ability to live independently, his sensory

impressions are creatively arranged and re-arranged in his mind and Faulkner's novel. Indeed, looking at Benjy's varied sensory perception in the novel, the reader may be reminded of Temple Grandin's statement that animals and autists have "sensory worlds [that] are so much richer than ours that it's almost as if we [neurotypical individuals] are deaf and blind" (57). As an example, Benjy alternately connects his sister with the smell of "leaves," and the sight of "flowers in her hair" (40), in Faulkner's novel. While these mental associations are not gathered and synthesized by Benjy into an abstract concept of his sister or what she represents--something Quentin and Jason repeatedly do in the novel--they do allow Benjy to pick up on all the subtleties of his sister's interactions with not just himself but other individuals as well. For instance, Benjy demonstrates an awareness of Caddy's physical and emotion maturation when he smells perfume on his teenage sister and begins to cry. Unable to initially discern what has gotten her brother so upset, Caddy places "the bottle" with "the stopper out" under Benjy's "nose" and remarks: "'So that was it. And you were trying to tell Caddy and you couldn't her. You wanted to, but you couldn't could you'"(42). Placed within the larger context of Benjy's section of the novel, the preceding scene highlights the character's ability to discern changes in his sister. In fact, considering the severity of Benjy's physical and emotional reaction to Caddy's implied sexual awakening, Faulkner implies that there is a degree of intuitive insight present in Benjy's mind.

When I use the term intuition, I mean to imply that Benjy orders his world absent the complexity of abstract meanings individuals in society place on any given situation. In a way, intuitive thinking is the opposite of logical thinking in that it is not based on things Benjy already knows and understands. Instead, intuitive thinking entails an individual perceiving a physical and/or emotional change in his or her environment, but he is not able to place this change in any preformed category or definition. When Benjy notes "I can smell the sickness" (61) in the

presence of his hypochondriac mother, the sensation is not explicitly attached to any one thing. Presumably, Benjy's internal observation could refer to his mother's mental illness, another impending physical illness in the house, or the general emotional volatility and barrenness in the Compson family. It is the character's inability to make abstract meaning out of these sense impressions that give Benjy's narrative its authenticity as Benjy is incapable of participating in his family's ritual of enabling his mother's performance of physical infirmity.

Autistic Ritual:

In terms of Modernism, the idea of ritual has paradoxical implications in *The Sound and the Fury*. On the one hand, rituals symbolize the static nature of the Compson family and their alignment with abstract and traditional ideologies of class, nation and race. While Benjy cannot perform, or understand, these abstract ideological identities, his animalistic or sensory-based cognition threatens to present, in the words of Georg Lukács an “incoherent stream of consciousness” (Lukács 31).⁸⁰ As Edward Ahearn argues, while writers like Rimbauld championed “the obliteration of ordinary consciousness . . . the attack at the level of sensation threatens the illusory stability of rational awareness, and implies a more real, if more infinitely chaotic vision” (138-39). In short, an aesthetic approach founded on “rational disordering” threatens to deprive the reader of any larger sense of meaning.

The intense and disordered sensory experiences of Benjy find some order in the character's mind through his employment of personal ritual, however. In addition to following the same path on his walks with Luster, Benjy shows a tendency to ritualistically return to certain sensations and their associated physical objects in the novel, such as the character's return to “the

⁸⁰ Referring to Faulkner's prose specifically, Lukács argues that “escape into neurosis” or pathology produces “a nightmare quality” as it “leads straight to a glorification of the abnormal and to an undisguised antihumanism”(31-32)

dark place on the wall where the mirror used to be” (255-256) in Jason’s section of the story. The sensation or memory of “fire,” for instance, comes up repeatedly in Benjy’s narrative as a source of comfort and a narrative marker. Significantly, these rituals seem meaningless to the outside world as they are dismissed as robotic, static and habitual actions. We witness this contrast most explicitly towards the end of the first section as Benjy’s mother tells Caddy to “take that cushion away [from Benjy] like I told you.” After Caddy protests that “he’ll cry” if she does so, Caddy leads Benjamin to the fire where he “look [s] at the bright, smooth shapes” (64) and becomes calm.

Benjy’s rituals, like his animalistic and sensory-based mode of cognition, alert the reader to autistic modes of being. “In addition to their role in normal child development, ritualistic and compulsive behaviors are one of three broad diagnostic symptoms of autism” (Belmonte 168).⁸¹ At its core, autistic rituals develop on an individual—not cultural—level as a way for an autistic individual to impose order on experience. In *The Sound and the Fury*, particular objects and rituals provide a way for Benjy to exert control over the chaotic nature of his sensory experiences. Although Benjy’s repetitive actions are dismissed as lacking the crucial intellectual element of self-awareness, they show the potential for Benjy to detect changes in his world. Particularly, as Julia Miele Rodas notes, while repetitive actions in autists are pathologized today—because they are stereotypically understood as inherently uncreative and “mechanistic”—these actions make the autistic conscious not just of what he or she sees experiences in a particular “frame” or context, but of the object in its totality. Similar to Rodas’s argument, Benjy’s rituals in *The Sound and the Fury* represent subjective forms of

⁸¹ Belmonte explains that “the tension between self and environment that gives rise to narrative structure, scripts, and rituals is particularly close to the surface of the psyche during the early years of human development, and indeed children’s rituals great similarity to behaviors that in older individuals would qualify as pathologically obsessive-compulsive” (167).

knowledge since they help him make sense of individual experience. In this way, Benjy's rituals personify foundational aspects of culture.

Looking at Benjy's repetitive behavior in the novel, for example, the reader is drawn to the discrepancy between Benjy's use or experience of ritual and Luster's dismissal of its meaning. "Shut up that moaning' . . . He came to the fence and pointed his arm. 'See them. They ain't coming back here no more. Come on.'" Luster interprets Benjy's rigid behavior as meaningless, but—as the reader learns later in the novel—the path along the fence from which Benjy cannot deviate represents both the land he grew up on and his lost inheritance. Consequently, the reader is impelled to entertain the possibility that the employment of rituals allows Benjy to see an object or place in its totality with regards to change and time. These rituals alert the reader to the presence of cognitive, creative and aesthetic elements in Benjy's mind.

Once more, if intelligence testing sought to measure an individual's "ability to detect absurdities" as well as the "speed and richness of [the] association of [his or her] ideas" (Gould 175), Faulkner reveals these elements of intelligence as not just present but distinctively pronounced in Benjy's disability. To explain, there is a "speed" present in Benjy's mental associations as he moves from one sense based impression and connection to another. Although Benjy does not appear to have any active control over the cognitive directions these impressions take him--his perceptual processes appear to be more involuntary than self-directed as Benjy lacks the ability to filter out any unwanted or unnecessary stimuli received by the brain—he exchanges a more economic manner of consciousness for one that sees the world as a unified whole, but one obscured by the character's awareness of immeasurable sensory details. While these details come at the reader with a rapidity that is often disorienting, they also create a textual

space where we become conscious of how much Faulkner's narrator perceives in a single moment of time.

I could hear the clock, and I could hear Caddy standing behind me, and I could hear the roof. It's still raining, Caddy said. I hate rain. I hate everything. And then her head came into my lap and she was crying, holding me, and I began to cry. Then I looked at the fire again and the bright, smooth shapes went again. I could hear the clock and the roof and Caddy (57)

Termed today as "gestalt perception, i.e. perception of the whole scene as a single entity with all the details perceived simultaneously," this manner of consciousness produces individuals who "may be aware of the information others miss, but the processing of 'holistic' situations may be overwhelming" (Bogdashina 48). In *The Sound and the Fury*, gestalt perception creates a paradoxical response for the most likely neurotypical reader. He or she may interpret Benjy's rapidly moving sense impressions as fundamentally chaotic and uncontrollable. Or, just as likely, he or she may become aware of their own intellectual limits by observing the unfiltered nature of Benjy's mind, and its ability to perceive large and minute connections. Either way, Benjy's individual rituals alert the reader to the unacknowledged or private nature of meaning for Benjy as it exists outside the sphere of dominant culture.

Autism as Metaphor for the Modern Condition

Although my analysis of disability and autism has been focused primarily on Benjy to this point, the perspective and anxieties the character represents permeate the entire novel. This dynamic aligns *The Sound and the Fury* with wider early twentieth-century fears regarding the hidden nature of disability; in other words, the novel betrays the concerns of a racial mainstream that is increasingly aware of the prevalence of physical and cognitive disability in their midst.

Benjy's difference thus embodies collective concerns regarding not just the nature of disability, but the nature of modern life and the individual's ability to adapt to this environment.

While autism as a medical category and/or neurological identity is a relatively contemporary occurrence, the narrative appeal of autism resides in more general anxieties about the changing nature of modern life. Indeed, "the self-conscious use of autism as a point of focus for narrative texts, or the use of autistic characters within texts," as Stuart Murray notes, might have begun in the 1990s "when neuroscientific research ha[d] begun to understand more fully the genetic aspects of autism," but the appeal of these narratives find strength in their metaphorical possibilities. Autism, as we recognize it in literature today, is both a state of being and a metaphor for a society affected by changes in "technology, computing, and an often unarticulated sense of the potentially bewildering range and multiplicities of everyday life" (28).

Explaining further, autistic characters--by their very brain chemistry or wiring--are often reduced to a series of metaphors that exemplify issues in contemporary culture--issues that pertain to a non-autistic audience. It is not very difficult to see, for instance, how a character that struggles to interpret or decipher a wide range of often overwhelming and disconnected sense impressions might hold a certain fascination for a modern reader. In a world where information seems to move faster and faster, and our sense of personal interaction and local identity erodes, the notion of an individual that "suffers" this same fate through biological difference or disability holds almost mythical appeal.⁸² Just as the mirror symbolizes the wider epistemological aim of *The Sound and the Fury*, contemporary autistic narratives impel the reader to look inward, to see autistic modes of cognition as existing on a biological and cultural continuum in society. Even

⁸² Stuart Murray perhaps explains the appeal of these narratives best when he states: "What we might term the narrative appeal of autism in cultural texts is that it most easily signifies the most radical form of personal otherness. Indeed, it is the personification of difference and otherness; a person, just like you and me . . . who is in fact nothing like you and me, but rather subject to a condition that defies logic and understanding" (25).

today, literary characters widely labeled by readers as autistic are often not explicitly labeled as such within their respective texts, since it represents a condition familiar, even if slightly strange, to the reader.

It stands to reason, then, that while Benjy is never labeled as autistic in *The Sound and the Fury*—the term autism existed only as a sub-category of Dementia Praecox (Schizophrenia) in 1929 and was used only to describe the most severe schizophrenics who live in a world of their own⁸³—a contemporary reader might very well confer this identity onto the character. Benjy, as a modernist literary creation, is a metaphorical figure in so far as Faulkner transfers society's reactions and anxieties about the forces of modernity onto the character. To clarify, while autistic characters in literature today⁸⁴ are represented as "product[s] of a brain in which the hard drive is incorrectly formatted" (26) or individuals who, by virtue of their cognitive difference, represent the rapid dissemination of information in [a] society that does not allow the "neurotypical" individual time for discernment, reflection or understanding, Benjy serves a similar metaphorical function for a 1930's audience. Allowing for the fact that modernist aesthetics reflect technological change, particularly changes in sensory perception, as Sara Danius argues in her work *The Senses of Modernism, Technology, Perception and Aesthetics*, Benjy's cognitive distinction is rendered as both innate difference and universal experience in the novel. In terms of modernist aesthetics, Tim Armstrong further notes that "modernism is [. . .] characterized by the desire to intervene in the body; to render it part of modernity by techniques which may be biological, mechanical or behavioral" (6). While Benjy—by virtue of

⁸³ I will discuss the history of this term in more depth in my chapter on Samuel Beckett.

⁸⁴ Two notable examples of these contemporary characters are Christopher Boone in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* and Oskar Schell in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. While these contemporary examples are both verbal—in comparison to Benjy—their narratives are centered around their attempts to impose meaning in a chaotic and uncertain world. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*—for instance—employs autistic modes of cognition to comment on the fragmented nature of meaning and experience after 9/11.

his cognitive and physical difference—does not get to participate in modernity in the same sense as Quentin, who travels to the industrial North and Harvard, does, his fragmented and rapidly moving sensory impressions reflect these changes.

Ironically, while *The Sound and the Fury* has always been recognized for its innovations in storytelling, readers are only now beginning to contemplate how much Faulkner connected this innovation with the technological forces of modernity. Specifically, Faulkner wished to print his novel in different colored inks. As Randy Boyagoda argues, "Faulkner readily acknowledged the difficulty of what he had written . . . [and] proposed using different-colored inks as a way to make Benjy's section more accessible, with distinct shades assigned to the criss crossed time-settings." Although Faulkner's vision for his novel's publication was unrealizable in 1929, several recent printings of *The Sound and the Fury* have attempted to reconstruct Faulkner's authorial intention. While it is impossible to argue with certainty whether these editorial changes align with Faulkner's original vision, the conflict between "old" and "new" modes of perception persists in any version of the novel.

How, ultimately, does this connect to the construction of autism and Modernism? In effect, Benjy—as a cognitively disabled individual—paradoxically embodies elements of progress and animal primitivism. While the distortions in his sense perceptions (his synesthesia, his inability to tell where his limbs are in space, and his animal perception) are idiopathic, they are visible because they symbolize his—and potentially white, Southern society's—inability to adapt and become modern.⁸⁵ It is on this last point that the markers of disability and autistic difference attain their ideological mobility in Faulkner's novel. While Benjy's represents the

⁸⁵ The racial anxieties of a post WWI society permeate Quentin and Jason's sections of *The Sound and the Fury* as Quentin's muffled protests of "durn furriners" and Jason's more overt bigotry betray their identities as members of a "South [they] knows[s] belongs to the past, and not yet" a part of "a modern American" (Matthews 70).

most radical form of neurological difference and disability in the novel, the “[t]he men’s problems [in *The Sound and the Fury*]” as Jay Watson correctly notes, “all point, in various ways, to their unsuitedness for modern bourgeois work regime, to a basic failure of industriousness” (36-37). Benjy’s autistic identity and disability, then, reflect back onto Quentin and Jason as they concurrently embody the identities of the Old and New South, and the precariousness of their social and racial privilege in modern society.

As I noted earlier in this chapter, the perception of physical and mental impairment increased suddenly in the United States after WWI with returning war veterans and intelligence testing laying the groundwork for emerging discourses regarding dis/ability. Allowing for the fact that there are legitimate differences of intellectual and physical ability between individuals in any given society, disability is also a social construct because it reflects, to borrow the words of Anna Stubblefield, "what people with power in a particular society at a particular point in time believe (or want others to believe) about the nature and meaning of intellect" or physical ability. Taken further, "what disables people is an environment in which the definition of a successful life is based on limited notions of independence, mastery of certain intellectual and social skills, and competitive accomplishment" (166-67).

Looking at *The Sound and the Fury*, one may notice that Faulkner gives Benjy's mental impairment or difference a certain "mobility" in his text as the specter of cultural disability haunts Quentin. At the start of his section of the novel, the reader becomes aware that Quentin “is Ben raised to a much higher level of human possibilities . . . [as] Quentin has available to him the whole range of abstractions denied to Ben” (Rueckert 26-27). Quentin can speak, live independently, and is generally considered an able-bodied individual by those around him. Yet, Quentin’s narrative is often as disorienting and fragmented as Benjy’s. The character struggles

with depression, and his emotional and mental deterioration ⁸⁶ drive the section's narrative in unexpected directions as the reader is impelled to question whether what Quentin experiences is true or false.

Faulkner establishes the connection between the two narratives on the first page of Quentin's section. "When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtain it was between seven and eight o'clock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch" (76). Here, Faulkner alludes to two themes developed in Benjy's section. First, Faulkner returns to the image of "shadow" or twilight that permeates Benjy's narrative. Where passages like "they came on in the twilight" (53) highlight a certain intellectual darkness in Benjy's narrative as the character seems to exist somewhere between waking and dreaming, Quentin's shadow world is almost as pronounced. Living as an adult in the North while attending Harvard, Quentin seems to move through his world without truly being a part of it. He seems almost a "shadow" moving through his environment. ⁸⁷

Secondly, the theme of time pervades Quentin's section as it does Benjy's. Where Benjy is unable to objectively measure the passage of time—he perceives the outer world as having meaning only in the present as he subsumes his childhood memories of Caddy into his

⁸⁶ On this point, Quentin is aligned with Benjy and the "intense world" theory of autism since Quentin's internal narrative—in contrast to his outwardly stoic demeanor—is characterized by an excess of emotion and empathy. Furthermore, William Rueckert observes that while Benjy's "bellowing and hushing give one [the reader] the rhythm of the fiction and the recurrent patterns in Faulkner's fiction for years to come," Quentin also "howl[s] and bellow[s]" albeit "much more articulately and elaborately" (26). If we place Quentin and Benjy side by side, in fact, both characters are defined by their adherence to private meanings characterized by intense personal emotions. Cut off from any meaningful connection to society, Quentin and Benjy exist in private worlds that—though they may have a certain local coherence—symbolize the individual's "helpless furious outrage . . . [at] the failure to find articulate meaning (coherence, cause-and-effect relationships; just rewards; fairness)" (24) in the outside world.

⁸⁷ This scene, or the overall dynamic between Quentin and Benjy, is reminiscent of the connection between Septimus and Clarissa in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. While Septimus has retreated almost entirely into his private world, Clarissa's private world often seems equally as pronounced in Woolf's novel as she uses the term "dark" to describe her soul. While the term "dark" is not pejorative in Woolf's novel, it reflects a theory of consciousness whereby one's true self or identity is hidden from public view. *To The Lighthouse*, like *Mrs. Dalloway*, is partly concerned with the oppressive force of modern life on these "dark" worlds.

understanding of his contemporary life—Quentin is very aware of the progressive and linear nature of time. He knows, for instance, that his sister has grown up and moved away from the Compson home, and he is cognizant of the family's changing position within society. In hearing "the watch" tick in his room, Quentin symbolizes an awareness of time quite different from his child-like brother.

Taking a step back for a moment, however, Faulkner locates the elements of Benjy's mental, linguistic and social alienation in the world at large. As such, Benjy's extreme isolation implicitly emphasizes the larger breakdown of traditional modes of thought and understanding. Here, Benjy's alienation functions as "a parable of the disintegration of the modern man [as] individuals no longer sustained by familiar and cultural unity [increasingly become] alienated and lost in private worlds" (Brooks 295). Verily, while Quentin is aware of time as an abstract concept, he lives more in the "shadow" of the past than Benjy.

Certainly, Quentin's section of *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates the character's concern with "familiar and cultural unity." His narrative is punctuated with continuous references to "father said," and "though his father seemed to have counseled acquiescence in the meaningless of existence, it is plain it is from him that Quentin derived his high notion of the claims of honor" (Brooks 293). Truly, of all the characters in Faulkner's novel, Quentin appears to situate himself as being part of a family and cultural lineage. Quentin sees himself as obligated to uphold traditional modes of conduct; specifically, as the oldest son, Quentin feels duty-bound to protect the "honor" of his sister from Dalton Ames, the character Faulkner insinuates took Caddy's virginity and fathered her child out of wedlock.

Whatever the particulars of Caddy and Dalton's relationship were, though, Faulkner

portrays Quentin's actions as adhering more to quixotic ideas of honor rooted in a dead past than meaningful enterprise. Like Benjy, Quentin's thoughts on the present, for example, are continuously interrupted by his memories of his sister. More than narrative detours, these memories infringe on Quentin's sense of the present as he confuses current events with past action. When Gerald Bland, a fellow student at Harvard, brags about his exploits with women, Quentin stops him to ask if "you ever ha[d] a sister." After Gerald responds "no but theyre all bitches" (160), Quentin attacks him as he confuses Gerald with Dalton. Quentin's attack is short-lived and ineffectual, though, as Gerald fights back and gives Quentin a black eye.

There is no doubt that Quentin represents the dying cultural and intellectual ideology of the Old South. As a symbol of the Old South, Quentin believes that the success or worth of his life, and the lives of others, resides in maintaining a certain code of honor. Quentin is honor-bound to protect his sister and his sister's reputation while Caddy is honor-bound to protect narrow and abstract notions of feminine identity. Rather than embracing the dying ideology of the Old South as her brother has, Caddy rejects these ideas as fundamentally meaningless. Upon contemplating his sister's sexual history, Quentin stops to ask: "Have there been very many Caddy" (115). Coming as this passage does in the middle of a long stream of consciousness that document both present and past sense memories, the reader notices the fragmentary nature of Quentin's ideals. Quentin adheres to a cultural and ideological ideology removed from its "familiar and cultural unity."

It is through the fragmentary nature of Quentin's ideology that Faulkner provides the reader with ironic references to some of his more abstract ideals regarding virginity, masculinity and family lineage. Faulkner tells us that Quentin is a virgin, a negative concept that would be an asset to his sister, but is a cultural and social disadvantage to him. "Calling Shreve my

husband . . . In the South, you are ashamed of being a virgin. Boys. Men. They lie about it” (78). Unlike Benjy, there is no intuitive aspect to Quentin's thinking as he bases his actions on the idea of executing a kind of performance--that of a white, Southern gentleman. Living in the North after the Civil War, however, the artificiality of his performance is exposed as the underlying ideology that gave meaning and power to Quentin's assumed identity no longer contains the same cultural capital as it did in the past. Instead, concepts like chivalry, which were once markers of the privileged Southern gentleman, take on different cultural meaning. Quentin, as a virgin, is associated with effeminate or even homosexual attitudes. Like Benjy, Quentin's previously “normative” white male body is figured as something non-normative in this section as the South has no cultural rhetoric with which to signal ability after the Civil War.

One need not read Quentin as homosexual per se, though, as homosexuality did not become widely visible in the United States until after WWII. Still, the taunts against Quentin's sexuality, and Quentin's eventual suicide, allude to the 1920 case of a Harvard student who took his own life by inhaling gas at his parent's house in Fall River, Massachusetts and confessed the night before to his older brother that he had been having an affair with an older Boston man. Putting this case, and Quentin's narrative, in a larger historical and social perspective, we might infer that Faulkner is less concerned with assigning any repressed identity or action (s) onto Quentin than he is with exploring the concurrent problems of the meaning of normality as it is expressed in the ideology of the Old South and the North. For while "the South which Faulkner had grown up in--particularly the rural South--was cut off, inward-turning, backward looking . . . a culture frozen in its virtues and vices" (Warren 244), the industrial and progressively educated North—whose symbolic heart lies at Harvard—suffers from its own ideological afflictions. The world Quentin encounters at Harvard seeks to impose definitional clarity on

concepts like sexuality, intelligence, and masculinity. Like the concept of disability, though, these terms are essentially unstable even as they appear naturalized in the eyes of the dominant power group or class. Since the Old South and the industrialized North are essentially ideologically closed societies (although the latter may masquerade as being individually and socially liberating), Quentin labors to meet each society's definition of normality.

Faulkner returns again and again to the idea that Quentin is an individual acting outside his time and, thereby, executing an ironic performance of antebellum white masculinity. During one of Quentin's encounters before his suicide, he meets three boys going fishing. The presence of the three boys, like the image of the mirror in the novel, invite the reader to consider a series of analogues between Benjy, Quentin, Jason and their biological and cultural lineage. The boys represent the three Compson brothers in their childhood. Seeing them triggers a series of fragmented internal ideas and impressions in Quentin's mind. "I . . . am my father's progenitor I invented him created I him Say it to him it will not be for he will say I was not and then you and I since philoprogenitive" (122). Degraded as Quentin's language is here, the reader may still discern Quentin's mental obsession with procreation through the repetition of the root word "progenitor." Although Quentin views himself as following his father's lineage, the lineage ends with the three sons, as none of the Compson brothers father a male heir to inherit the family's biological and ideological mantle. The fact that Quentin envisions and presents himself as inheriting his father's identity as a privileged, white Southern male becomes an ironic performance since Quentin appears almost culturally castrated in the novel. He not only does not have children, but society seems to attach an impotency to his character or demeanor.

Truly, the breakdown of language in Quentin's and Benjy's narratives stand as symbols for modernity's effect (s) on traditional modes of understanding. In *The Sound and the Fury*,

though, not every character is fully aware of the pervasive nature of these changes. Quentin's father, for example, holds a much more nuanced understanding of the changing and, ultimately, artificial, nature of one's social identity than his son. "Father said it used to be that a man was known to be a gentleman by his books; nowadays he is known by the ones he has not returned" (81). The passage is perspicacious in a number of ways. First, Quentin's father understands that his family is in the midst of economic and cultural decline as the days of a gentleman possessing a private library on a private estate have collapsed along with the South's rural economy after the Civil War.⁸⁸ While Quentin's father reveals a class and cultural concern familiar to Modernist literature,⁸⁹ the passage also hints at the ephemeral nature of intellectual knowledge and ability. Particularly, the advent of mass printing, public libraries and the overall growing dissemination of public knowledge produces a climate where the individual must choose what he wishes to learn, and what identity he wishes to adopt. Gone is the time where the individual might cling to the illusion that one could be a well-rounded, holistically educated man or woman. And, in its place, society has instilled the idea of the utility of specialized knowledge. In this new world, what the individual learns has a particular "shelf life" or "expiration date" by which that knowledge ceases to have the same cultural, class and economic capital it once did.

It is worthwhile to note that while time plays an important role in the narrative structure of Benjy's and Quentin's sections of the novel, Quentin's narrative demonstrates personal and collective anxiety regarding the measurement of time in a manner that Benjy's narrative does not.

⁸⁸ Richard Godden argues that "to the conservative Southern mind the end of slavery posed a key problem: how to position blacks in their organic place (at the bottom, as the hands of the system), without the educational benefits of the benevolent institution of slavery" (105).

⁸⁹ The idea of an expanding, but less traditionally culturally literate reading public, pervades Modernist literature. More to the point, "the large new reading population, including women and the working classes," were being trained in a more rudimentary fashion that, in trying to prepare them for their stations in life, failed to pass on high cultural ideals" (Pease 91). Presumably, Quentin represents a theory of knowledge that rests on principles of "high culture" and not vocational training.

Benjy, as a non-verbal or low functioning autistic character, cannot be conditioned to follow clock time. As Quentin muses: "Father said clocks slay time. He said time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life" (85). Comparing this passage to Benjy's existence, one might argue that Faulkner sees his disability as liberating insofar as Benjy lives in the moment. Quentin, on the other hand, is keenly aware of the concept of time as society measures it. The "little wheels" on "the clock" Quentin's father refers to represent not simply the passage of chronological time, but the measurement of time as economic and cultural value. The image of the mechanized clock, for American society, references Benjamin Franklin and Henry David Thoreau and their "economic" concepts regarding how the individual might get the most out of the day. Coming as it does in Quentin's narrative, and the novel's stage in American's history, these conceptions take on added intellectual and emotional weight.

Where Franklin and Thoreau looked at the economic value of time as being analogous to what the individual was able to accomplish in the day, with the least amount of time and effort wasted on superfluous endeavors, *The Sound and the Fury* presents a picture of a post WWI society where the economic measurement of time is no longer liberating, but constricting for the individual. In terms of Quentin's narrative, the mechanized clocks represent the antiquated nature of the character's cultural, economic and intellectual outlook, a connection that Quentin himself seems to be aware of without fully understanding. Holding the pocket watch that his father gave him, Quentin remembers that "father said that constant speculation regarding the position of mechanical hands on an arbitrary dial . . . is a symptom of mind function" (77). In short, Quentin clings to his father's watch as he clings to a Southern value system that no longer has economic or cultural value. As such, Quentin is not only a product of another time, but

silently labeled as "mentally disabled" by contemporary society as his way of thinking has no apparent value or use in the present. Furthermore, while "clock time" represents the bane of modernity, Quentin's preoccupation with "clock time" symbolizes a postwar South that—through its ruined economy and lack of modern infrastructure—can only envy, not adapt to, "clock time."

Without a doubt, Quentin's decision to break his father's watch "on the corner of the dresser" (80) and the watch's ability to "tick . . . on" signifies the character's inability to adapt to a changing world as well as the unstoppable nature of modernity. Faulkner himself seems to present mixed attitudes about these forces. Surely, the values of the Old South that Quentin adheres to are depicted as corrupt and artificial with or without the changes in American society that destroy the Compson family. Additionally, by placing Quentin at Harvard, Faulkner gives the Compson son access to another kind of privilege and the ability to reinvent himself, making the character's suicide all the more meaningless and unnecessary, a fact not lost on Quentin's brother Jason. "I says no I never had no university advantages because at Harvard they teach you how to go for a swim at night without knowing how to swim" (196). Brutal as Jason's words are, they hold an undercurrent of satire. Quentin goes to Harvard to get a modern education that will help the Compson family adapt to the economic and cultural challenges of a new century. Yet, the primary characteristic of this model of education is specialized or fragmented knowledge. While Quentin's death is blatantly—to the reader, at least—a suicide, not an accidental drowning, Jason's commentary draws attention to America's changing and narrowing notions of ability/disability.

Once more, Quentin would appear to have a variety of potential modern identities available to him at Harvard, but he seems ill-equipped to adopt any of these roles. This is,

perhaps, indicative of Faulkner's general attitudes regarding the reforms placed on the South and its citizens during and after WWI. As Faulkner's biographer Richard Gray notes, "The emergence of the New South, epitomized by the smokestack and the skyscraper . . . [and] encouraged by the First World War (with its huge demand for weaponry, and for manufactured goods no longer producible in Europe," not only uprooted the planter aristocracy to which the Compson family belonged, but transformed American society on a scale not previously witnessed. While America's new economy was associated with egalitarian notions of opportunity, it also wrought devastation on the bodies and minds of many American laborers. As more Americans moved to the cities for employment, for example, the United States began to pass "ugly laws" that sought to hide the appearance of "people with disabilities" on public streets. "In 1911, Chicago updated its laws to prohibit 'exposure of diseased, mutilated, or deformed portions of the body'" (Nielson 89). These kinds of public ordinances can be viewed as originating from, as well as ironically feeding, collective anxieties regarding the definition of disability. For as the economy becomes standardized, the idea of a standardized normal body gains ideological strength.⁹⁰ Expanding and crowded cities required workers who could fill the particular needs of a growing urban economy; therefore, people increasingly distinguished between useful and non-useful citizens. But, while the concept of a "normalized" or standard human body finds some clarity in our knowledge that it [the body] "has evolved functional parts: lungs for breathing, legs for walking, eyes for seeing" (McCruer 371), other types of disability remain invisible to the human eye. Ugly laws, after all, essentially highlighted American society's concerns with "controlled appearance" as "ugly ordinances epitomized how modern

⁹⁰ This idea was reflected in a variety of urban reform texts such as Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). More particularly, as David Leviatin notes, "national organization and individual assimilation were linked [for writers like Jacob Riis]" since "the making of modern America was tied inextricably to the making of modern Americans" (9).

bodies were and must be seen as they engaged with city spaces” (Schweik 86). In other words, while Benjy's disability may be outwardly visible to society—although I would argue that even this may be contested to a certain extent since the character possesses the "functional parts" of the human body mentioned above—characters like Quentin "short circuit" the "dominant protocols governing . . . the representation of disability" (Quayson 202). Much like autism finds its narrative power in its metaphorical possibilities, Quentin's outward "normality" draws attention to the alienating nature of modern society and the inadequacy of concrete definitions of physical normality and disability.⁹¹ We "empathize" with Quentin because we see more of his internal struggles with cultural definitions of disability within us than we would sometimes care to admit.

Faulkner's biographer Richard Gray avers that all of “Faulkner’s narratives can be gauged by the degree to which they concentrate on experiences of disorientation and anxieties that have a specifically social or cultural cause.” More specifically, "his books are full of people on the move: not, as in mainstream American fiction, in search of something personally new and morally restorative but because they have been uprooted--destabilized . . . by pressures they may understand but feel unable to control (21). In terms of form, then, *The Sound and the Fury* captures this sense of disorientation through the alternating internal and external autistic dynamic of Benjy’s and Quentin's narratives. Although Benjy's pronounced linguistic disability and neurological difference take the reader into the autistic view point of the novel, his inevitable alienation⁹² gives way to the metaphorical possibilities of neurological difference in Quentin's

⁹¹ As I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, the contrast between “outward” appearance and authenticity permeate Modernist literature. While Quentin’s outward normality in *The Sound and the Fury* primarily align with my discussion of ability and disability, the years between the end of the 19th century and early part of the twentieth century produced a society that was preoccupied with the concept that the racial or ethnic “Other” could adopt and/or perform the identity of the racial and cultural mainstream.

⁹² Since Benjy does not possess or learn language, in a traditional sense, his alienation from a speaking world is unsurprising.

section. Here, Quentin's profound alienation, inability to meaningfully communicate with those around him, and disorientation in the face of modernity's changing definitions of normality become symptoms of a society that has alienated the individual from traditional and stable meanings. Indeed, as Randy Boyagoda correctly explains, "the writing in *The Sound and the Fury* isn't difficult for the sake of difficulty, nor is its meaning confined to the story of one spectacularly Southern brood." On the contrary, "the novel both reveals and embodies the jagged, individual experience of modernity's ironic provision for all of us: an intense awareness of the particulars of each our own time and place, shot through with fearful unknowing of how these particulars fit together, about if they even can, or should, and why."

In terms of chronology, I should note that the by the time Faulkner published *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929, American society had been already largely transformed.⁹³ Concurrently, Jason's narrative, occurring as it does after Benjy's and Quentin's sections, explores the results of these changes. When Faulkner sacrifices Benjy and Quentin's narratives of neurological difference in exchange for Jason's perspective in *The Sound and the Fury*, the reader is immediately confronted with the harsh and debased nature of the character's language and thoughts. "Once a bitch, always a bitch" (180), Jason exclaims in the section's first lines. Indeed, Jason's section is defined by a degree of brutality and judgment far beyond that of Quentin or Benjy's. Speaking more generally, however, Jason's narrative is also the most outwardly "normalized" section of Faulkner's novel. In addition to departing from the fragmented sensory impressions and world view of Quentin and Benjy, Jason demonstrates the ability to clearly separate himself or his identity from the people and objects around him. In a

⁹³ As Leviatin succinctly states: "By 1920, a national economy and society had been organize. The middle class emerged as the dominant class; the culture it produced guided the nation's way of life. New methods of manufacturing goods, consumer products, and communicating ideas were in place. According to social critic Alan Trachtenberg, America was 'incorporated'" (9).

sense, Jason's narrative recalls the earlier scene in the novel where "Luster turn[s] on the light" and "[t]he windows went black" since Jason's section is devoid of an inward gaze. The lack of an inward gaze does not signal a more objective viewpoint, however, but a character blind to the particulars of the world around him.

While Jason neither exists in the moment, like Benjy, nor the past, like Quentin, his speech and his thinking are analogous to the "anxiety and frustration" of modern economies (Matthews 379). Particularly, Jason is obsessed with making money in "cotton futures" (Westbrook 53).⁹⁴ In one respect, we might say that Jason functions as a cautionary tale for modernity's narrow conceptions of physical and intellectual "ableism." Just as Quentin obsesses over one form of artificial time, Jason continually agonizes over being "on time" and never having "enough time." Unlike Quentin, though, there is very little that is even superficially romantic about Jason's conception of time: Jason is unable to conceive of time beyond the very confines of its connection to the world of finance. Jason simply and predictably wishes to situate himself at the correct time so that he may maximize his financial gain according to narrow rules of finance. As Jason explains: "Cotton is a speculator's crop. . . . Let him make a big crop and it wont be worth picking; let him make a small crop and he wont have enough to gin" (191). Ironically, while Jason seems to outwardly embrace modernity and his place in the New South in a manner that Quentin couldn't, much of his financial dealing seems inept and almost comic to the reader. In the words of John Matthews, Jason "seems to never escape the theatre of his own mind. Jason performs the story for himself. It is the largest of the closed economies" (384).

⁹⁴ "Futures are contracts that traders are willing to buy at a current price expecting that the contracts will rise in value at a certain time in the future. Jason Compson sells short a futures contract, expecting that the contract will decline in value at a specific time in the months ahead when he can buy it back and pocket the difference between the greater proceeds from the short sale and the lesser cost of covering, or buying the contract back" (Westbrook 54).

Leaving aside the character's general physical and linguistic cruelty—his outward bullying of Benjy and Quentin and their failures—Jason is not a symbol of modern American independence and success. While the Compson family matriarch, Caroline, avers, upon learning that her son will be given a job in a bank after he finishes high school, that "Jason will make a splendid banker he is the only one of my children with any practical sense" (94), Jason demonstrates very little "practical sense." On the contrary, since "practical" is defined as action or thinking that is level-headed, efficient and not concerned with theory or ideals, Jason represents a failed attempt to assimilate to America's new economy since he does not fully comprehend the rules of the stock market and cotton trading. "I didn't realize what it was until I was signing for it, and I tore it open without even caring much what it was" (234). Furthermore, Jason's racist diatribes—his references to the foolishness of "tak[ing] a jew's word for anything" (234)—betray the character's fears of modern America as he associates it with "foreign" identities and ideological forces.

White Identity and Disability:

Given the way that Benjy, Quentin and Jason's narratives overlap, and that the novel more generally represents the decay of the Compsons, the specter of disability runs through the entire family. There remains a certain ontological problem at the center of this observation, however: while Benjy's intellectual disability is overt in *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner seems to wish to continually point to disability's resistance to classification. At recurring points in the novel, characters argue about where to place Benjy. Jason, for instance, proposes that the family "rent him [Benjy] out to a sideshow [. . . as] there must be folks somewhere that would pay a dime to see him" (196). Still, other conversations in the novel see Jason argue that Benjy should be "sen[t] down to Jackson . . . [since] he'll be happier there, with people like him" (222).

Indeed, the question of where to physically and ideologically place Benjy seems to be lurking in the background of Faulkner's novel, obscured by the more sensational event of Benjy's castration.⁹⁵

In terms of race and identity, however, Jason's inability to place his mentally disabled brother in one environment reflects the changing conception of disability in Faulkner's lifetime and its effect on American society's conceptions of race. Interestingly, while Benjy's caregiver Luster attempts to get enough money to see the minstrel show in the novel—"I gotta get to that show" (56)-- Faulkner alternately associates Benjy with the spectacle of the "sideshow" and the invisibility of the public asylum. Historically, while the asylum could essentially hide mental disability from public view, both minstrel shows and "sideshows" or freak shows served another purpose. In American society, minstrel and freaks shows helped create and maintain the idea of the racial "other." Particularly, as Thomas Fahy persuasively argues in his work *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination: Constructing the Damaged Body from Willa Cather to Truman Capote*, the act of looking at "damaged bodies"—legless and other outwardly different individuals, that were also perceived to be racially different (African American and Oriental, for example)served to "assuage pervasive fears about immigration and the increased freedom of African Americans" (19). Yet, "in the aftermath of WWI, the racial other was not the only problem." Instead, "the wounded soldier" came into public view thereby "undermin[ing] America's vision of itself as a powerful and indomitable empire" (54). In short, the idea of the disabled body as both "freakish" and racially "othered" becomes de-stabilized by WWI, moving

⁹⁵ As Anna Stubblefield explains, "a central tactic of the [eugenics] movement was the involuntary sterilization of people label feeble minded" Specifically, "between 1927 and 1957, approximately 60,000 Americans labeled either feeble minded or insane underwent sterilization at state institutions in the name of eugenics"(168). I would argue that Benjy's castration in *The Sound and the Fury* must be explicitly placed within this historical context since "sixty percent of those sterilized were women, and a large majority of those were white and poor" (168).

American society's conception of disability away from the binary construction of "looking" that Jason presents. Benjy can neither be hidden from view nor can he be made an object of spectacle to support an ideology of racial difference and inferiority.

These issues find their proper context in this essay's previous discussion of the impact of mental testing on American society's concept (s) of cognitive normality and disability. In one regard, the increasing presence or visibility of disability has a "democratizing" effect on American society. More specifically, if we read the narratives of Benjy, Quentin and Jason within the prism of Benjy's cognitive disability—as well as the specter of this disability in his brothers—we become conscious of the Compson family's previously "cemented code of authority that haunts even contemporary questions of self definition and equal access" (Babb 169). Without a doubt, Faulkner portrays the Compsons as a family in decline, and this decline is documented by the wraithlike menace of mental disability/insanity that threatens to engulf the lives of the entire family. Intriguingly, however, Faulkner juxtaposes the outwardly disguised nature of Quentin's mental decline with a deteriorating or degenerate "racial" performance. Quentin's dialect is mistaken for a form of black vernacular in the North. "I've heard them talk. He talks like they do in minstrel shows" (120). Additionally, Quentin--while pondering his physical proximity to an African American with "a derby and shined shoes" on the train as well as the proper etiquette for engaging with such an individual in the North--muses that "a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among" (86). Reading this section, and thinking about the growing visibility of "white" models of disability in American society, one can argue that Faulkner portrays "abelism" and white identity as a kind of performance, predicated on mutually ingrained and often arbitrary ideas regarding normality and power.

As the reader witnesses in *The Sound and the Fury*, the ideology of the Old South and the Compson family has been turned upside down. Not only does Quentin ride a train in Massachusetts with an African American male who challenges the character's economic and socially privileged position in American society, but Benjy's African American caregivers continually impel the reader to take note of the inverted, and arbitrary nature, of the family or society's power structure. While Benjy's caregivers work for him or the family, they show the reader the capricious nature of this hierarchy as--through every outward measure--they hold a "naturalized" position of authority over Benjy.

Ultimately, disability upsets and exposes the "normative" ideology of race in Faulkner's novel in that it unmasks the hidden elements of American racial privilege. Or, as Valerie Bann succinctly defines it: "The ideology of whiteness wove together arbitrary traits of hair color, eye color, skin color, religious belief, language, morality and class into a network of standards against which those defined as different could be measured" (169). This argument, though, holds particular weight when we consider the manner in which certain forms of disability--autism, in particular--are rhetorically framed. Specifically, while autism--as a neurological condition or disability--seems to be "radically democratic" since it may affect any family regardless of class or ethnicity, scholars such as Paul Heilkner have argued that contemporary cultural "rhetoric" suggests that "autism is exclusive, that it is socially divisive, affecting only a particular kind of people as determined by the single and fraught demographic distinction of race" (2).⁹⁶ Granted, while there is no evidence that the biological or cognitive markers of autism do not affect a wide

⁹⁶ Although the cultural rhetoric of autism has become more inclusive in recent years—as more African American and Hispanic children have been diagnosed as autistic—it is still predominantly represented as a condition of the mainstream and the affluent. Certainly, this is at least partly the result of the disparity of educational and medical access between poor and affluent communities. In short, more educated and more affluent families are more likely to receive a diagnosis of autism from their schools or medical practitioners.

range of populations, autism is, partly, a cultural construction since--rhetorically--it is often not even recognized or visible outside of particular societies.⁹⁷ Even in the United States, autism is often subconsciously "racialized" as "advocacy groups [such as] Autism Speaks and Generation Rescue. . . overwhelmingly feature white actors and celebrities" in their public awareness campaigns. Furthermore, these campaigns "make their appeals [regarding the tragic nature of this type of disability] by highlighting the "personal ethos" of autistic children's "grandmother[s] and mother[s]" . . . "demonstrating how autism affects several generations at once in white families" (Heilker 5). So, if a contemporary reader interprets Benjy as autistic, this reading of the character's disability may be the result of framing as the effects of Benjy's difference stretches out to touch past and present, current and proceeding/preceding generations of the Compson family.

Certainly, the racialized rhetoric of autism partly explains why there are more diagnoses of autism in white families than other ethnic or cultural groups today. As previously mentioned, intelligence testing--which finds a foothold in American domestic society after WWI--had, and continues to have, a more explicit effect on middle and upper class white families as these groups have had greater access by way of education and other affluences to these kinds of tests. In one respect, the identification of disability--autism or otherwise--allows for a more pluralistic vision of American society as the elements of a group's privilege(s) are no longer taken for granted. On the other hand, as we see in *The Sound and the Fury*, the identification of disability in a community can induce an almost violent rhetoric of correction, a narrative that seeks to reestablish "normative" ideologies of essentialized racial superiority by explaining individual instances of disability that do not meet the above paradigm.

⁹⁷ While discussions of autism—its effects on the family and society, causes, and general definition—permeate American and British society, it is largely un-discussed in much of the 3rd world.

Very broadly, the causes of disability in *The Sound and the Fury* are figured as either cultural or biological. In regards to biology, the characters in *The Sound and the Fury* explain all kinds of aberrant behavior as the result of tainted or inferior blood lines. When Luster's—the Compson's African American servant--behavior goes beyond the realm of simple mischief, Dilsey reprimands him by saying: "you got jes es much Compson devilment in you as any of em" (276). Applying our knowledge of the rhetoric of eugenics in the first half of the twentieth century to the preceding passage, one can reasonably argue that Dilsey's words transcend mere metaphor. Indeed, considering how much time Faulkner devotes in the novel to Quentin's perceived virginity, and the connection between his virginity and the ideology of the Old South, the reader would be wise to not take Dilsey's comment at face value. Among the agrarian gentry prior the Civil War, young men often lost their virginity by taking advantage of one of the family's African American slaves since the demure Southern belle—a model of behavior Quentin most likely wishes his sister to adopt—would not be a viable option for men outside the ritual or tradition of marriage. Hence, Dilsey places Luster within the Compson family's "blood" lineage, attributing his "mean streak" to a degenerate hereditary trait. ⁹⁸

Concurrently, Jason's ability, or perceived ability, to succeed in a modern world derives from the character's separate blood lines. While we know that Jason is the Compson matriarch's favorite son, this favoritism is grounded in the belief that he derives his physical, intellectual and emotional traits from the maternal side of the family. "For he takes after my people the others are all Compson." Intriguingly, the above description of Jason is preceded by one of Quentin's

⁹⁸ As Anna Stubblefield correctly explains, a great deal of the eugenics movement in the United States "emphasize[d] the value of superior blood and the menace of inferior blood." More importantly, in regards to our discussion of *The Sound and the Fury*, Stubblefield notes that "the idea of promoting reproduction by pure white people while restricting reproduction by tainted white people spread [. . . as a result of] white elites who feared off-white immigration and supposedly inherited forms of 'degeneracy' including pauperism, criminality, feeble-mindedness, insanity and homosexuality" (164).

narrative flashbacks. Presumably remembering Jason as a child, Quentin gives us a fragmented memory of his brother's early resourcefulness. "Jason furnished the flower. They made kites on the back porch and sold them for a nickel a piece, he and the Patterson boy. Jason was treasurer" (94). Since these passages are filtered through the memories of Quentin, and the words of Caroline, the Compson matriarch, there are a couple of ways one can read this section of the novel. In one regard, Quentin's memory demonstrates the presence of an essentialized practical or financial intelligence in Jason. But, Quentin's memory also demonstrates Caroline's favoritism towards Jason as the reader can discern her overt praise of Jason's accomplishment's in the passage. One can speculate that although Faulkner takes great care to figure the Compson blood line as "degenerate" in his novel, and to figure the cognitive disabilities of Benjy and Quentin as attributable to this degeneracy, he also wishes to stress the perceived cultural causes of the family decline.

Truly, *The Sound and the Fury* continually emphasizes Caroline's un-nurturing and "cold" personality. Additionally, Caroline's emotional unavailability serves as a recurring cause for the cognitive "degeneracy" of Benjy and Quentin. As a case in point, Quentin--on the day of his suicide--alludes to his struggle to place Caroline within the traditional linguistic framework of motherhood: "My little sister had no. If I could say Mother. Mother" (95). In fact, Quentin's narrative is permeated with his lamentations of "If I'd just had a mother so I could say Mother Mother" (172). Yet, one must be careful in making sweeping generalizations about Caroline's role in Benjy and Quentin's cognitive "degeneracy." Rather, the novel's development of Caroline's imperfect, at times even narcissistic, model of parenting stems from the acknowledgment of Benjy and Quentin's cognitive disability, not necessarily the other way around.

Whatever Caroline's emotional limitations are as a character, it is crucial to note that Faulkner locates a great deal of the novel's conflict (s) within the scope of the failure (s) of language. Quentin does not simply lament a terrible childhood, or an emotionally detached parent, but cognitively quarrels with his inability to attach the term "mother" to Caroline. Particularly, as a product of the Old South, Quentin attaches a very specific--albeit quite unrealistic--meaning to motherhood. Or, as Richard King correctly describes:

The Southern woman was caught in a social double-bind: toward men she was supposed to be submissive, meek and gentle; with the children and slaves and in the management of the household, she was supposed to display competence, initiative and energy. . . . [In] the role of mother . . . sexuality or erotic appeal was denied to her. In extreme form she was stripped of any emotional, nurturing attributes at all. Eventually, she came to acquire a quasi-Virgin Mary role as the asexual mother of the Southern male hero (253).

As I discussed earlier, white intellectual superiority was taken for granted prior to intellectual testing and the increased visibility of all forms of disabilities after WWI. But, while intellectual superiority was an unexamined or unquestioned aspect of white identity for a large portion of American history, white moral superiority was just as powerful an ideological force. In many ways, however, these arbitrary beliefs supported and informed one another. So, much like a house of cards falling, the presence of disability in a white family destroys previously unquestioned beliefs like that in Southern motherhood.

It is this final connection between disability and white identity that links this novel to the historical rhetoric of autism. While recent years have witnessed American society slowly retreat from the notion that autistic isolation and alienation result from "cold" and emotionally detached

mothers, one may reasonably argue that Leo Kanner's and Bruno Bettelheim's early theories that the atypical behaviors of autism must be caused by some type of inadequate parenting resulted at least partly from the unspoken and unexamined belief that the children of affluent and well-educated white parents could only acquire a cognitive disability--if not by a tainted, non-white bloodline--through some kind of personal or moral failing. Looking at *The Sound and the Fury*, the reader easily sees that Benjy's disability serves as an implied criticism of the Compson family, and Caroline's ironic position of moral privilege within the family, as well as it does of Benjy himself. Specifically, Caroline figures Benjy's disability as a measure of her personal melancholy, suffering, and disappointment. "Benjamin Benjamin the child of my sorrowful" (172). Cleanth Brook similarly interprets Caroline as a character "who feels the birth of an idiot son as a kind of personal affront," and who subsequently "spoils and corrupts her favorite son, and who withholds any love or affection from her other children and her husband" (Brooks 293). As a reader, one recognizes the manipulateness of Caroline's performance of suffering and martyrdom. Clearly, she does not love her son, Benjy or show the capacity to love much of anyone but herself. Rather than reading Caroline as the cause of the family's decline, however, I would argue that it is more important that the reader recognize that this type of person has always existed--in the Compson family line or others like it. Disability simply unmask its existence.

Certainly, any individual is a mixture of cultural and biological influences and to say that cognitive disability derives from one or the other is a conversation better left for another kind of scholarship. But, in terms of rhetoric and narrative, the way we "weight" the possible influences of cognitive difference and disability illuminates the particular concerns or anxieties of a society. According to Alice Hall and others, Faulkner's inspiration for Benjy Compson came explicitly

from the author's personal life as "his first-grade teacher, Annie Chandler, and her mentally impaired brother Edwin, lived just a few blocks away from his childhood home in Oxford, Mississippi (28). One would be hard pressed to believe that the intricate inner life of Benjy Compson that Faulkner created came simply from this outward observation. On the contrary, so much of Faulkner's employment of disability in *The Sound and the Fury* originates from American society's larger anxieties about rigid definitions of intelligence, normality, race, and yes, disability. Hence, the novel explores a series of metaphors for a changing American society.

All told, a writer often puts things in a text he or she did not intend or realize. "Sometimes," Faulkner said himself, "the writer says what he does not believe and sometimes he doesn't know what he believes." While this quotation could refer to the author's position--in *The Sound and the Fury*--on specific changes in American society, it could just as readily refer to a contemporary reading of Benjy as autistic. While it was not Faulkner's intent to write an autistic character or narrative in his novel, the textual breadcrumbs are still there. Perhaps this is due to autism's general narrative inclusiveness or linguistic elasticity. As Stuart Murray notes, "autism [today] is increasingly becoming a term used with imprecision . . . [so] it is possible to think of the two terms [idiocy and autism] as different but comparable in a scheme of loose semantic deployment" (Murray 68). Specifically, while the autistic individual--in contrast to the "idiot"--is characterized by his or her extreme linguistic and social isolation in contemporary literature, he or she is very much connected to the "idiot" figure's status as a point of narrative and cultural fascination as he or she challenges society's notions of normality and cognitive ability. So, just as our society today is drawn to autistic narratives for the synchronous reasons that disability seems somehow more prevalent or visible and because the autistic personality seems reminiscent

of extreme, not unfamiliar aspects of ourselves, so too does Faulkner's character claim a similar position and narrative function.

Chapter 3:

Cosmopolitanism and Social Conditioning:

Degenerate London in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*

In Chapter Two of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), Mr. Vladimir describes "science" as a "sacrosanct fetish," and an ideal target for a psychological attack at the heart of modern society. "The demonstration must be against learning—science. But not every science will do. . . . it would be very telling if one could throw a bomb into pure mathematics. But that is impossible" (28). For Mr. Vladimir, the "symbolic embodiment" of these "fetishistic beliefs" is "the Royal Observatory, Greenwich" which "had been made the keeper of Standard World Time [in 1884] and thereby acquired immense national and international prestige" (Schnauder 95).⁹⁹ Hence, Mr. Vladimir instructs Verloc to "hav[e] a go at astronomy" and destroy the Royal Observatory through Verloc's preferred "means of expression . . . bombs" (28).

While Mr. Vladimir confidently describes the symbolic and psychological importance of science in English society, Vladimir himself expresses no reverence for science as a repository or method for individual progress and the attainment of truth. Rather, "Mr. Vladimir believes an assault on this spot will arouse fear in the populace at large [and] highlights some of his own assumptions about the importance of Newtonian uniform space and time" (Turner 121). Indeed, comparing Newton's laws of motion¹⁰⁰—as they describe the relationship between a body and

⁹⁹ As I discussed previously in the Faulkner section of this work, the question of "clock time," or how the individual gets outside of/away from "clock time" is a recurring theme in Modernist literature. So, the Royal Observatory, Greenwich is a somewhat enigmatic symbol in *The Secret Agent* as it concurrently represents scientific authority and precision and Modernism's distrust of the mechanistic or machine-like characteristics of scientific authority.

¹⁰⁰ On its simplest level, Newton's "three laws of mechanics" describe the motion of the body. "The first law states that a body remains at rest or in uniform motion in a straight line unless acted upon by force. The second law states that a body's rate of change of momentum is proportional to the force causing it. The third law states that when a force acts upon a body due to another body, than an equal and opposite force act simultaneously on that body." In terms of *The Secret Agent*, actions—such as Stevie's death in a failed attempt to bomb the Royal Observatory or Winnie's murder of Mr. Verloc—are rarely depicted as the result of individual agency or free will, but rather, the result of "mechanistic" responses to previous outside actions and forces.

the forces acting upon it as well as the body's motion in response to said forces—to the theme of “social control” in *The Secret Agent*, the reader bears witness to an important subtext in Conrad's novel; namely, the application of scientific paradigms and physical law to man-made social systems as a way to predict, regulate and control human behavior.

The idea of predicting and ultimately controlling human behavior finds particular significance when we examine *The Secret Agent* in the context of mental disability and pathology. Verily, if one compares *The Secret Agent* to *The Sound and the Fury*, we see a couple of obvious similarities. Both novels prominently feature a mentally disabled, childlike¹⁰¹ male character—Stevie in *The Secret Agent* and Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*--who is central to the novel's plot, but lacks individual agency in the narrative. Furthermore, Stevie and Benjy are similarly “Christ-like” figures in Faulkner's and Conrad's narratives as their mental disability prevents them from bestowing complex ideological judgments¹⁰² on the actions of other characters in the novel as well as precluding the reader from making correlative judgments about Stevie and Benjy. Lastly, Stevie and Benjy are concurrently depicted as burdensome to the families entrusted with their care, and each man's cognitive difference is a source of shame within those families. In one of the novel's flashbacks for example, Stevie's father “declar[es] himself obviously accursed since one of his kids was a ‘slobbering idjut and the other a wicked she'devil’” (201).¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Stevie, like Benjy, is the name of a child, not of an adult. As I will discuss in greater detail later, the comparison between Stevie and Benjy does not end with their joint infantilization, however. Stevie, like Benjy, is also feminized in the novel as Conrad describes him as being “put into a green baize apron, [where he was seen] sweeping and dusting upstairs” (31).

¹⁰² Stevie, for example, thinks of Verloc as “good” in *The Secret Agent*, but his judgment is flawed or limited from the reader's perspective.

¹⁰³ The religious significance of Benjy or Benjamin's name is also important in *The Sound and the Fury*. As I discussed in my previous chapter, Benjamin's name signifies an attempt to civilize and control the racialized aspects of the character. While Stevie's father in *The Secret Agent*, views Stevie as a “curse” or punishment from God, Stephen is also the name of the first Christian martyr—a man who was stoned to death because he would not stop

Unlike Faulkner's *The Sound the Fury*, though, Conrad's novel places the disabled body in a distinctly urban and cosmopolitan environment: 1880s London. More to the point, Stevie, as Patrick McDonagh avers, "is very much an offspring of late-nineteenth, early twentieth century degenerate ¹⁰⁴ London" (311). Particularly, Stevie's cognitive disability fits within Max Nordau's Darwinian paradigm which linked a perceived spike in "crime, madness and suicide" to "the destructive influences of large towns" or cities. These "destructive influences," which ranged from an "increase in the consumption of narcotics and stimulants," to "tainted foods," and the effects of "the little shocks of railway travelling" and "the perpetual noises, and sights in the streets" on the nervous system (Nordau 34-41), were viewed as having a particular effect on the "weaker" elements of society. In a manner of speech, the forces of modernity—embodied most forcefully in urban centers—could be seen as a speeding, runaway train, with which only the able-bodied members of our society could keep pace. "The strongest could keep up, no doubt, and even now, at the most rapid pace, no longer lose their breath, but the less vigorous soon fell out left and right, and fill today the ditches of the road of progress" (Nordau 40). Adding to this list, the cosmopolitan aspects of urban centers like London further increased society's anxieties over degeneration, as England's denizens contemplated the effects of a foreign contagion within their midst. ¹⁰⁵

preaching about Jesus. Considering that Stevie dies because he blindly follows Verloc, the character is very much an ironic martyr since he dies for a false idol and in a pointless act.

¹⁰⁴ As Martin Ray avers in his article "Conrad, Nordau, and Other Degenerates: The Psychology of *The Secret Agent*," "a clue to the significance of *Degeneration* [...] lies in its [*The Secret Agent*'s] dedication to Caesar Lombroso, a criminologist and analysts of degeneracy." While Nordau is not explicitly referenced in *The Secret Agent*, Martin Ray argues that "Nordau is a true disciple of Lombroso, and it is impossible in certain cases to tell which of the two men is exerting an influence on Conrad" (126). Additionally, when we consider Nordau's polemics against the effects of rapid industrialization on the human body, links between Nordau's concepts of degeneration and *The Secret Agent* become sharper.

¹⁰⁵ Daniel Pick, to name just one example, very effectively discussed images of degeneration in British literature in relation to the age's zeitgeist in his work *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-1918*: Dracula descended on London, thus descending in a sense into the much wider social debate of the 1880s and 1890s about the morbidity and degeneracy of the average inhabitant of the metropolis. [...] Stoker's novel, for all its mythological and folklorist insistence, can be read in relation to specific late-nineteenth century discourse of

Indisputably the London of *The Secret Agent* is rife with images of disease and disability. In addition to Stevie's obvious cognitive disability, labels of degeneracy are widely placed on characters in the novel. Mr. Vladimir, for example, refers to the "imbecile bourgeoisie of [England]" when speaking to Mr. Verloc in Chapter Two (25). The novel describes Mr. Verloc as possessing a "lowered physiognomy" (24). Even Mr. Vladimir's speech is associated with a "somewhat oriental phraseology" (187) later in the novel, assuring that no character in the novel remains outside the intertwined ideas of cognitive disability, degeneracy, and racial difference. Indeed, the characters in Conrad's novel operate in a world where "the whole social order had to be protected against . . . unhygienic labor" (11). In short, the narrative of *The Secret Agent* is animated by Max Nordau's theory that the modern, urban dweller "breathes an atmosphere charged with organic detritus" (Nordau 35) and reflects the turn of the century's anxious pessimism about the future of Western/European civilization.

Nordau's theory of degeneration is not the only concept that informs Conrad's text, however. "Reviews of *The Secret Agent* attributed the novel's dark view of London to the fact that its author was a foreigner to England and to English culture" (Walkowitz 39). More specifically, Conrad was a Polish-born writer who was writing in his non-native English, a fact which called into question concepts of national literary identity and "natural" ability.¹⁰⁶ Certainly, while the London of *The Secret Agent* is replete with images of disability and degeneracy, Conrad's novel engages in a type of "critical cosmopolitanism."¹⁰⁷ In other words,

degeneration. [. . .] The novel at once sensationalized the horrors of degeneration and charted reassuringly the process of their confinement and containment (174).

¹⁰⁶ "Early twentieth century critics of cosmopolitanism presumed that cultural artifacts, as a matter of course, should articulate and maintain existing cultures. These critics argued that literature should conform to a writer's 'experience,' by which they meant a coherent national tradition that was neither changeable nor uncertain" (Walkowitz 20-21)

¹⁰⁷ As Rebecca Walkowitz defines the term, critical cosmopolitanism "has meant [not just] thinking beyond the nation but also comparing, distinguishing, and judging among different versions of transatlantic thought; testing moral and political norms, including the norms of critical thinking" (2).

Conrad's novel implicitly questions various kinds of epistemological privilege, be it definitions of authentic national identity or scientific pretensions of diagnostic precision with regard to disability and degeneracy.

I want to begin then by linking the concept of disability more directly to cosmopolitanism. Particularly, as I argue in this chapter, disability is the most extreme form of foreignness since it fundamentally represents a deviation from society's sense of a cognitive and behavioral norm. Disability, like nationality, however, is often an unstable cultural and linguistic concept. This instability is especially apparent in *The Secret Agent*, ironically, in the face of paradoxically professional and colloquial attempts¹⁰⁸ to name characters as degenerate or disabled in the novel. Joseph Valente, for example, has previously noted that Stevie appears "autistic" in Conrad's novel because "Conrad contrives to strip the term [idiot] of its pretensions to diagnostic exactitude, to sustain about the term a zone of irresolution or alternate possibility" (23).¹⁰⁹ Where this chapter builds on Valente's argument, however, is that in addition to examining Conrad's interest in the fallacy of a completely objective or "exact" diagnostic certainty, my argument focuses on the effects of social and educational conditioning on neurological and national identity in *The Secret Agent*. Where Valente interprets Stevie as an "antitype (precursor) of the autistic" (20), I contend that Stevie—like many of the other characters in Conrad's novel—is not a paradigm of a "natural" foreign or "othered" identity, but a character that responds and changes in response to the varied external stimuli placed in front of him. In a manner of speaking, Stevie is a partially "colonized" individual since, as "a source of anxiety [. . .

¹⁰⁸ Attempts to diagnosis characters as degenerate in *The Secret Agent* are employed by scientific professionals and laymen.

¹⁰⁹ In short, Valente argues that "Conrad fashions the character of Stevie in a manner calculated both to invoke and to explode the category of idiocy, thereby inadvertently giving his protagonist attributes at once consistent and corrective of the dominant contemporary social and scientific construction of autism" (20).

.] from the very first day of his birth” (33), Stevie is conditioned by both his family and London society at large to conform to neurotypical standards of acceptable and/or normal behavior.

What is considered “natural”—be it cognitive ability or national identity—is always complicated by a host of external forces. During Conrad’s lifetime, Conrad proposed that “English [was] natural to his writing” no doubt partly because the alternative (choice) denoted “insincerity” and artifice (Walkowitz 41).¹¹⁰ *The Secret Agent*, however, offers another possibility in terms of national and neurological identity. While characters such as Stevie are not entirely “natural” in their actions, neither are they a product of individual agency or choice. Rather, Conrad experiments with a proto-behaviorist narrative in his novel in that the characters of *The Secret Agent* are the products of social conditioning and their physical environment. While Conrad’s novel predates the work of the leading founders of Behaviorism—John Watson and B.F. Skinner—*The Secret Agent* elucidates the rise of psychology as a science and a discipline separate from philosophy insofar as the formal elements of the novel forgo the exploration of internal mental mechanisms (varied sensory experiences, states of mind, and/or unconscious or repressed desires), instead highlighting observable behavior that occurs in relation to environmental stimulus. Through this narrative framework, *The Secret Agent* explores the limits of applying strict, methodological scientific approaches and rhetoric to the social problems of urban environments, at the same time as it figures human action as a product of biomechanical forces. In this way, Conrad’s novel reflects a Modernist culture that increasingly viewed neurological and national identity as unstable and transformative in nature.

¹¹⁰ Conrad’s work “was produced in the context of a literary culture devoted to categories of distinctiveness and authenticity” (Walkowitz 39). Hence, the writer’s choice of English was viewed as a manner of intentional artifice, an “impersonation of Englishness” (39).

Science and Modernism: The Embodied Mind in *The Secret Agent*:

References to “science” permeate *The Secret Agent*. The term “science” has a somewhat dynamic and imprecise meaning in the novel, however, which can be discerned through Mr. Verloc’s observation that “of late even the merest derivative of the word science (a term in itself inoffensive and of indefinite meaning) had the curious power of evoking a definitely offensive mental vision of Mr. Vladimir, in his body as he lived, with an almost supernatural cleanliness” (40). The preceding passage reveals a couple of key points in relation to the arguments I propose regarding disability and degeneracy in this chapter: First, the term science functions as a true “fetish” object in Conrad’s London insofar as—in the absence of a populace that can assign concrete and practical meaning to “science”—it evokes an emotional response that assigns almost magical or spiritual powers to the term. Second, Vladimir’s identity is figured as “embodied” by Mr. Verloc, a rhetorical move that links Vladimir to Cesare Lombroso’s pseudo-scientific theories on innate criminality as well as modernity’s changing conceptions of identity and mental processes.

Accordingly, as Ulrika Maude effectively explains in her essay “Science, Technology and the Body,” the emerging scientific fields [Neurology, Psychology, and Natural Science] of “the late nineteenth century . . . “cast . . . doubt over traditional conceptions of agency as the basis of selfhood” (17). These emerging fields, which employed the theories of Darwinism, neurology and psychoanalysis respectively, had a complicated effect on society. In one regard, the fields of neuroscience and psychology, as an example, utilized different types of rhetoric or “professional idioms” that called into question the very definition of the term “science,” an issue *The Secret Agent* implicitly examines. While these dialogues functioned separately though—contributing to the ubiquitous feeling that civilization’s acquired knowledge has become

fractured or disconnected—they also informed one another in the sense that they collectively drew attention to the theory that mental processes, which include everything from emotional states to decision making to violent behavior—were the result of the body’s effect on the mind.

The idea that the various cognitive and emotional states of the mind--as well as the subsequent observable actions of the individual--are the result of biomechanical forces commanded significant attention in scientific, philosophical, and literary thought in the late nineteenth century. Henri Bergson’s work *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889), as just one example, avers that “the molecular state of the brain at any given moment will be modified by the shocks which the nervous system receives from the surrounding matter, so that the sensations, feelings and ideas which succeed one another in us can be defined as mechanical resultants” (143-44).¹¹¹ While Bergson’s work attributes the absence of “free will” to attempts to measure time as a scientific or mathematical entity, “divide[d] into equal portions” (107)--an epistemology that privileges patterns of behavior and routines—there remains an underlying uneasiness in the work’s rhetoric.¹¹² “Bergson in fact at times appears overly determined to defend the faculty of free will, to the point where his work frequently unveils a deep-rooted anxiety over its limitations” (Maude 16). This "anxiety" is not exclusive to Bergson, though. The formal techniques of the Modernist novel or "High Modernism" often attempt to evade any reference to human actions in time as a product of

¹¹¹ There have been several attempts to apply Bergson's theories to *The Secret Agent* even though the question of whether Bergson had a direct effect on Conrad's writing and novel remains unsolvable. Notably, M.A. Gillies argues that *The Secret Agent* emphasizes the "social function of comedy" as Bergson emphasized in his essay "Laughter." In short, laughter works as a "corrective" . . . "when man behaves in a mechanical or automatic fashion" (197).

¹¹² Bergson’s concept of *durée*, of course, very much influences Modernist prose. Stream of consciousness techniques essentially present an idea of time that rejects “mathematical measurements” in exchange for the proposition that time may move more slowly or quickly for the individual. Gertude Stein explained the aim of this technique was to avoid "the inevitable narrative of anything, of everything succeeding something . . . in anything having a beginning and middle and ending" (25).

"objective" or deterministic notions of cause and effect. Stephen Kern makes this very point in his analysis of Gertrude Stein's fiction. "She avoided narrative succession because she saw individuals locked in repetitive patterns that went nowhere and were distorted by narrative patterns of cause and effect, beginning and ending, even temporal succession" (102). "Narrative succession," then, places characters in a material universe where "free will" dissolves in the face of the scientific and temporal laws of cause and effect.

Certainly, there is a great deal of ambient noise in *The Secret Agent*--a novel that does follow a linear plot or obeys the rules of "narrative succession-- that impels the reader to consider a biomechanical concept of identity and action. Characters in the novel do not so much "act" but instead "react" to the events in the story. Most prominently, Stevie "blindly"¹¹³ follows Verloc's instructions and attempts to plant an explosive device at the Royal Observatory, inadvertently blowing himself up in the process when he "stumble[s] against the root of a tree." As we learn in the novel, Stevie is a pawn of both Verloc and Vladamir's larger scheme; more than simply lacking awareness of what Verloc is asking him to do--the narrative is unclear about the extent of Stevie's recognition of the device's potential to maim and kill--the novel implies that Stevie is incapable of exercising free will in the face of the influence (s) of Verloc and degenerate London, in total.¹¹⁴

The biomechanical concept of action in Conrad's novel does not simply destabilize the concept of free will--through Stevie's bombing of the Royal Observatory--but also impels the reader to consider Stevie in ways that transcend the category of idiocy. While Stevie is called a

¹¹³ Verloc considers Stevie as a "favourable" choice to bomb the Royal Observatory based "not on Stevie's intelligence, which sometimes played queer tricks with a man, but on the blind docility and blind devotion of the boy" (190).

¹¹⁴ When the reader is first introduced to Stevie in the novel, Conrad's narrator informs us that "[h]e helped his sister with blind love and docility" (9).

“weak minded creature” (181) by Inspector Heat, and more objectively labeled as an “idiot,” in its legal or medical sense,¹¹⁵ Stevie transcends this diagnosis by virtue of the novel’s focus on Stevie’s idiosyncratic physical behaviors—“capering all over the place downstairs” (47)—and repetitive movements, outward behaviors which suggest that Stevie suffers from sensory processing issues, not strict idiocy, per se. When Verloc “announce[s] his [intention] to take Stevie into the country [. . .] and leave him with [. . .] Michaelis,” for example, Stevie responds not with intellectual vacancy, but with bewilderment. “He carried out this scheme on the very next day. Stevie offered no objection. He seemed eager, in a bewildered sort of way” (157). The passage suggests that Stevie’s problems are ones of neuroprocessing, not strictly faulty cognition.¹¹⁶ This point is further supported through Mr. Verloc’s earlier statement that “perhaps his brother-in-law was not such an idiot as he looked” (154). Taken together, these passages from Conrad’s text allow the reader to interpret Conrad’s character as being autistic since his cognitive disability, like that of Benjy Compson, is embodied or sensory based.

While Stevie’s cognitive difference is embodied, Conrad’s novel resists the concept of innate difference as to accept the latter would simply trade one form of diagnostic certainty for another.¹¹⁷ In short, you cannot separate the individual body—for all its innate distinctiveness—from the effects of the physical or outside world. After Stevie unintentionally kills himself in the

¹¹⁵ According to the 1845 Lunatics Act, an “idiot” was defined as “every person, whose mind from his birth by a perpetual infirmity is so deficient as to be incapable of directing him in any matter which requires thought or judgment, is, in legal phraseology, an idiot” (Newman 19).

¹¹⁶ Joseph Valente has previously argued that “Conrad [. . .] needed to disassociate Stevie from the sort of primitive, appetitive, unreflective depravity imputed to so-called ‘mental defectives.’” Therefore, Stevie’s “consist[s] not in an intellectual apparatus diminished to the point of chronic incomprehension—the traditional fate of the simpleton—but in a phenomenological circuitry (sensory, perceptual, affective, cognitive) overloaded to the point of derangement, a state of hyperesthesia, or systematic overstimulation that spasmodically distorts the information to be processed by intensifying it” (Valente 25).

¹¹⁷ Rebecca Walkowitz contends that “Conrad suggests in his novel that interpretation is limited by meanings that characters and readers are able to recognize.” In other words, “the way people look—and in what manner and with what preconceptions looking takes place—tells us most about them” (49).

bombing of the Royal Observatory, for instance, Inspector Heat's description of Stevie's remains is telling: "Blown to small bits: limbs, gavel, clothing, bones, splinters—all mixed up together" (174). Just as Stevie's body is broken apart into a series of particles and dispersed in the physical environment, nineteenth century society increasingly saw the body and mind as inseparable from the physical world. The image of Stevie's undefinable body and "personhood" scattered amongst bomb residue and street rubble then reflects the age's deep rooted anxieties over the concept that ideas such as agency and "free will" are simply illusions that mask a larger, more menacing truth. Namely, human consciousness is no more than a temporary state, destined to expire with the destruction of the body. Or, as Inspector Heat muses as he looks at "the heap of nameless fragments" that was Stevie. "The man [. . .] had died instantaneously; yet [. . .] the inexplicable mysteries of conscious existence beset Inspector Heat till he evolved a horrible notion that ages of atrocious pain and mental torture could be contained between two successive winks of an eye" (74).¹¹⁸ Ironically, although Inspector Heat ponders the possibility that time is not a strict constant in this passage, imaging time slowing down for Stevie at the precise moment of his agonizing death, the novel still figures Stevie's final act as devoid of agency.

Though Stevie's lack of agency is explicitly connected to his "imperfect" or "damaged" body and mind, the novel's questions regarding the limits of "free will" are not limited to this character. Like Benjy Compson, Stevie—through his disability--functions as a representative figure who allows the author to examine more collective concerns of society. Correspondingly, Stuart Murray argues that "disability disturbs" insofar as it "offers [a . . .] characteristically

¹¹⁸ Jill Clark does a more thorough and extended analysis of the images associated with Stevie's death. Of particular note, she argues that Conrad employs the "tropes of fire and explosion quite often" in *The Secret Agent*, and Stevie's death—in particular—"intuits [. . .] a thermodynamic meltdown in the cosmos that is somehow 'tripwired' mechanistically through the fire and explosion. While the senselessness of Stevie's death echoes back to Shakespeare's "'a tale/ told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/signifying nothing,'" it also "satirize[s]" the concept of "Victorian progress at the century's end" (2).

double movement: a seemingly anomalous and deviant version of humanity that nevertheless focuses all too uncomfortably for many on the central issues of the human condition”

(“Bartleby, Preference, Pleasure and Autistic Preference”). It is vital to stress that while Stevie is a character who fails to meet society's definition (s) of a bodily "norm"--as his "vacant mouth and distressed eyes" (131) reveal his cognitive impairment to the reader--his lack of agency or free will, when compared to the behavior and actions of the other characters in the novel, often appears to be nothing more than a difference of degree, not kind.

This idea finds support most explicitly in Inspector Heat's conversation with Verloc after Stevie's death. Impelled to explain why he arranged to have Stevie deliver the bomb at the Royal Observatory, Verloc explains: "The lad was half-witted, irresponsible. Any court would have seen that at once. Only fit for an asylum." In this scene, Stevie's acquiescent personality and actions are figured as a byproduct of his cognitive disability. Not only is Stevie deemed by Verloc to be a convenient instrument for Vladimir's terrorist plan--as Stevie could not legally be held accountable for the consequences of his actions--Verloc essentially figures him as a behavioral "tabula rasa," a featureless mind which responds mechanistically to the instructions or environmental stimulus he gives it. Verloc's description of Stevie could just as well refer to himself, however, an irony not lost on Professor Heat. "He may've been half-witted, but you must have been crazy. What drove you off your head like this?" (175). Indeed, just as Verloc perceives Stevie as an individual defined by "blind docility" (190)--neither good nor bad--Inspector Heat sees the great majority of "criminals" and anarchists—of which Verloc belongs--as "fellow citizens gone wrong because of an imperfect education" (78), not immoral or evil men. Despite Verloc's boasting that "all the world shall know what I've done for them" (202-03), there is very little evidence in Conrad's narrative that the secret agent has performed any actions

of great consequence or initiative prior to the bombing of the Royal Observatory. Instead, like many characters in the novel, Verloc appears to be at the mercy of his bodily impulses or instincts as they are triggered by environmental stimulus. Furthermore, Conrad often describes Verloc's body as "degenerate" in its "lowered physiognomy" (24).

An Unstable Set of Meanings: Disability, Foreignness and Vice

Cesare Lombroso's concepts of an innate, embodied criminality deeply influence *The Secret Agent* and its exploration of the limits of free will. Particularly, as a Darwinist, Lombroso saw the biological and social explanations for the violent actions of "lower organisms" as directly applicable to the behaviors of the criminal mind. As a case in point, Lombroso compares the behavior of "insectivorous plants with that of humans to draw the following parallel. "They [insectivorous plants] establish that premeditation, ambush, killing for greed, and, to a certain extent, decision making (refusal to kill insects that are too small) are derived completely from histology or the microstructure of organic tissue—and not from alleged will" (Lombroso 168). Rather than strictly equating human violence and criminality with violence found in "lower organisms," Lombroso—perhaps unsurprisingly for his time—sees much of innate criminality as falling under the umbrella of a "degenerate" physiognomy.

While *The Secret Agent* spends a great deal of time noting the "degenerate" physiognomy of London's inhabitants, the novel suggests both scientific and pseudo-scientific theories of cause and effect—as it relates to definitions of disability, foreignness and criminality—are more hoped for than certain. In the third paragraph of the novel, for example, Conrad takes great care to present the reader with outwardly definitive images of vice and criminality in his description of the Verloc's store window. "The window contained photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls [and] nondescript packages in wrappers like patent medicines" (3). It is in this

context that the reader is first introduced to Mr. Verloc and his “naturally heavy” eyes and his overall physical appearance which “had an air of having wallowed, fully dressed, all day on an unmade bed” (4).

While Conrad outwardly links Verloc’s degenerate appearance to the images of pornography in the store, he hints that all is not as it initially appears. To be precise, while Verloc’s store might occasionally sell “one of the faded, yellow dancing girls to an amateur” (4), “the pornography shop provides camouflage for Verloc’s anarchist activities by making the appearance of strange, disheveled men seem normal” (Walkowitz 46). In terms of Conrad’s aesthetic approach, these first few pages of *The Secret Agent* alert the reader to the degree of attention to detail required to properly interpret the novel. *The Secret Agent* demands that its readers question the assumptions and definitions imposed upon the characters in the novel, especially as these definitions align with “cultural types they [readers] have observed or imagined in the past” (Walkowitz 50). In so many words, Conrad seeks to make the “normal” appear “abnormal” and the “abnormal” appear “normal” in the novel.¹¹⁹

In terms of disability, then, *The Secret Agent* subverts epistemological paradigms that equated physical and cognitive disability with innate criminality. In addition to transcending the legal definition of “idiocy” Stevie concurrently touches and subverts Cesare Lombroso’s theory of the born criminal. Particularly, Lombroso views the physically disabled as exceptionally prone to violent behavior. “Epileptics” Lombroso avers . . . “resemble born criminals and the morally insane in physiognomy” (248). Noting such various physical markers as “Tactile

¹¹⁹ “Conrad’s novel includes a range of experiences that one expects to find familiar: marriage, habits of perception, government institutions, and landmarks of local color, such as restaurants, shops, and city streets. Yet Conrad suggests that domestic culture is full of foreign activities, such as colonialism and European politics” (Walkowitz 42-43)

sensitivity," "left handedness," and "agility" (248), ¹²⁰ Lombroso defines epilepsy as an atavistic identity insofar as its characteristics resemble a prior stage in human evolution for the Italian physician and criminologist. Although there are a plethora of examples of disability and degeneracy in Lombroso's work to choose from, epilepsy—like autism—is a neurological condition. Autists, like epileptics, suffer from momentary attacks of motor, sensory, and/or cognitive dysfunction.

While Conrad's novel does not explicitly aver that Stevie—as a neurologically “othered” and “disabled” character—is innately predisposed towards violence, the fear of violence nonetheless accompanies the character. When he was “fourteen [years old],” Conrad tells us, he is reprimanded for “letting off fireworks on the staircase [. . .] a matter [which] might have turned out very serious.” “His motive for this stroke of originality,” the narrator cryptically tells us, was “difficult to discover” (8). It is Stevie's lack of affect that concerns the narrator, and—by implied association—the reader. Furthermore, Stevie's outward emotional vacancy is thoroughly embodied when we compare the above scene with Lombroso's description of the sensory states of epileptics: “Like born criminals, epileptics display tactile insensitivity.” This “insensitivity” Lombroso avers, may take the form of “extreme insensitivity to touch” or “extraordinary dullness of touch” (250). More concerning than Stevie's childhood act of mischief is that he does not reveal the appropriate “biomechanical” responses of laughter or painful sorrow. His demeanor remains a blank slate which defies the narrator's attempts to assign meaning to Stevie's actions.

¹²⁰ While Lombroso's list of physical markers of criminality is far too random and imprecise to be taken seriously at this date, his discussion of “tactile sensitivity” is nevertheless interesting as it might refer to a host of contemporary neurological and cognitive conditions, not the least of which is autism. While I will discuss this in relation to Stevie more completely later, there is certainly evidence in the novel that Stevie's disability is defined—at least partly—but some type of sensory processing disorder as Conrad describes him as having “a faithful memory of sensations” if not “mere facts, such as his name and address” (140).

While acknowledging Stevie's disquieting lack of outward affect, though, it is important to note that Conrad simultaneously associates Stevie with a profound form of cognitive "otherness" as well as more representative or universal mental processes. To explain, Conrad's narrator continuously describes Stevie's behaviors as more closely resembling those of an animal than a human being. "Stevie mope[s]" around the Verloc house, the narrator tells us, "in the striking fashion of an unhappy domesticated animal" (154). Mr. Verloc "extend[s] as much recognition to Stevie as a man not particularly fond of animals may give to his wife's beloved cat" (33). Additionally, Stevie's intellect appears inherently sensory based as he makes judgment about his environment based on potent and vivid memory of physical pleasure or pain. "He knew the hot iron applied to one's skin hurt very much. His scared eyes blazed with indignation: it would hurt terribly" (41). When we compare these scenes with Comrade Ossipon's statement that Stevie's actions are "'typical of this form of degeneracy,'" we may be tempted to confuse Ossipon's views with Conrad's or the novel's wider view of Stevie's difference.¹²¹

Although Stevie's behaviors are animalized, the character is far from a one-dimensional portrait of Lombrosian criminality as Conrad alternately depicts Stevie as "savage" and empathetic. In an early section of the novel, Stevie "prowl[s] round the table like an excited animal in a cage" (46)--an action which disconcerts Mr. Verloc. Here, Conrad's narrator appears to note the presence of an irrational volatility in Stevie, a product of an "embodied mind" influenced by an imperfect or "broken" body. In a later section of the text, however, Stevie's animalized behaviors taken on more positive tones. Travelling with his sister, Winnie

¹²¹ Conrad's text certainly expresses ambivalent attitudes about Lombroso's theories, despite their ubiquity in the text. While characters such as Comrade Ossipon engage in Lombrosian rhetoric and diagnosis, the veracity of Lombroso's theories appear dubious in the text, a point most readily supported by Karl Yundt who articulates the novel's often unspoken assertion that "Lombroso is an ass" (40).

and his mother in a London cab, Stevie takes note of the “the transactions [. . .] taking place” (131) between the driver of the cab and his horse. Emotionally intuitive and empathetic, Stevie whispers “[d]on’t whip” when the carriage driver brings “the reins [high] over his head” (131), presumably intending to prod the horse to more forcefully pull his human cargo. ““You mustn’t,” stammered out Stevie, violently, ‘it hurts’” (131). Without question, Stevie demonstrates the capacity to hold almost antithetical emotional and intellectual states for the reader.

The novel’s depiction of the human body intelligence as animalized or primitive extends well beyond Stevie, though. As a point of fact, most of the novel’s denizens of London are associated with animalistic characteristics at one point or another. Chief Inspector Heat, for instance, cryptically describes the “perfect anarchist [. . . as] not to be recognized as a fellow creature [. . . but] a mad dog to be left alone.” Concurrently, the narrator tells us that Inspector Heat “though what is called a man, was not a smiling animal” (102). Even though animalistic characteristics are imposed on a great many characters, these characteristics are not necessarily affiliated with violent or criminal behavior. The Chief Inspector, after all, dismisses the potential of Mr. Verloc to cause much trouble for his department, noting that “he’s [Mr. Verloc] a lazy dog, like the rest of them” (108). At points like this in the novel, the described primitivism of Verloc and the anarchists appears to be one defined more by indolence and passivity than violent passion and action.

Acknowledging that Stevie is cognitively “othered,” then, we must also correctly place Stevie within the nineteenth century’s larger milieu regarding the nature of human intelligence and free will. More to the point, while Behaviorism comes to be widely codified as a separate branch of psychology with the publications of John F. Watson’s 1913 essay “Psychology as the

Behaviorist Views It”¹²² and B.F. Skinner’s 1931 invention of the operant condition, better known as “Skinner’s Box,”¹²³ the theory that the rules governing animal intelligence and actions could be directly applied to humanity was certainly “in the air” in *fin de siècle* London.

If we briefly examine Edward Lee Thorndike’s 1906 work *Education*, a work which partially laid the groundwork for Behaviorism and was published just one year before Conrad’s novel, we can make direct connections to *The Secret Agent*. Particularly, Thorndike interprets human action or behavior as being the result of “the situation of being in such and such a place, so light, so warm, with such and such walls and furniture around him, such and such clothes upon him, and these words before his eyes” (54). While we cannot definitely state that Conrad read Thorndike, we can see the influence of these emerging scientific theories on his text. In fact, Inspector Heat’s observation that “citizens . . . [break] bad because of an imperfect education” takes on deeper meaning when considering Thorndike’s influence in establishing our modern education system. As John Mills explains: “American psychologists [including Thorndike] treated all forms of learning as skills. Maze running in rats, the learning of arithmetic by schoolchildren, and the growth of personality pattern could be treated as the incremental growth of some sort of underlying habit structure” (Mills 84). The influence of these emerging theories was not limited to America, though. On the contrary, *The Secret Agent* establishes the existence of an emerging British system of education that views learning as a series of passively acquired and objectively measurable skills. Despite Stevie’s cognitive difference and intellectual primitivism, therefore, the novel informs us that “under our [British] excellent system of compulsory education he had learned to read and write” (7). The “compulsory education” of

¹²² Watson’s work eruditely described Behaviorism as a purely objective branch of natural science which held its theoretical goal as the predication and control of behavior.

¹²³ Skinner believed that human free will was an illusion and any human actions were the result of the same action.

which narrator speaks refers to the establishment of a special education system in Great Britain. This system, as a 1901 report in *The British Medical Journal* laid out, provided for the training or “treatment” of a wide variety of “defective classes of the community” including “idiots, imbeciles, the feeble-minded, the epileptic, and juvenile delinquents.” More than learning content or pedagogy, these kinds of reports stressed the importance of environmental factors in training the “feeble-minded.” Classrooms, as one example, needed to be “brightly decorated” and “rooms and halls” had to be “exceptionally well lighted.” All in all, these kinds of classrooms were perceived as serving a vital social service in Conrad’s time because—by focusing on “training” or teaching “skills”—they sought to prevent the “feeble-minded” from being left out or abandoned in the urban economy’s rush towards modernity. “That in everyday life the weakest go to the wall is an obvious fact, but if some of the feeble-minded members of the race can be trained so that they no longer gravitate to the wall, they are no longer of the same degree weak” (“The Training of Mentally Defective Children”). Certainly, there are Darwinian undertones in the preceding passage, but these ideas are mollified by the theory that through focused and systematic training the weakest members of society could survive. Quite clearly, then, Conrad’s omniscient narrator in *The Secret Agent* implies that Stevie’s education is an accomplishment of modernity and its scientific or systematized methods of instruction since Stevie’s intellect is so visibly primitive.¹²⁴

Yet, Conrad seems to revel in depicting unexpected and abrupt changes in the mental and physical states of his characters. Most prominently, Stevie’s sister Winnie functions as a selfless and defenseless feminine Victorian archetype for much of the novel. While Stevie’s biological mother shows a great deal more outward concern and caring for her son than Faulkner’s

¹²⁴ While the novel’s narrator indeed appears to be boasting, there are ironic undertones to this passage. We may infer that Conrad’s opinions are not the same as narrator’s in this regard.

hypochondriac mother in *The Sound and the Fury*,¹²⁵ it is clear that Winnie is the primary caretaker and protector of Stevie. Shortly after Stevie's death in the Royal Observatory bombing, for example, Winnie recalls "putting the boy to bed by the light of a single candle on a deserted top floor of a 'business house'" and remembers "the blows intercepted [intended for Stevie] (often with her own head), of a door desperately shut against a man's rage (not for very long); of a poker flung once (not very far), which stilled that particular storm into the dumb and awful silence which follows a thunderclap" (200-01). Winnie's selflessness extends far beyond this memory, though. Specifically, the novel implies on multiple occasions that the marriage between Winnie and Mr. Verloc is one of convenience with Winnie and her mother's ultimate goal being to ensure the care and protection of Stevie. "But by making him [Stevie] over to his sister, by thus going away, she gave him the advantage of a directly dependent position" (136). Indeed, when we compare the mother's words with Winnie's later proclamation (after her brother's death) that "she [now] had her freedom" (208), the reader can discern that the Verloc marriage was not a relationship founded on romantic love or attachment.

Intriguingly, Conrad's narrative keeps this information at a distance from the reader and Winnie herself, an impression supported by the novel's description of the relationship as one founded on routine or habit. Winnie's statement that "she had grown accustomed to [Mr. Verloc] in body and mind" (206) suggests another form of social conditioning in the novel as Winnie sees herself passively adapting to the intertwined physical and cognitive states of marriage. Like so many other events and actions in the novel, there appears to be almost a biomechanical aspect

¹²⁵ Bernard Meyer notes that Conrad was writing *The Secret Agent* during Jesse's second pregnancy and suggests that Conrad's jealousy of the baby is felt in the novel's dramatic structure, particularly Verloc's murder of Stevie—the surrogate child. "In spite of the thin disguises employed, the family group concerns a father, a mother, and a child. Moreover in being responsible for killing the boy, Verloc becomes an appropriate substitute for the child's murderous real father" (188).

to the Verloc marriage that makes the reader question the presence of free will in the characters, and their past choice to wed.

Most shocking to the reader, however, is Winnie's violent murder of her husband and simultaneous physical and mental degeneration after Stevie's death. Moving towards Verloc with "the carving knife" in her hand, the narrator tells us, "the resemblance of her [Winnie's] face to that of her brother grew at every step, even to the droop of his lower lip, even to the slight divergence of his eyes" (216). Acting almost as if in a trance, the scene implies that Winnie is more similar to her brother—and thereby associated with her brother's potential for animalistic acts of violence—than Conrad's narrator had initially revealed. Furthermore, Comrade Ossipon notes that Winnie's "cheeks," "nose," "eyes" and "ears" all denote the presence of filial forms of physical and cognitive degeneracy. While it is tempting to align our interpretation of *The Secret Agent* with Comrade Ossipon's "scientific" explanation for Winnie's actions, the veracity of Ossipon's theory is not so clear cut in the novel. On the contrary, it appears more likely that Conrad wishes the reader to entertain the existence of these animalistic traits in all his characters, and the absence of free will in any of the people of fin de siècle London. Hence, Winnie's murder of her husband should be interpreted as more an action of mechanistic cause and effect upon Winnie than individual or family pathology. More materially, as I will discuss in the proceeding section, Winnie's degenerative and violent behavior--and subsequent suicide at the conclusion of the novel--say more about modernity's anxieties about cosmopolitan urban environments and the manner in which these environments obscure society's paradigms of racial, gender and cognitive difference than it does about any kind of homogenous theory of violence, criminality and cognitive disability.

Disability, Gender, and Race in Conrad's "Cosmopolitan" London

Although Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau have the most explicit influence on Conrad's novel, *The Secret Agent* is truly part of a much larger cultural and scientific zeitgeist, one that increasingly views the violent individual or criminal as marked by a "conscience" that "is almost deficient, [. . .] instincts [which] are vicious," and self control [which] is very weak." The lack of apparent self-control, furthermore, could be "due to ungovernable temper, to passion, or to mere imbecility" (Galton 42). Galton's use of the terms "instinct" along with "imbecility" is crucial here as it provides context for this essay's discussion of the relationship between conceptions of cognitive disability and an animalized, embodied form of intelligence. Though Conrad describes characters such as Stevie as being "animalistic," the "source" of these instincts seems to be continually in doubt in *The Secret Agent*, as the characters operate and live in environments which seem to be removed from their "natural" roles. More precisely, the cosmopolitan environment of Conrad's London unsettled what had been concrete—albeit artificial—paradigms of racial and gender differences; consequently, the characters in Conrad's novel rarely, if ever, adhere to fixed definitions of disability and degeneracy and thus remain fundamentally unpredictable in their behavior.

On this last point, *The Secret Agent* is clear. While Conrad's London is a city segregated along geographic, racial and cultural lines, characters freely move through these spaces. On the very first page of the novel, the narrator tells us that the Verloc "shop" was located in "one of those grimy brick houses which existed in large quantities before the era of reconstruction dawned upon London" (3). The shop sells--as a matter of fact--"shady wares" (5) which "the evening visitors [. . .] men with collars turned up and soft hats rammed down" purchase surreptitiously from Mr. Verloc. The novel generally implies that Mr. Verloc's shop sells some

kind of pornography or other vice—although the sharp eyed reader recognizes it as a convenient front for Verloc’s anarchist activities—but the geographic and cultural space of his business symbolizes a much wider concern for British society. The Verloc homestead is a metaphorical heart of darkness within London. In this "primitive" space, individuals from all over the British Empire converge, but they gather while providing no means for society to definitely categorize where they come from.¹²⁶ The narrator pointedly tells the reader, for example, that Winnie's mother "considered herself to be of French descent, which might have been true" (5). All told, the cosmopolitan nature of the Verlocs’ section of the city threatens to contaminate the more affluent and culturally homogenous sections of London. As the novel describes: "He [Verloc] generally arrived in London (like the influenza) from the Continent, only he arrived unheralded by the press" (6). Much like Conrad's other famous novel, darkness stands a series of metaphors in the novel: a symbol for the "primitive" within the individual, within British society, and—in *The Secret Agent*--the unseen contagion in the heart of the city overlooking the Thames.

All told, one of the most arresting components of the early pages of *The Secret Agent* is the ubiquitous failure of language. Conrad’s narrator cannot, or chooses not, to explicitly name a variety of things from Winnie’s mother’s heritage to the precise nature of the Verloc business. Concurrently, Conrad’s narrator demonstrates a much more confident tone when “pathologizing” Mr. Verloc as a literal and figurative disease arriving on the shores of London.

Put within its proper context, the “pathologizing” of Mr. Verloc highlights important distinctions between the turn of the century’s emerging concepts of an “embodied” mind and the

¹²⁶ On this point, Conrad’s novel is influenced by the author’s own cosmopolitan biography. As Geoffrey Harpham notes: “Like others, Conrad left Poland in large part because it did not exist except as a kind of phantom, a notion, a historical memory. Since the last of its three partitions at the end of the eighteenth century, Poland had been controlled by Prussia, Austria-Hungary, and, most oppressively, by Russia.” Hence, “to be Polish was, for Conrad, also to be Russian” (23).

scientific community's changing conceptions of disease. As David Youssef points out: "The innovations in bacteriology in the latter half of the nineteenth century put an end to a widespread belief in classical approaches to the origins and treatments of disease." These "classical approaches" comprehended disease as resulting from "an imbalance in the constitutional make-up of the human body." By the turn of the century, however, science held that "disease" could best be understood as a "discreet, external entity" which—when unmanaged—held the potential to attack the human body (2). Consequently, much like the principals of Darwinism were applied to human social systems, the changing conceptions of disease influenced urban planning and management.

Indeed, if we look at *The Secret Agent*, we begin to understand how important the ability to objectively and definitively identify markers of disability and degeneracy are in the novel as diagnosis essentially designates who—and who does not—have a right to the city. The novel's clinical approach to individuals and actions in the novel is centered most concretely in the voice of Comrade Alexander Ossipon—"nicknamed the Doctor," an "ex-medical student without a degree" (39) who tells us that "in two hundred years doctors will rule the world" (252). The character is part of a much larger milieu—one that connects the visibility of behavioral and cognitive difference in the text to British society's anxieties regarding disease, contagion, and urban degeneration. As I mentioned briefly earlier, although Stevie is the most explicitly "degenerate" and/or cognitively disabled character in the novel, labels of so-called degenerate behavior and appearance are imposed on multiple characters in the novel. Furthermore, as Patrick McDonagh correctly avers: "The power to ascribe these traits is never granted to any one group: police, anarchists, and government bureaucrats all struggle to rest authoritative control of the concept to pathologize their opponents, but the struggle is never resolved" (311).

Interestingly, while McDonagh's argument points to an almost "democratic" attitude towards clinical or methodological diagnosis in Conrad's novel as characters, like Comrade Ossipon, need not be an official part of British medical or scientific hierarchy to participate in its rhetoric, the unresolved nature of this linguistic and ideological struggle hint at Conrad's distrust of Ossipon's pathology-based ideology regarding physical and behavioral difference.¹²⁷ While it may be tempting to conflate the narrator's or Comrade Ossipon's clinical and rhetorical certainty with that of Conrad's, there always remains a hint of irony in these "objective" diagnoses of degeneracy that impel the reader to (re)evaluate its ultimate validity. On the contrary, *The Secret Agent* and Conrad appear to more pointedly criticize "Ossipon" and his "lost the ability to view his fellow human beings as individuals" rather than "Lombrosian typologies" (Schaunauder 2) than to profess any unified theory of urban pathology and degeneracy.

The inability of scientific rhetoric to neatly and concretely encapsulate theories of disability and degeneracy has as much to do with the cosmopolitan nature of urban environments as it does with the irrational anxieties these environments produce. Cosmopolitanism, after all, was defined for most of the nineteenth century as "nowhere a stranger" (Bryant 116) and this definition most explicitly identifies the kinds of fears urban environments generated in Conrad's lifetime. While science increasingly viewed the mind as "embodied," mechanistic conceptions of behavior were still founded on gendered and racialized theories of environment. In other words, women's mental processes and actions were most properly understood or evaluated within the realm of the home, or domestic sphere. Similarly, the actions of the racialized "other" only made sense within the context of a primitive society, or environment.

¹²⁷ While McDonagh focuses his argument strictly on the concept of "idiocy," I would argue that the "struggle for authoritative control" in *The Secret Agent* applies to issues of national and racial identity as well as idiocy. In other words, just as society struggles to categorize Conrad as an authentically British or Polish writer, the London of *The Secret Agent* is a world devoid of definitive meaning in regards to a host of epistemological concepts.

If “one of the salient features that marks the beginning of the twentieth century is the unprecedented clustering of populations into urban areas never seen before in human history” (Youssef 1), then these mass relocations also upend many of the traditional theoretical paradigms outlined above. As an example, Winnie lives in the West End of London with her husband. The area—as it existed around the time of Conrad’s novel—was a place for new immigrants, filled with sex shops, brothels, music halls and theaters.¹²⁸ Within this urban space, Winnie is separated from traditional conceptions of domesticity and gender. When we look back at Winnie's murder of her husband in the novel from this theoretical lens, as a matter of fact, Winnie's violent act appears less the result of the character's inherent or biological degeneracy than a consequence of modernity's urban spaces.

My preceding point finds support in the novel's depiction and development of the Verloc marriage. Through the first section of *The Secret Agent*, Conrad alerts the reader to the presence of a "linguistic schism" between Winnie and Mr. Verloc. This schism--defined through Mr. Vladimir's oration that "anarchists don't marry [. . .] It [marriage] would be an apostasy" (30)—is maintained by Mr. Verloc who refuses to divulge his identity or actions as a secret agent to his wife. More implicitly, conversations between Mr. Verloc and Winnie lack even the "ceremonious amenity of address and courtliness of manner" (158) that characterize marriage or spousal rapport in the Victorian Age.

Certainly, the narrator makes the reader aware that Mr. Verloc's silence is grounded in the belief that Winnie needs to be "protected" from the more unsavory and (a)immoral elements of his profession. More tellingly, Conrad’s narrator implies that a traditional notion of marriage is a

¹²⁸ In her essay “A City that “disliked to be disturbed”: London’s Soundscape in *The Secret Agent*,” Patricia Pye places Conrad’s depiction of London in *The Secret Agent* alongside a range of travel narratives that note the “strong contrast between its [London’s] quarters” (22).

"vain and antiquated"(158) as—in the Darwinian landscape of London—a marriage based purely on Victorian notions of courtship, romantic love and religious fidelity no longer has relevance. Rather, in a world that entertains Lombroso's theory that "rising population density is correlated with increasing theft and decreasing homicide, except where temperature provides a countervailing influence (favoring theft in the North and homicide in the south)" (Lombroso 316), Winnie requires the protection of her husband--described as a "big" and dark featured individual (75)--to secure the economic and physical survival of her mother and disabled brother.

Keeping these issues in mind, therefore, the reader would be remiss not to observe that Winnie only becomes violent when the linguistic schism of the ideology of separate spheres collapses towards the end of the novel. Here, Mr. Verloc confesses to his wife that he unwittingly played a direct role in Stevie's death. Yet, this scene contains its own double-movement as Winnie--by entrusting her husband with Stevie's care and safety--is also directly responsible for her brother's death. Hence, Winnie's status as a paradigm of feminine morality and domestic authority collapses under the strain of her own newly acquired knowledge and corruption at the hands of her "racialized" and "degenerate" husband. More properly then, we might read Winnie's murder of her husband as an attempt to wipe out the "pathogen" which threatens to corrupt her.

Yet, the Verloc marriage has an important symbolic function in Conrad's novel. As Conrad's narrator informs the reader, "He [Mr. Verloc] was thoroughly domesticated. Neither his spiritual, nor his mental, nor his physical needs were of the kind to take him much abroad." Instead, "[h]e found at home the ease of his body and the peace of his conscience, together with Mrs. Verloc's attentions and Mrs. Verloc's mother's deferential regard" (5). The passage implies that "domesticat[ion]" is what Mr. Verloc should strive to attain. In the context of the

above passage, moreover, domestication is associated with cultural identity and conformity as Mr. Verloc's marriage confines him to the physical and cultural boundaries of Great Britain and not of foreign shores.

The difference between appearance and authenticity, then, characterizes the Verloc marriage and “spill out” to a host of other issues in the novel. In addition to initially being naively unaware of her husband's occupation as an anarchist, and his larger plan to use her brother in the bombing of the Royal Observatory, Winnie's superficial attempts to “domesticate” Stevie hint at questions regarding the difference between performance and authenticity in a cosmopolitan society. As the reader observes at one point in the novel, Stevie's identity is explicitly feminized as “Stevie [is] put into a green baize apron” by his sister and given a host of domestic chores—“sweeping and dusting”—to complete (31). While Winnie's feminization of Stevie creates—on one level—an image of docility, selflessness and domesticity in the mind of the reader, Conrad's narrator states that Stevie completes these domestic chores with such “intent and conscientious” action that it appeared “as though he were playing at it” (41). When considering this passage in relation to the epistemological paradigms of Cesare Lombroso and fin de siècle society that equated physical and cognitive disability with vice and criminality, I would argue that Stevie's feminized behavior is its own type of performance, one predicated on Winnie's knowledge of the limited set of meanings cognitive disability presents to society. If an individual is cognitively disabled, he or she is either a symbol of innocence—as Benjy is in *The Sound and the Fury*—or deviance. Since Winnie perceives the social and economic repercussions of a definition of deviance,¹²⁹ she takes great care to teach Stevie to “play” the

¹²⁹ Winnie and her mother both understand the importance of outward appearance in relation to Stevie. Winnie's mother, for example, wishes to leave her “furniture” to Stevie but realizes that to do so would “be like tampering with his position of complete dependence” (129).

role of docile innocence. Although this does not imply that Conrad wishes for the reader to interpret Stevie as “naturally” violent or criminal, the reader should consider the performative aspects of Stevie’s identity.

What makes Stevie a figure of cosmopolitanism is that his physical and cognitive disability concurrently make him a figure of suspicion—in regards to Lombrosian theories of innate criminality—and separate him from the concept of a bodily norm or ideal.¹³⁰ In regards to gender, Stevie’s feminization is not just performative—and therefore uniformly artificial or inauthentic—but is also physically embodied as the novel describes Stevie as “slender” with “rosy lips” and a “pale, clear complexion,” which “g[i]ve him the aspect of a delicate boy, notwithstanding the fluffy growth of golden hair on his cheeks” (139). The feminized or “non-normative” body of Stevie, therefore, is a narrative and theoretical conduit for Conrad since Stevie symbolizes the most extreme and ideologically disorienting aspects of cosmopolitanism.

Indeed, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues: “Western thought has long conflated femaleness and disability, understanding both as defective departures from a valued standard” (337). Society’s power to define cognitive degeneracy and disability, in fact, were based—in Conrad’s lifetime—on “teleological” notions of sexuality. As Sander Gillman explains it, “sexuality, and degeneracy are inexplicably linked [. . .] through Hegel’s model of history, in which each age succeeds and replaces, on a higher level, the one that preceded it.” According to this paradigm, the adult “male European” represents the pinnacle of the intellectual and cultural progress of Western Civilization while other types of “embodied” identity are necessarily primitive or degenerate. “If the most advanced stage of human sexuality following the

¹³⁰ As Ralph Saverese argues in relation to Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*, the intellectually disabled individual is a “neurocosmopolitan” figure since his or her “disabilities [. . .] alienate characters not only from a bodily norm but also from typical cognition and communication” (7).

redemption of Christ is that of the adult, male European, rather than the child or the Other (woman, black) as child, this is proof that the most primitive sexuality must correspond to the most primitive stage in history.” Nevertheless, definitions of primitive or degenerate sexuality in Conrad’s time were fairly dynamic as feminized, racialized or other aberrant sexual traits in white male bodies could symbolize “the potential for each adult of regression” (120).

In terms of *The Secret Agent*, Stevie’s concurrently child-like and feminized physiognomy produce a white male body that can no longer be defined according to the previous paradigms of physical and intellectual strength. Instead, "degeneration" or disability produce a category of "whiteness" and white male identity that is cosmopolitan since does not conform to any definitive or concrete paradigm of national and cultural identity, an interpretative problem implicitly attributed to the physical and cognitive effects of modernity and urban environments, specifically on the British population.

Going further, Conrad carefully figures Stevie as “slight and fair,” most noticeably in comparison to Mr. Verloc’s “sturdy, darkish” physiognomy” (170). Stevie's feminized, yet non-"racialized" form of disability allude to British society's fears regarding the effects of conditions of modernity--and the effects of city living in particular--on racial and gender hierarchy. In his 1883 work *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development*, for example, Sir Francis Galton expressed his concerns about defining the "normal characteristics of a healthy race" since he felt that modern living conditions at least had the potential change behaviors as particular "races" were adapted to live in particular environments. “But even this [the superiority of the instincts of "civilized society"] is saying too much, because when the conditions under which the race is living have recently been changed, some instincts which were adapted to the old state of things

are sure to be fallacious guides to conduct in the new one” (Galton 43).¹³¹ The idea that the cosmopolitan environment removed people and societies from their "natural" environments went beyond the fear that cities like London held a foreign contagion in their borders. While that issue was a distinct concern, social and Darwinian scientists were equally preoccupied with the prospect that the modern urban environment administered a "jolt" or shock to the evolutionary process as the pace and sensory landscape of the city seemed to be completely antithetical to that of the previous age. “Galton and others believed,” as William Greensdale correctly argues, "that the 'fittest,' in the sense of the healthiest stock—the countrymen—were less able to adapt, and were so ill equipped to survive the special exigencies of urban life” (42). From a Darwinian and Lombrosian perspective, then, Stevie represents the potential within each individual for physical and mental degeneration as his body portrays a feminized and deviant version of the “ideal” adult, “white, male European,” Gilman describes.

Cosmopolitan Art: Stevie’s “Circles” and a Modern Reading Public

While Galton and Lombroso frame much of their rhetoric of degeneracy around the notion of criminality and violence, Conrad's depiction of Stevie is not as clear cut as the character resists the age's more explicit connections between physical disability, degeneracy and "deviant" behavior. Looking at Stevie in the larger scope of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth thought, then, the reader may observe the existence of competing epistemologies of

¹³¹ Similarly, Cesare Lombroso averred that new urban environments had the potential to effect people as these environments pushed people out of their “natural” roles. Particularly, Lombroso sees the outward signs of the nineteenth century pathology of hysteria--a feminized disorder--as closely aligned with other kinds of “embodied” mental disorders. “The links between hysteria and epilepsy” Lombroso states, “are obvious. Hysterical convulsions are almost always indistinguishable from epileptic seizures . . . Characteristics that hysterics share with epileptics include lability of symptoms, restlessness, the desire to do harm for harm’s sake, gratuitous lying, and unprovoked irascibility” (Lombroso 283). Although women suffering from hysteria could exhibit a wide array of symptoms—not limited to those mentioned in Lombroso’s text—the common foundation between the symptoms witnessed in female hysteria and other types of mental disorders (which could be present in men or women) was that some individuals were more susceptible to being corrupted by the stresses associated with modern life.

modernity within Conrad's novel. The competing epistemologies of which I speak point us towards issues in *The Secret Agent* that figure cognitive disability as a result of the influences of primitive or "degenerative" physical states at the same time as they reveal a tentative reverence for these states and their ability to express a more authentic form of identity and personal subjectivity. Certainly, no scene in *The Secret Agent* expresses this paradox more than Stevie sitting at the "deal table" in "Mr. Verloc's shop." Here, "thus disclosed," the reader observes "Stevie, seated very good and quiet [. . .] drawing circles, circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism, of a mad art attempting the inconceivable" (39). On the surface, Stevie's drawings present another example of autistic "private meanings" as the artist [Stevie] never turn[s] his head" (39) to consider the judgments society places on his drawings. His "circles" defined by a "uniformity of form" and endless "intersecting lines" defy obvious meaning or explanation. Taken in the context of Comrade Ossipon's statement that "these drawings" are "typical of this form of degeneracy," the drawings represent an extreme form of artistic "otherness" in London. In not meeting the artificial or "scientific" standard of an artistic "norm," Ossipon dismisses Stevie's artwork as degenerate, primitive and meaningless. Furthermore, in naming Stevie's art as "mad" and "degenerate" Ossipon attempts to control and segregate it.

As an apostle of Lombroso, Comrade Ossipon looks for evidence of mental and physical pathology in art as well as body and behavior. Looking at Lombroso's 1889 work *The Man of Genius*, for example, the reader can draw parallels between Comrade Ossipon's judgment that Stevie's drawings are "perfectly typical" of his "form of degeneracy" (39) and the wider

intellectual trajectory of the late nineteenth century that conflated cognitive and physical differences with “degenerate” forms of art. Arguing that “the creative power of genius may be a form of degenerative psychosis belonging to the family of epileptic afflictions” (336), for example, Lombroso avers that art—like many of the mental processes discussed in this essay—is fundamentally “embodied.”¹³² As such, Lombroso spent a great portion of his professional life in the pursuit of developing an objective criteria for identifying “degenerate” or atavistic forms of art. For Lombroso, the fundamental danger of these forms of art was that they held the promise or allure of lifting the individual to a higher plane of understanding or consciousness. Stopping for a moment to ponder the appeal of these forms of art, Lombroso seemingly finds an ally for his position in the prose of Dostoyevsky. “Those fleeting moments, in which our highest consciousness of ourselves--and therefore our highest life--is manifested, are due only to disease, to the suspension of the normal condition; and, if so, it is not a higher life, but, on the contrary, one of a lower order” (Qtd in. Lombroso 340). In short, “degenerate” art—like Stevie’s circles—paradoxically represents “higher” and “primitive” forms of “consciousness.”

How then does this connect to cosmopolitanism? It is vital to observe that Lombroso prefaces his discussion of “degenerate” art by noting that the epileptic or disabled individual possesses a “strange passion for wandering, and for animals” (337). So, the “degenerate” and disabled individual represents an intellectual primitivism that is understood through the individual’s animalized wayfaring. At home everywhere and nowhere, the physically and intellectually disabled individual is the epitome of the cosmopolitan individual. More so, his or

¹³² As Rebecca Walkowitz argues, “early twentieth century reviewers emphasized Conrad’s foreign origins while they praised his fluent use of the English language” (38). Hence, Conrad’s genius was figured as both “embodied” (natural) and foreign since it appeared to exist outside the “normal” or typical framework of artistic ability.

her art reflects this cosmopolitanism in that it represents simultaneously modern and atavistic states of being.

As I have endeavored to make clear, concepts of disability and degeneracy are concurrently "primitivized" and feminized in *The Secret Agent*. While Conrad's novel confers these traits onto Stevie, however, *The Secret Agent* does not endorse Comrade Ossipon's Lombrosian assessment of Stevie's drawings. In the above mentioned passage, Conrad is careful to give Karl Yundt ample narrative space to refute Comrade Ossipon's theories.

Does he know that, this imbecile who has made his way into the world of gorged fools looking at the ears and teeth of a lot of poor, luckless devils? Teeth and ears mark the criminal? Do they? And what about the law that marks him better still—the pretty branding instrument invented by the over fed to protect themselves against the hungry. Red-hot applications on their vile skins—hey? Can't you smell and hear from here the thick hide of the people burn and sizzle? That's how criminals are made for your Lombrosos to write their silly stuffy about" (40).

Yundt's harangue of Ossipon and Lombrosian theory reject innate conceptions of degeneracy and criminality. Instead, Conrad conflates notions of degeneracy and criminality with a type of verbal propaganda as individuals like Stevie are "brand[ed]" as degenerate and/or criminal by society.

While Yundy criticizes the labels of degeneracy those in power—the "social cruelty" of "the overfed" elite (40)—place upon the underclass of London, Conrad also implicitly criticizes the perceptual and interpretative limits of a modern, middle and lower class, reading public. To explain, Conrad's novel pairs the narrator's and Comrade Ossipon's descriptions of Stevie's drawings with references to Stevie's reading habits, as Stevie picks up the "newspapers from the

window to read" (50). Winnie, however, expresses concern regarding the effect the London newspapers' more sensational stories—such as the story of "a German officer tearing half-off the ear of a recruit"—have on Stevie. "I wish he had never been to school,' Mrs. Verloc began again brusquely. 'He's always taking away those newspapers from the window to read. He gets a red face poring over them.'" Winnie's concern appears to be grounded in her observation that Stevie believes everything that's "said" is "true" (50). Yet, Conrad's novel is somewhat ambiguous regarding the cause of Stevie's very literal and narrow readings of the London periodicals. After all, Stevie's "skills based" education seems to preclude the character from being able to distinguish fact from satire, truth from fiction.

Conrad's novel implicitly questions various types of epistemological certainty, then. Peter Nohrenberg makes a similar point when he states that "although Stevie's physical features support Ossipon's diagnosis of him as a degenerate, his activities as a scribbler create an uneasy identification with the author" as "Stevie serves as both a double for the lowbrow reader and for the author himself, who must endure the misguided judgments of a new class of professional readers and critics" (52) who questioned how to correctly place and interpret Conrad's work in regards to the author's cosmopolitan identity. Although Stevie is decidedly cognitively disabled in the novel, his reading habits—along with the character's subsequent fragmentary knowledge and understanding of the day's events—are conditioned. Instead, Stevie's activities as a "scribbler" and reader function as an implied critique of the urban forces of modernity and middle and lower class readers whose knowledge is shaped by rigid and base modes of perception.

Verily, Stevie's inability to read beyond the surface—to test the veracity of the newspaper articles that emotionally affect him—make Stevie a source and victim of urban pathology.

Essentially having received a rote or "habit based" education, Stevie "absorbs" information on the page, but is ill equipped to "weave" the assorted collection of symbols, consonants and vowels into longer strands of thought or knowledge. The theme of a superficial and disconnected model of reading represent much more than personal disability in *The Secret Agent*, however. Stevie's difficulties with making "global connections," rather, symbolize a perceived wider change in human character and knowledge. Specifically, while most people received their information locally and by word of mouth before the turn of the last century, the growth of the urban or cosmopolitan environment witnesses the rise of a reading public that gets its information second hand. In one respect, Stevie's reading disability reminds us of Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" (1936). "Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the external world but of the moral world as well, overnight has undergone changes which were never thought possible" (84). The "changes" to which Benjamin refers result in the figurative death of "the storyteller" as a repository of human experience, as he or she can no longer effectively make the story "the experience of those who are listening to his [or her] tale" (87). In short, empathy becomes impossible in a modern world where all knowledge is received second hand.¹³³

Stevie's reading experiences are not entirely "modern," though. Because while Stevie is not able to thoroughly distinguish fact from fiction, or make larger and wider connections between what he reads and the world around him, he emotionally connects with the newspaper stories he reads. In this way, Stevie rejects the paradigm of objective and utility based reading that Benjamin saw as characterizing the modern individual. "[B]y now almost nothing benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information" (89). Since Stevie's intelligence is

¹³³ In his work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that newspapers allow readers to imagine broader connections. Here, reading newspapers isolates Stevie from wider and more authentic forms of truth.

"animalized," he is incapable of adapting the "objective" reading position of the modern individual. Ironically, the "animalized" intellect that London society viewed as being "morally defective" since it was associated with a lack of "will power" ("Mentally and Physically Defective Children" 1107), allows Stevie to express a greater potential for emotional sympathy than his "neurotypical" literary counterparts. Stevie's reading process appears much like his interaction with the cabman and his horse in the novel; he intuitively and emotionally relates to the suffering of these individuals in the city where Winnie and her mother cannot.

Given Stevie's more subjective and primitive form of cognition, we are left to ask what London society envisioned as the necessary counterpart of the modern intellect. On this point, the social scientist Georg Simmel (1858-1918) is useful for his explanation of the perceived connection between Darwinian evolution and urban environments. As Simmel argues, the metropolitan environment brought an "intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of inner and outer stimuli," an environmental change that only certain kinds of individuals were equipped to handle. "In order to accommodate to change and to the contrast of phenomena, the intellect does not require [. . .] inner upheavals; it is only through such upheavals that the more conservative mind could accommodate to the metropolitan rhythms of life. Thus, the metropolitan type of man [. . .] reacts with his head instead of his heart" (410). So, the more evolved or modern individual is one that is perceived to think objectively and unemotionally, and predictably. The more primitive, emotional and "volatile" intellect is one that "should be kept [or segregated] in industrial homes and there made partly to support themselves by work" ("Mentally and Physically Defective Children" 1106).

Any unified theory of disability and degeneracy--be it gendered or racialized--depends on the existence of a homogenous community, which late nineteenth-century London assuredly was

not. Considering how strongly Conrad associates Stevie with a pre-modern models of intuition and empathy, *The Secret Agent* is properly understood as scrutinizing a situation where individuals have been cut off, at least partially, from a rural and local culture. The fact that Stevie is feminized and "primitivized" recall Rita Felski's thesis that "the discourses of modernity reveal multiple and conflicting responses to the process of social change" (15). Truly, the entirety of Conrad's novel might be said to explore plural conceptions of modernity. At times in *The Secret Agent*, Stevie symbolizes the "yearning for the feminine as emblematic of a nonalienated, nonfragmented identity" (37). At other points, the novel and the novel's "pathologizing" of Stevie reflect "a hostile and defensive response to the seductive allures of emotion, desire, and the body" (24) as located in the character. While it is difficult to discern if Conrad wished to attach any fixed notion of disability or "authenticity" to Stevie, the cosmopolitan nature of the character's intellect and identity allow the author to present these issues from multiple angles.

Autism, Behavioral Conditioning and Performativity

Even though Conrad associates Stevie with multiple and even contradictory theories of cognitive difference and disability, the character's inner psychology remains at a distance from the reader. Certainly, a significant reason why the reader is unable to positively discern whether Stevie possesses the qualities of free will, moral judgment and "higher level" cognitive function is that Conrad eschews the more Freudian influenced literary techniques that characterize so much of Modernist prose. In its place, Conrad utilizes a clinical or proto-behaviorist narrative prosthesis in *The Secret Agent*.

While William Faulkner takes the reader into the inner world (s) of characters like Benjy and Quentin—showing us a variety of emotional, sensory, and cognitive states—Conrad forgoes

the more distinctly avant-garde elements of the Modernist novel. While Conrad spends a great deal of time describing the behaviors of Stevie, or the physiognomy of the novel's assorted characters as well as the details of their physical environments, the novel never engages in the "stream of consciousness" techniques of Modernists like Faulkner and Woolf: formal moves that dig beneath the surface of observable action and expose the schism between witnessed and perceived reality. There are no scenes in *The Secret Agent* that provide the reader with great insight into the complexity of human thought, feeling and social relations in the same way that Mrs. Ramsay's felt, but unspoken impressions of her world and the people in it lead the reader to contemplate these issues in *To The Lighthouse*. Put another way, there is a perceptible emotional "detachment" in *The Secret Agent* that almost rejects the existence of individual feelings or the unconscious as a valid barometer of social relations and existence. Or, as Conrad biographer John Batchelor observes: "He [Conrad] deliberately keeps narrative at a distance from mimesis" in the novel as "the narrator [demonstrates him or herself to be . . .] in full possession of all the facts and the novel's art consists of the way in which the voice chooses to reveal those facts to the reader" (158). In short, Conrad deliberately and meticulously withholds information as it pertains to his character's "inner worlds."

Conrad's approach, most certainly, derives at least in part from the time period's "usually unacknowledged and unnamed [. . .] search for practical applications, [. . .] yearning for philosophical respectability, [and] the need to generate a specifically behaviorist theory of the body" (Mills 23). As I have discussed throughout this essay, science is concurrently an abstract and practical force in *The Secret Agent* as the ability to objectively identify signs of disability and degeneracy dictate how society may control those issues. Furthermore, psychology does not come to be accepted as a branch of science--and not philosophy--by purely studying the

subconscious and invisible mental processes. Rather, it is only by adapting a more methodical and objective approach to identifying "abnormal" behavior--and presenting a model (s) for modifying that behavior--that psychology is accepted as a science.

The search for "practical applications" for psychology's "behaviorist theor[ies] of the body" finds a natural bedfellow in the planning of urban environments. For as Susan Schweik notes, the visibility of "disabled" bodies and aberrant behavior were a problem needing to be controlled in cosmopolitan cities. "They [the disabled] were made to embody what was wrong with the city, all that stood in the way of its greatness, its efficiency, its health or its visual appeal. They would have to be managed as much as architecture, street layout, or drainage" (Schweik 69).¹³⁴ In *The Secret Agent*, Stevie's particular form of cognitive disability or "degeneracy" has particular relevance to a history of Behaviorism. In one respect, Stevie's cognitive impairment fits neatly within a very wide category of literary representations and medical definitions of idiocy which cross several time periods. Yet, as Stuart Murray quite correctly observes, "we might note a number of key characteristics and behaviors" (77) in Stevie. If we look at Conrad's text, we see that Stevie is overly literal: mistaking the conversations he overhears and the pulp novels and newspaper articles he reads for a more threatening reality. Or, as his sister, Winnie, describes: "He was out of his mind with something he overheard about

¹³⁴ It is shortly after Mr. Verloc's murder, for example, that Winnie addresses the possibility of taking advantage of the cosmopolitan nature of other world destinations. "Murders escaped. They escaped abroad. Spain or California. Mere names. The vast world created for the glory of man was only a vast blank to Mrs. Verloc" (224). Winnie's reference to California is intriguing because "California [. . .] functioned as "one of the prisms through which the American people, for better or worse, could glimpse the future" (Starr Qted. in Schweik 24). California, and San Francisco particularly, passed one of the earliest ugly laws in 1867 and these laws were very much a response to "a city under enormous sociohistorical pressure, reeling from its Gold Rush and boom and subsequent bust, [and] a conflicted urban culture shaped by multinational migration (including, crucially, Chinese immigration)" (24). So, while London society in Conrad's novel struggles to identify where people originate from, where they "properly belong" and whether they represent a threat or "pathogen" to the nation, Winnie's momentary flirtation with escaping overseas to another city stresses the inherent epistemological crisis at the heart of heterogeneous geographic and cultural spaces.

eating people's flesh and drinking blood" (50). Additionally, Stevie's speech becomes fragmented in the face of anxiety, "robb[ing] him of the power of connected speech." At these moments, Stevie's linguistic cadence becomes labored and unnatural: "No. No, Walk. Must walk" (132). Just as significantly, Conrad implies that Stevie is dependent on repetition or routine to navigate the city of London on his own.¹³⁵

Based on much of the above criteria, Stuart Murray names Stevie as a "character with autism" (77) in the novel. While definitively labeling Stevie as autistic is problematic—as by doing so one almost embraces the pseudo-scientific "pathologizing" speech acts of Comrade Ossipon—the character's described behaviors most certainly align with our contemporary understanding of autistic difference, and place Stevie in a different category of "abnormality" in the novel. Although Conrad's novel figure's Stevie's cognitive difference as embodied, Conrad depicts these physical differences in such a way to destabilize *fin de siècle* concepts of racial difference and degeneration.

As the reader observes, the characters in *The Secret Agent* participate in two distinct kinds of diagnosis: physiognomic and behavioral. Conrad's unnamed narrator, as a case in point, notes how "the disdainful pout of Comrade Ossipin's thick lips accentuated the negro type of his face" (43). This passage, like many others in the novel, equates certain types of behaviors and facial characteristics with a racialized "other." Inspector Heat describes Mr. Verlock as "a sturdy, darkish chap" (170). Mr. Vladamir chastises Verlock for not "haven[ing] . . . the physique of [his] . . . profession" (18). Truly, the novel seems to imply that atavistic features, which are inherently racialized in Conrad's text, necessarily coincide with observable,

¹³⁵ As we discover later in the novel, Winnie stitches Stevie's home address into his jacket pocket lest he get disoriented in the absence of her husband. We may infer that in the same manner that anxiety causes Stevie to lose the power of speech, it most likely causes him to become physically disoriented in the novel.

degenerate behaviors. While these behaviors may not always reach the level of criminality, the “lazy” (19) countenance of Verlock symbolizes European society’s concerns regarding a foreign, racialized contagion in London’s midst.

Stevie—while animalized and feminized in terms of his intellect and behaviors—is not physically racialized; he is not covertly given “Chinese eyes” as Virginia Woolf does with Lily Briscoe. Instead, Stevie is pathologized through the careful observation and documentation of the behavioral “signs” of disability: Stevie’s handwriting, art, repetitive movements, and fractured speech. Indeed, the “democratized” environment of pathology and disability in *The Secret Agent* remind us of Majia Nadesan’s argument that autism “emerged in the early 1940s” in relation to “an emergent matrix of practices and interpretative vocabularies that marked the transition into the twentieth century.” Taken further, “the conditions of possibility for diagnosing children as autistic or high functioning autistic are ultimately less rooted in the biology of their conditions than in the cultural practices and economies of their time” (79-80). When considering the manner in which individuals are diagnosed as “degenerate” in Conrad’s novel, I would argue that the reader would be derelict not to observe that—while characters share a rudimentary Lombrosian vocabulary—there are no truly professional doctors in the story. Therefore, the diagnosis of “degeneracy” and disability is more of a cultural than professional undertaking in the novel since diagnosis is dependent on the participation of all of London’s citizens.¹³⁶

Ultimately, the purpose of any Behaviorist or Proto-behaviorist theory of “degeneracy” or disability, however, is not to simply identify aberrant behavior but to modify it. As such,

¹³⁶ I would be remiss not to note that disabilities such as autism often have geographical and cultural boundaries. Autism, for example, is commonly diagnosed in larger cities—like New York—and often unheard of in other countries. This is not to suggest that autism is not real—as difference or disability—but simply that diagnosis or identification is dependent on the common vocabulary and diagnostic gaze of a particular place and time.

dominant society held greater potential to shape behavior if "deviancy" was identified early in life. "Prior to the late 1800s, children would not have been subject to any form of 'developmental' or psychological examination unless their conditions were particularly severe and their parents particularly economically privileged" (Nadesan 80). While the novel gives us little access to Stevie's developmental history, Conrad does imply that the character's disability—although "real" and pronounced—may have escaped detection in another time period. As Winnie states: "She saw him [Stevie] amiable, attractive, affectionate and only a little, a little peculiar" (144). Although it is reasonable to assert that Winnie's description of Stevie is merely the language of a nonobjective family member that has lost the ability to honestly face the depth of her brother's cognitive challenges, the fact remains that Stevie is far from a physical or mental invalid.

When we place Conrad's description of Stevie, and Stevie's behaviors, next to the age's scientific literature on the identification and "training" of the disabled, however, the character's cognitive and mental identity becomes much more complex. According to an 1898 report by Walter Bernard on "The Neglect of Early Training of the Mentally Defective": "Is not the first manifestation by an infant of mental peculiarities or deficiencies capable of being met by such methods as corrective suggestion, and appeals to imitativeness" (686). Of particular note, the preceding report fails to discuss any of the physical or biological underpinnings of cognitive disability. Instead, the report advocates a method of education or "training" of the disabled that stresses "imitation" of appropriate behavior.

Returning to *The Secret Agent*, I would like to point out that Conrad leaves more than a couple of "textual breadcrumbs" in his novel to suggest that Stevie's identity has been shaped through social conditioning. For as Winnie tells us: "She avoided using the verb 'to steal'

because it always made her brother uncomfortable." Since, "[c]ertain simple principles had been instilled in him so anxiously (on account of his 'queerness') that the mere names of certain transgressions filled him with horror" (144). As we can see, Conrad explicitly links Stevie's "docile" behavior with an "educational intervention." Seeing from a young age that Stevie was "queer" or abnormal, the British education system "overcorrects" and drills into Stevie the idea that "stealing" is the most unimaginable of moral transgressions.

Interestingly, Conrad explores two separate kinds of behavioral conditioning in the novel. The first kind of behavioral conditioning anticipates B.F. Skinner's theory of "operant conditioning" as it was influenced by Thorndike's law of effect, which held the premise that if a particular behavior was followed by a desirable consequence or reward that behavior would be reinforced. Similarly, undesirable consequences would make the behavior less likely to occur again. Essentially, Skinner held that behavior could be modified or changed by controlling rewards or consequences.¹³⁷ While Conrad's novel does go so far as to provide the reader with the pedagogical details of Stevie's "compulsory education" we may rightly discern that Stevie's education—as a mentally disabled individual—focused as much on behavior modification as it did on basic math, reading and the alphabet. Stevie's behavior, in fact, is characterized by an "unnatural" obsequiousness that goes beyond stereotypes of feminine docility. As Conrad's narrator tells us: "the desire to make the horse happy and the cabman happy, had reached the point of a bizarre longing to take them to bed with him" (139). Conrad's novel, though, explores the implications of this manner of education from a number of different angles. After all,

¹³⁷ One example of this type of "operant conditioning" is "token economies," which are "staff operated operant systems in which the delivery of tokens controls the target populations actions; these economies are designed for use in instructional settings such as mental hospitals, institutions for the mentally retarded, and schools." Tokens may be "awarded for the performance of basic school tasks, such as getting dressed or helping keep the ward tidy" (Mills 125).

Stevie's "conditioned" obedience looks far different when Mr. Verlock chooses Stevie as his accomplice in the Greenwich Observatory Bombing on the grounds that Stevie will act "as he had been instructed to do." Quite tellingly, the novel informs us that "Stevie's view of the police" was "modified" by "Mr. Verloc" whom "never had [. . .] a more attentive and admiring disciple" (191).

While the first kind of behavioral conditioning is founded on "positive reinforcement"--as Stevie seeks the emotional and verbal approval of Mr. Verloc and others--Conrad gives us a "dark mirror" of Stevie's social conditioning in the form of Mr. Verloc's fellow anarchist Michaelis. Particularly, Michaelis was confined "in the whitewashed walls of his cell, in the sepulchral silence of the great blind pile of bricks near a river" (38). The passage's imagery recalls the pseudo-scientific dialogue of the entire novel as "the whitewashed walls" of Michaelis's cell associate the prison with the concepts of a hospital and the need to segregate "disease" from society. Once again, though, Conrad represents one of his characters as a passive mechanism in society. Left in physical and social isolation for years, Michaelis "talk[s] to himself, indifferent to the sympathy or hostility of his hearers." Michaelis is "no good in discussion," furthermore, "because the mere fact of hearing another voice disconcerted him painfully, confusing his thoughts at once--these thoughts that for so many years, in a mental solitude more barren than a waterless desert, no living voice had ever combatted, commented, or approved" (38). When compared to Stevie, Michaelis' "social conditioning" is intriguing since Michaelis does not "adapt" his behavior to the expectations or "norms" of society. Instead, the character retreats into an obsession with self that resists society's attempts to "tame" or mollify him.

While Stevie demonstrates the characteristics of an "autistic identity," then, he is also a colonized subject in so far as his "natural" instincts and behaviors have been "tamed" or mollified. In a fundamental regard, Conrad uses Stevie to explore the implications of an individual who has been "ostensibly cut off, if only partially, from culture" (Savarese 7). When I use the term "culture," I am not referring to concepts related to nationality, ethnicity or religion. The term culture here refers to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's claim that "the meanings attributed to extraordinary bodies reside not in inherent physical laws, but in social relationships in which one group is legitimated by possessing valued characteristics." This dominant group "maintains its ascendancy and its self identity by systematically imposing the role of cultural or corporeal inferiority on others" (Qtd. in Strauss 541). If a disability is identified or defined primarily through behaviors, as Stevie's is in the novel, then it is reasonable to say that Stevie's "disability is simultaneously real, tangible, measurable, physical and an imaginative creation designed to make sense of human morphology, capability and behavior" (Strauss 541). Another way to look at this issue is that--by themselves--any strictly behaviorist theory of disability is necessarily incomplete since it ignores the role of the biological in defining cognitive difference.¹³⁸ Stevie's behaviors (restlessness, anxiety, over-literalness) in the novel, furthermore, are common enough in the "normal" individual that his pathological symptoms seem, at times, at least, less "disabling" than part of natural human diversity.

To appreciate fully the extent to which Conrad's novel deals with the theme of social conditioning, therefore, the reader would be keen to recognize the degree to which the act of

¹³⁸ While I do not have enough time or space in this essay to discuss this issue fully, the influence of "behavior modification" on the education of the "disabled" is still felt today. ABA Therapy (Applied Behavioral Analysis), which is essentially based on the theories of B.F. Skinner, is the primary approved treatment for children and adults with autism. While ABA therapy is engulfed in narratives of "recovery," the claim itself is problematic since ABA addresses behaviors and not biology. In short, autistic children and adults are instructed to mimic "normal" or appropriate behavior.

looking permeates the novel. Particularly, the characters in *The Secret Agent* show an awareness of the presence of a dynamic "epistemological gaze" ¹³⁹ and contemplate ways to control or redirect that "gaze." Speaking with State Councillor Wurmt regarding his "reports for the last twelve months," for example, Mr. Verloc gets "the sense of being blinked at watchfully behind the blind glitter of these eyeglasses on the other side of the table [and this] disconcerted him" (16). Yet, while Wurmt gazes at Verloc, Conrad's narrator describes Wurmt as "the useful hard-working if obscure member of the Embassy" (16). The terms "hard working" and "obscure" are inherently linked in the previous passage. First, the novel's reference to "useful[ness] and "hard work" identify the economical basis of the "[c]ultural intolerance of disability." Colin Barnes astutely notes that while "our distant ancestors lived in such a harsh environment that there was little opportunity to support individuals with impairments who could not take care of themselves [. . .] the advent of relatively stable communities able to produce an economic surplus through the development agriculture" changed this societal model (Barnes 20). At the heart of these changes, cities--with their inherent degree of surplus--is "ground zero" for these changes as cities needed to provide institutions, such as boarding houses, shelters, and sometimes medical care, for the members of society that "nature" no longer eliminated from sight.

The increased visibility of disability in urban centers, however, sparked "[a]nxieties about" individuals who live solely "by their disablement" (Schweik 83). ¹⁴⁰ In other words, British and American society jointly became concerned about the "disabled" individual who

¹³⁹ The epistemological gaze in *The Secret Agent* refers to the variety of ways society attempts to construct stable notions of meaning in regards to disability, race and national identity.

¹⁴⁰ As support for this argument, Schweik cites the case study of Dora in which Freud states "and so it happens that anyone who tries to make [the hysterical patient] well is to his astonishment brought up against a powerful resistance" Qted in Schweik 81).

exaggerated or even fabricated his or her condition in order to avoid work and continue as a ward of society's individual and collective charity. Even if one is to make his or her "own way" or living, then, he or she is impelled to do so in a manner that does not draw attention to the particulars of physical and mental difference. To act in any other way would be to make oneself culturally objectionable and attract the "gaze" of mainstream society.

So, although Stevie is essentially a passive receptacle for the objectives of the British education system, Conrad hints that Stevie's managed behaviors are as much the result of a necessary cultural "performance" as they are of educational conditioning. Conrad's narrator informs us that "Stevie [. . . is] accustomed to move about disregarded" (41). Additionally, the reader is told that "[t]he endeavor to keep him [Stevie] from making himself objectionable in any way to the master of the house put no considerable anxiety into these two women's lives. 'That boy,'" Winnie and her mother collectively intone, "had been a source of that kind of anxiety almost from the very first day of his birth" (32-33). But, this cultural performance is a complicated and impossible ideological "dance" because economic care and support are predicated on antithetical concepts: justifying economic care through the visual concealment of disability and difference.

Perhaps no scene demonstrates this ideological paradox more than the narrator's description of the economic and social ramifications of the distribution of Winnie's mother's modest estate. "The possession of furniture would not be in any sense a provision, He ought to have it--poor boy. But to give it to him would be like tampering with his position of complete dependence. It was a sort of claim which she feared to weaken" (129). Akin to how society feared--even still fears--that the "able-bodied" might pass as "disabled," Winnie's mother anticipates the visual implications of Stevie acquiring a modest number of physical possessions.

Viewed from the outside, Stevie might appear to be undeserving of the economic support of the state in terms of his education, or simply be judged as an individual taking advantage of the charity of Mr. Verloc. These images, certainly, should be tempered by the knowledge that Stevie demonstrates evidence of legitimate physical and cognitive impairment. But, as Patrick McDonagh argues, the distribution of "charitable assistance" in London was a labyrinthine affair as these charitable organizations attributed a "moral" as well as social and physical "interpretation of the causes of poverty" (304). In short, the individual who worked hard, who eschewed charity and economic dependence, could—by his or her moral superiority—overcome the collective forces of physical and intellectual disability.

The cultural performance(s) described above is essentially the anti-freak show. Instead of presenting cognitive and physical difference as a spectacle which affirms society's sense of the "normal" and "abnormal" body, the "pathologized" individuals in *The Secret Agent* all try to avoid the epistemological gaze of society. Yet, their performance appears to be predicated on the knowledge that they are always being observed. As a case in point, Conrad highlights society's preconceptions regarding the obvious or "spectacular" nature of the foreign body in relation to the Assistant Commissioner's plan to travel "in disguise" in the foreign district of London. "He contemplated his own image with a melancholy and inquisitive gaze, then by sudden inspiration raised the collar of his jacket. This arrangement to him seemed commendable, and he completed it by giving it an upward twist to the ends of his black mustache" (123). The Assistant Commissioner's belief that "foreignness" might be represented by simply enacting a set of outward behaviors points to the perceptual limits of London society in regards to a range of cultural identities.

Certainly, *The Secret Agent* appears to reject society's blind adherence to scientific rationality and social conditioning as they are expressed in the Lombrosian methodology of Comrade Ossipon. While there is an "imbalance," as Michael Haltresht describes it, in Conrad's depiction of observable physical and behavioral "abnormalities" in the novel, "almost all of them [these abnormalities] are of the kind that can be precipitated by emotional factors . . .since psychosomatic disorders often reveal frustrations, conflicts and pressures that have been repressed" (Haltresht 102). Although Conrad very deliberately catalogues the outward appearances of "degeneracy" and disability, the omission of inner "conflicts" and "pressures" draws attention to their fundamental importance in the construction of the self in society. Behavior, for Conrad in the novel, is not something that can or should be understood purely scientifically or mechanistically.

But, the novel also expresses doubts about the capacity of the individual to attain a meaningful degree of agency when his or her behaviors and cognition are shaped as much by the differences and imperfections of the body as they are by social conditioning. Much like *Heart of Darkness*, the novel expresses deep seated fears of lurking kinship with the "other" even as British society champions theories of social and scientific progress. Instead of the "racialized" "other" in *Heart of Darkness*, however, the disabled figure serves as the embodiment of a hidden kinship as his animalized intelligence stand for the primitive modes of cognition that resemble so much of "normal" human comprehension.

It was in response to criticism of the above contradictions in the novel—as well as the perception of the "sordid surroundings and moral squalor of the tale"—that Conrad was impelled to explain his artistic choices in a 1920 author's note on *The Secret Agent*. "Man may smile and smile but he is not an investigating animal. He loves the obvious. He shrinks from

explanations." Placing Conrad's words in the larger context of the novel's depictions of Stevie, I would claim that Conrad's character is not only a direct representation of disability, but a figurative representation meant to encourage the reader to consider the implications of a variety of epistemological problems in regards to concrete notions of racial, cultural, and national identity. It is because the novel is "distinguished by a tendency towards paradox" (Lothe 176) that we are compelled to ponder the accuracy of the interrelated series of behavioral and linguistic signs of pathology in the novel and to apply these questions to the reader's and society's ability to properly interpret these signs.

Chapter 4:

'No Laughing Matter':

Disability, Obscenity and Popular Culture in Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*

When the reader is first introduced to the title character of Samuel Beckett's 1938 novel *Murphy*, the third person narrator titillatingly informs him or her that Murphy has bound himself "naked in his rocking chair," secured by "seven scarves that held him in position." Indeed, the images the reader spies of Murphy, "curtained off from the sun" in his "mew in West Brompton" (1) function as sexually suggestive as Beckett toys with his audience's expectations regarding the perceived divisions between literary and "pornographic novels."¹⁴¹ While these perceived divisions--between high and low culture, pornographic and aesthetic discourses--ultimately collapses across a wide range of twentieth-century publications, *Murphy's* outwardly sexually explicit content places the novel within a 1930s zeitgeist where writers and publishers were forced to consider the limits of aesthetic license as well as the legal definition of obscenity.¹⁴²

The first few pages of *Murphy*, certainly, borrow as many technical elements from mass culture as they do from serious literary tradition. If "pornography's primary aim is to excite the sexual drives of its viewers, often by a spectacular representation of sexual desire" (Pease 67), then one method through which pornography attains this goal is through its depiction of unadulterated, bodily sensation. In *Murphy*, Beckett initially places his reader in the position of

¹⁴¹ Allison Pease remarks that "though pornographic novels were clandestinely distributed and sold throughout the nineteenth century, their sexual representations were carefully segregated from works with respectable distribution." Hence, while sexually explicit images were not unusual in printed works, these images did not appear in works of "high culture" and "mainstream novels" (xi) before the turn of the twentieth century.

¹⁴² While "Beckett's volume of ten linked short stories, *More Pricks than Kicks*, was published in London on May 24, 1934" (Knowlson 175), it was banned in Ireland under the country's 1929 Censorship Act. Additionally, as Rachel Potter extensively discusses, novelists such as Djuna Barnes and Samuel Beckett wrote and revised "within the context of censorship in the early to mid 1930s, most notably the cultural fall-out of *The Well of Loneliness* trial in 1928, and the freeing of *Ulysses* in the United States in 1933" (175).

a voyeur, where he directs him or her to observe the private and aberrant sexuality of the novel's main character. "Sweat pounded off him," Beckett's third person narrator tells us, and—put within the context of the opening pages' ubiquitous references to the carnal acts of "eating, drinking, and sleeping" (1)—this embodied representation of Murphy threatens to move Beckett's narrative away from literary aesthetics and into the realm of pornographic spectacle.

In what appears on the surface to be a literary case of bait and switch, however, the reader's critical and aesthetic instincts are redirected as Beckett introduces a series of mind/body connections that while "sexually suggestive," are not "pornographically" emblematic or "representative."¹⁴³ Instead, Beckett's text demonstrates a certain self-awareness as the narrator—anticipating the objections of the censor to the sexual images on the page--works to place Murphy's actions in a more complex epistemological context. "He sat in his chair in this way because it gave him pleasure, it appeased his body. Then it set him free in his mind" (2). For Murphy, the act of fastening himself to his rocking chair serves a function in addition to physical stimulation. While Murphy's ritual requires him to acquiesce to the physical impulses of his body, the result of this act is a clearer and more objective state of cognition for Murphy. Furthermore, as I will discuss in greater detail later, Beckett figures Murphy's ritual as the product of a form of cognitive and physical difference, one that impels the censor to question whether Murphy's actions should be understood as the result of willful obscenity or of disability.

¹⁴³ In an extended discussion of the "Nausicaa" chapter in *Ulysses*, Allison Pease argues that Joyce "incorporate[ed] and defamiliariz[ed]" elements of pornography in his work. While "Nausicaa" is riddled with references to sexual explicit content, for instance, "potential pornographic pleasure is always disrupted, held at bay by an intervening discourse." In this manner, Pease avers that "Joyce's avante-garde, modernist firm necessarily violates the pornographic forms used within, recoding such works for the high-brow reader" (89).

As a whole, Beckett's novel is littered with references to the presence of the censor's eye on the text and on Murphy, "the seedy solipsist" (50)¹⁴⁴, in particular. When Celia—Murphy's lover—visits her paternal grandfather, she informs him that "I have not spoken to you of Murphy because I thought it might give you pain" (8), a line that could just as easily be interpreted as addressing a prudish reading audience as Celia's concerned relation. Similarly, Beckett omits explicit references to Celia's sexual prostitution in the novel, instead leaving the reader a series of clear, yet sufficiently coded innuendos that connect the death of Celia's parents when she was a mere child with the beginning of her occupation "on the street" (8). Lastly, after she is forced to contemplate the prospect that Murphy might be unable to "find work at once," Celia's coy sounding statement that she might need "to go back to hers" is explained by Beckett's narrator. "This phrase was chosen with care, lest the filthy censors should lack an occasion to commit their filthy synecdoche" (46).

Tellingly, Beckett figures the presence of the obscene in the mind of the censor or reader, not the text itself, as Beckett substitutes the term "filthy" for obscenity, and employs the word as an adjective for a coarse or primitive type of reading process.¹⁴⁵ To clarify, Beckett did not just object to the presence of a censorship board in Ireland; rather, Beckett was most troubled by the knowledge that the censors could scan entire works for objectionable passages without reading or taking into account the meaning of those passages in the work. In his essay "Censorship in

¹⁴⁴ While "solipsism" refers, in the philosophical sense, to the theory that only one's own mind is sure to exist, Murphy's inability to acknowledge or understand others minds points as much towards cognitive disability as it does towards the character's epistemological position.

¹⁴⁵ Rachel Potter briefly discusses the different interpretative opportunities between the words "obscene" and "unclean" in relation to Djuna Barnes' novel *Nightwood*. As Potter explains, "Barnes' editor," T.S. Eliot, wished to substitute the term "obscene" with "unclean" in the "final scene" of the novel where Robin Vote "bark[s] in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching." Potter argues that the word "unclean relates to animals that are defiled or impure and therefore unfit to be eaten" and—as such—is "clearly tied to the body." While the terms "obscene" and "unclean," are "clearly related," Potter avers that the Barnes most likely kept the phrase "obscene laughter" since it takes [the reader] into more open-ended questions about linguistic and aesthetic boundaries" (175).

the Saorstát” (1935), Beckett acerbically notes that “[t]here are books that are so blatantly indecent and known to be indecent that it would be unnecessary for the members of the board to read every line of them” (*Disjecta* 84). As readers, Beckett considers “the Censorship of Publications Board” in Ireland ill-equipped to judge the degree of morality or obscenity contained in his works as they bring many of their subconscious assumptions about art and narrative to their partial reading of texts flagged for “sexual immorality,” “vice” or “unwholesome content” (84). Put concisely, the censor supplies the “obscenity” in the text since he or she takes the isolated linguistic signs and symbols on the page and unconsciously connects them to pre-established cultural ideas of narrative and obscenity.

The preceding discussion brings me to the larger question I would like to address in this chapter: Since cultural and legal judgments about literary obscenity require parallel constructions of linguistic, narrative, and normative sexuality, how does Beckett’s employment of disability subvert the censor? If mass culture is defined by a certain repetition—in the sense that these kinds of texts are predictable and recognizable by virtue of their general ubiquity and connection to recognizable narrative and linguistic forms—what happens when disability comes into direct contact with these cultural “normates”? I will argue that disability not only disrupts the reader’s assumptions regarding the nature of obscenity, but it also allows Beckett to re-appropriate the elements of mass culture—pornographic and otherwise—to breathe new life into traditional literary and linguistic forms. Furthermore, since Beckett’s version of Modernist aesthetics eradicates the boundaries between high and low art at the same time as it makes no compromise with the public taste,¹⁴⁶ Beckett’s work is figuratively autistic.

¹⁴⁶ This idea can be best summed up by famous Modernist slogans such as “making no compromise with the public taste,” the motto of the groundbreaking journal *The Little Review*, founded in 1914.

Beckett and Disability:

In order to discuss the ways in which disability—and specific kinds of disability—functions in *Murphy*, especially in regards to conceptions of obscenity, it is first necessary for me to explain the previous ways in which scholars have discussed Beckett’s interest and use of disability in his fiction. As Beckett scholars have noted, there are rampant images of disability across the length of Beckett’s work. His characters walk with crutches, are confined to wheelchairs and bedrooms, or have weak eyesight or hearing, as well as a variety of other physical ailments. It is within the context of these elements of Beckett’s fiction that Ato Quayson avers that “the deteriorating and impaired body had a special fascination for him [Beckett]” since the Irish author “suffered endless illnesses ranging from an arrhythmic heartbeat and night sweats to cysts and abscesses on his fingers, the palm of his left hand, the top of his palate, his scrotum and, most painfully later in his life, his left lung” (*Aesthetic Nervousness* 29). Similarly, Beckett biographer James Knowlson outlines Beckett’s struggles with mental illness, particularly his panic attacks and depression directly prior to and after his father’s death in 1933. “After my father’s death I had trouble psychologically. The bad years were between when I had to crawl home in 1932 and after my father’s death in 1933” (Beckett qtd. in Knowlson 167). Describing the severity of his mental state during this time period and its distinction from his previous physical afflictions, Beckett continues: “It was a strange experience I can’t really describe. I found I couldn’t go on moving. [. . .] So I went to Geoffrey Thompson’s surgery. [. . .] He gave me a look over and found nothing physically wrong. Then he recommended psychoanalysis for me” (Beckett Qtd. in Knowlson 167). While Beckett would eventually make a recovery, in the sense that his decision to leave Ireland in 1934 and relocate “to London partly with the express purpose of seeking psychological help for his health problem” resulted in

the abatement of many of Beckett's more severe depressive symptoms,¹⁴⁷ he would continue to struggle with the frailty of his physical form for the rest of his life.

Despite the author's personal encounters with physical and mental disability, however, there is a certain lack of narrative specificity in regards to the author's representation of disability in his fiction.¹⁴⁸ Going further, Beckett's fiction adopts very few of the dominant tropes of literary depictions of disability. Beckett does not focus on the physical suffering disability produces as Faulkner does in relation to Benjy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*. He also does not give the reader a great deal of explicit insight into the biographical causes of his characters' mental distress as Virginia Woolf does with Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Instead, Beckett's prose abstains from presenting what Quayson describes as the "discomfort of disability." "Discomfort" is a "euphemism for a broad range of perturbations that afflict the character with disability, from embarrassment to physical discomfort to pain, both mental and physical" (*Aesthetic Nervousness* 54). While the absence of clear references to discomfort does not preclude the existence of those elements in relation to the characters of Beckett's fiction, this approach allows the author to employ images of disability to address a host of philosophical issues that transcend the "perturbations" of individual disability.¹⁴⁹ Hence, while images of

¹⁴⁷ Gary Winship, among others, does a thorough job cataloguing the range and severity of Beckett's physical and mental suffering as Beckett suffered from "heart palpitations" and "insomnia," which Beckett attempted to mollify by "smoking and drinking excessively" (340). As Winship and others aver, "Beckett's research interest in psychiatry" and fictional depiction of a London psychiatric ward in *Murphy*, "had been fueled by his access to the wards at Bethlem Royal Hospital through his friend Geoffrey Thompson who worked as the senior physician at the hospital site in Kent at that time" (343-344).

¹⁴⁸ When I say lack of specificity, I mean that disability in Beckett's fiction is rarely connected to an individual body or identity. Clearly, part of this is due to the fact that images of impairment are so pervasive in Beckett's work that the perception of individual differences are mollified. Yet, Beckett seems to resist any and all impulses to depict physical differences and disability in a concrete manner. A prime example of this is contained in Beckett's later novel *Molloy*, where Beckett's disabled character (he uses crutches to walk)—in going to ride a bicycle—remarks that he "propped the foot of [his] stiff leg [. . .] forgetting which [particular leg]" was infirm.

¹⁴⁹ Patrick McDonagh briefly touches on this dimension of Beckett's writing in his essay "Autism and Modernism." Specifically, in examining the images of silence, "aleness" in Beckett's fiction, McDonagh rhetorically asks: "Was Beckett writing as a modernist or as an autist?" (101).

disabled characters are ubiquitous in Beckett's fiction, then, the personal experience of disability remains largely undeveloped and unexamined as the author omits the narrative device of an expressed "mental and physical" discomfort that connects the symbols of an impaired body to a clear referent.

Beckett's shadowy and elusive vision of disability ultimately unsettles the relationship between the reader and the text since the reader most likely expects the literary work to recognizably reflect social models of disability and normality. In other words, if the non-disabled reader perceives disability to be defined by the "mental and physical" suffering of another or "othered" person, then literary depictions of disability should reinforce that traditional social or cultural narrative. When literary texts do not follow this traditional narrative structure in regards to disability, though, the reader's assumptions about the meaning of disability and its interconnected conceptions of social, physical and cognitive normativity begin to unravel. In short, disability—when removed from its traditional paradigms of representation—impels the reader to look at "prejudices and biases" (*Aesthetic Nervousness* 15) that may have previously remained unexamined.

The following analysis of *Murphy*, then, serve as a kind of litmus test to the representation of cognitive disability and the proto autistic characters in the Modernist novels this work studies. While it is commonplace to identify Beckett as "the last Modernist"¹⁵⁰ since his works "suggest an exaggeration—or a critical parody, perhaps—of certain elements associated with canonical high modernism" (Mayhew 230), Beckett's use of disability refract the author's critical aesthetics. Where there are didactic sides to the other authors in this

¹⁵⁰ Anthony Cronin uses the term as a subtitle for his 1997 biography of Samuel Beckett. More generally, Beckett straddles the ideological boundary between Modernism and Post modernism since his work often resists Modernism's attempts to attach meaning to form, formal purity to aesthetic expression.

dissertation, Beckett does not explicitly advocate for the transvaluation of certain forms of disability—as Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner often do in their prose—or simply critique definitions of neurotypical behavior and cognition—as Joseph Conrad does in his work. Furthermore, where representations of cognitive disability and neurological difference often stand in for Modernist concerns regarding the importance of originality, truth and authenticity in art—in the works of Woolf, Faulkner and Conrad—Beckett implicitly asserts that any attempts to teach or reform readers, regarding not just disability but a variety of epistemological assumptions, is absurd. Just as the boundaries between the genres of high and low culture collapse in his novel, Beckett turns his critical gaze on the entire spectrum of society.

Murphy and Asperger's Syndrome:

In respect to his novel *Murphy*, Beckett incorporates many of the author's personal experiences with physical and mental illness into his depiction of the title character. Murphy, for example, lays in his "bed" at night "wanting to sleep" but unable as he listens to "a rat [. . .] behind the wall at his head, wanting to move" (67)—a reference to the author's personal struggles with insomnia.¹⁵¹ Additionally, Murphy is described as "not rightly human" by another character in the novel, a phrase which implies that Murphy is associated with paradigms of physical disfigurement and abnormality, when he "applie[s] at a chandlery for the position of smart boy" (47). This entire scene in the novel, in fact, most clearly identifies Beckett's character as physically and cognitively "othered" as Beckett follows Murphy's attempts to find meaningful employment in London society at the behest of Celia. As Beckett's narrator describes the situation: "This was the first time he [Murphy] had actually presented himself as a

¹⁵¹ James Knowlson recounts that "as a little boy" Beckett "became very nervous at night and would go to sleep only with a night-light and his favorite teddy bear" (36). Knowlson argues that Beckett's insomnia may have been due to the author's "extraordinary acute sense of hearing that he ascribed to the narrator in *Malone Dies*" (36).

candidate for a definite post. Up till then he had been content to expose himself vaguely in aloof able-bodied postures on the fringes of the better-attended slave markets” (46-47). The preceding passage reveals a couple of important aspects of Murphy’s temperament. Although Murphy’s job search is motivated by Celia’s ultimatum that either he finds work or she “walk[s] out” (26), Murphy seems to place no great personal and emotional importance on the value of work. Furthermore, as a literary representation of disability, Murphy’s inability to find employment is absent of the expected portrayal of the character’s physical and emotional discomfort in the face of this failure. Instead, Murphy reveals no sense of shame as “the chandlers” take turns berating Murphy with taunts of “[e] ain’t smart” and “e’aint a boy” (47). Even though Beckett’s narrator tells us that “Murphy was too familiar with this attitude of derision tinged with loathing to make further blunder of trying to abate it” (47), the reader may suspect that Murphy’s silence in this scene is less strategic and more a product of the character’s removal from constructions of cultural and social normality.

It is partly because of Murphy’s lack of apparent visible shame and emotion as well as general “social ineptitude” that Quayson suggests that “Murphy represents autism . . . at the level of the eponymous hero’s characterization” (“Autism, Narrative, and Emotions” 838). Certainly, if the reader is to try to discern the exact nature of Murphy’s form of disability or cognitive difference via the novelist’s presentation of the character’s behaviors and cognitive processes, Beckett provides the reader with a plethora of evidence to support Quayson’s conclusion. In addition to Murphy’s solipsism, the character demonstrates a set of obsessions with routines and rituals. During his job search, for example, Murphy leaves at the same time each morning, follows the same streets paths and routes, and returns with a “punctuality” that is “astounding” as it “did not vary [. . .] by more than a few seconds each day” (43). Murphy also employs a series

of internal systems to help him navigate through London. “He took up his stand in the mouth of Brewery road, so that when the clock in the prison tower marked six forty five he could get off without delay” (45). Murphy’s reliance on rituals suggests that the character has an “excessively perceptual (rather than conceptual) style of interaction with his environment” (Belmonte 168), a type of cognitive impairment common with individuals on the autistic spectrum. As Matthew Belmonte explains, many autists struggle to “automatically and fluidly extract structural similarities” from the varied environmental sense data their bodies take in since “there is no neuroanatomical Cartesian theater wherein all the separate elements of the perceptual scene are integrated.” Rather, “narrative organization [in the autist] must depend on coordination of activity among widely separated brain regions” (168-169).¹⁵² In order to compensate for this cognitive deficit, many autists rely on ritualistic behaviors and routines to bring order to experience.

While ritualistic behaviors may be present in individuals at all points of the autistic spectrum, however, Asperger’s syndrome—as a sub-category of autism—is marked by profuse but unnatural or pathologized speech. Indeed, compared to the other characters studied in this dissertation—Cam, Benjy and Stevie—Murphy possesses a significant degree of verbal eloquence and the reader might logically hesitate to define the character as linguistically impaired. The novel tells us, however, that other characters have trouble deciphering Murphy’s speech. After Murphy attempts to explain to Celia why he resists the idea of work, Celia is left even more puzzled regarding Murphy’s state of mind. “She felt, as she felt so often with

¹⁵² Beckett scholars have long contended that the author “identifies Murphy as a descendent of Descartes by making numerous allusions to the mind-body distinction and by endowing Murphy with an awareness with the principal difficulty bequeathed by dualistic thinking; i.e., the question of how communication between the mind and body is effected” (Cousineau 223). While Beckett’s novel is composed long before our more recent scientific evidence that the brain’s ability to represent sensory data is especially impaired in people with autism, Beckett’s general interest in disability suggests that the author meant to portray the physical or objective world as particularly problematic and difficult for Murphy to understand.

Murphy, spattered with words that went dead as soon as they sounded; each word obliterated, before it had time to make sense, by the word that came next; so that in the end she did not know what had been said” (25). Critically for this essay’s ensuing discussion of the ways in which disability disrupts social or “normative” conceptions of obscenity, Celia has difficulty engaging Murphy in conversation because Murphy’s speech patterns—while mimicking “normative” speech in critical ways, subvert the listener’s linguistic and narrative assumptions. Specifically, Murphy’s speech lacks any apparent sense of narrative cohesion as his sentences string together the character’s isolated observations on a topic without providing the listener with the necessary interpretative cues of narrative transitions and variance of tone and cadence. ““In the mercantile gehenna [. . .] to which your words invite me, one of these will go, or two, or all. If you, then you only; if my body, then you also, if my mind, then all. Now?”” (25). Although the reader might logically infer the cause of the interpretative problem might lie with Celia, Murphy’s speech betrays an autistic dynamic that defamiliarizes Celia’s, and the reader’s, linguistic assumptions even as it pathologizes Murphy’s speech as mechanistic.

There are interesting parallels to be made between the Modernist technique of “defamiliarization”¹⁵³ and the social construction of Asperger’s Syndrome. In his 1944 essay “Autistic Psychopathy in Childhood,” Hans Asperger noted that for higher functioning autists, “[l]anguage feels unnatural, like a caricature” (Asperger 70). The sense that speech, for those with Asperger’s, is mechanistic derives from the individual’s verbal and non-verbal speech characteristics. Murphy, as a case in point, speaks to Celia with “cold and unwavering eyes” (25). Additionally, “[c]onversations” with individuals with Asperger’s are often “limited to a small number of topics, often revolving around those few that are the special interest of the

¹⁵³ In its aesthetic sense, defamiliarization refers to forms of art that seek to recover the sensation of life as it is seen and perceived, not known. In other words, the role of art is to make things seem unfamiliar rather than automatic.

autistic person.” Since Murphy shows a pronounced disinterest in discussing topics like work with those around him and because “Murphy” does “not speak in the ordinary way unless spoken to” (150), the reader might almost wonder if Beckett could have composed Hans Asperger’s influential essay before the Austrian pediatrician did.

Yet, while Beckett pathologizes Murphy’s speech, he disperses the sources or causes for problems of narrative and meaning away from Murphy and onto other characters. On the one hand, narrative failures in the novel are the result of neurotypical characters being unable to converse with Murphy. As Tager-Flusberg, a psychologist specializing in autistic language acquisition, explains: “Even when the autistic person does engage in conversation the non-autistic listener has a hard time participating in the discourse or learning much from his or her conversation partner” (Tager-Flusberg 151). Although Beckett’s narrator tells the reader that Celia has a hard time understanding Murphy, the novel flips the script in relation to disability and language several times; particularly, Murphy judges Celia’s speech as impaired in its own right. Listening to Celia speak, Murphy “murmur[s]” that Celia has no conception ““of what her words mean”” as she has “[n]o more insight into their [her words] implications than a parrot into its profanities” (25). Given Beckett’s previous description of Murphy’s repetitive behaviors and rituals, Murphy’s critique of Celia’s speech as parrot-like is intriguing. While Celia interprets Murphy’s speech as falling “dead” as soon as he speaks, Murphy construes Celia’s speech as lifeless by virtue of its conventionality. Though Celia’s speech is only pathologized by Murphy, Beckett implies that Celia’s use of language is ultimately devoid of meaning because the speaker mindlessly repeats a series of passively learned words and expressions. Built on a wealth of unexamined narrative and linguistic assumptions, Celia’s language and speech descend into a cycle of meaningless and endless repetition.

It is not coincidental that Beckett draws parallels between Celia's conventional language and the image of a parrot shouting "profanity."¹⁵⁴ In parts of the novel, Celia—in her clumsy attempts to read or understand Murphy's behavior—becomes a literary substitute for the captious voice of the average middle class reader and censor. In fact, the inability of Celia and other characters in *Murphy* to correctly interpret the significance of the title character's speech and actions elucidate Beckett's objections to forming legal and aesthetic definitions of obscenity. This hermeneutical impasse—between the limited narrative expectations of a reading public conditioned by the aesthetic forms of mass culture and an avante-garde author seeking to reinvent or appropriate these forms—hides within the lens of disability. To be more direct, since disability refracts the reader's sense of the "normal," the presence of disability in Beckett's text denies the public a stable narrative position from which actions and speech in the novel may be judged.

Theory of the Mind and Obscenity:

Compared with Beckett's other literary works, *Murphy* may seem aesthetically undemanding. The novel's plot, after all, follows a simple linear structure that chronicles Murphy's attempts to find work—following his girlfriend's ultimatum—and ultimate employment as a nurse at Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, where he cares for a group of mentally ill patients. Murphy's narrative is intertwined with the efforts of a group of eccentrics—lead by his jilted fiancée Miss Counihan—to find Murphy. But, as Rubin Rabinovitz correctly contends: "The apparent simplicity of the novel can be a stumbling block for the unwary reader, or—to use Beckett's term—'gentle skimmer'" ("Murphy' and the Uses of Repetition" 67). Part of the

¹⁵⁴ Beckett presents a variant image of this image later in the novel when the narrator states: "All the puppets in this book whinge sooner or later, except Murphy, who is not a puppet" (74). So, while Beckett's novel pathologizes Murphy's repetitive speech and behavior, Beckett also associates Murphy with a degree of originality and free will not available to the more neurotypical characters in the story.

novel's difficulty comes from Beckett's employment of an untrustworthy narrator. "In some of Beckett's early works the narrator's commentary is occasionally untrustworthy; in *Murphy* the unreliable narrator is an important structural device" (*The Development of Samuel Beckett's Fiction* 104). Where scholars like Rabinovitz have supported their interpretation of the narrator's dishonesty by cataloguing his or her internal inconsistency—the narrator tells us that Murphy uses "seven scarves" to bind himself to the chair; then, in listing them mentions only six (1)—I argue that Beckett's narrator is not dishonest, per se, but that the novel intentionally tests the reader's ability to interpret the mental states of its characters. While Beckett characterizes Murphy as having an extreme cognitive deficit or disability in relation to theory of the mind, the novel's internal structure exposes the difficulty of this cognitive action for the neurotypical reader. In this way, Beckett's portrayal of Murphy—in so far as Beckett's novel tests the reader's ability to infer definitive meanings from the character's outward actions--betray Ezra Pound's contention that "the arts are now divided between popular charlatans and men of talent, who, of necessity, write, think and paint only for each other, since there is no one else to understand them" (Qted. in Cooper 2). In other words, Murphy's impaired theory of the mind reflects the perceived cultural and intellectual elitism of avante-garde or high Modernism.

As I have explained in relation to the other disabled characters studied in this dissertation, theory of the mind refers to the ability to attribute mental states—beliefs, intents, desires, moods and knowledge—to other minds and to understand that other minds may have different mental states to our own. Generally, "children below the age of about four years seem to lack the understanding of belief that is central to our common-sense interpretation of human action" (Sodian and Frith 159). As Sodian and Frith imply, mind reading often remains a transparent skill in the sense that the typically developing individual exercises this cognitive facility with

such regularity that he or she gives little thought to its development or limitations. As children, for example, we naturally learn to read the facial expressions of our parents and to discern whether our parents are pleased with our behavior or not. Mind reading, in short, is perceived to be a fundamental part of what it means to be human.

In autism, the part(s) of the brain responsible for mind reading do not develop typically, however. As a result, many autists have difficulty with seeing bodies as motivated by other minds. In *Murphy*, Beckett's narrator describes "Murphy's mind [. . .] as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe" (65). Concurrently, Murphy has a great deal to say about Celia's physical attributes, but Murphy—and the narrator—rarely speculate or present information regarding the nature of Celia's inner thoughts. Instead, Murphy tells the reader that "[t]he part of him he hated craved for Celia" (5). In light of previous Beckett scholarship, Murphy's abhorrence of his physical attraction to Celia suggests that "a lack of a body, or a bound body, produces an almost spiritual freedom for Murphy. In a sense, the less he can interact with his body, the more he is free" (Bennet 118). Beyond his wish to deny the influence of his body on his mind, Murphy appears both unable and uninterested in beholding Celia's body as a site of emotional and intellectual—as well as physical—connection. Even scenes of intimate physical affection between Murphy and Celia reinforce the preceding idea as Murphy appears to be emotionally separated from his partner. "She sank down athwart his breast, their heads were side by side on the pillow but facing opposite ways, his fingers strayed her yellow hair" (19). Interestingly, while Beckett takes a fair amount of care to describe the details of the body—details which could have been construed as obscene or provocative to the reader—he ultimately creates an aura of distance or disinterest between Murphy and Celia in this scene.

Murphy's cognitive disability is an important narrative device for Beckett as it allows the author to subvert the images of sexuality in his novel by making them scenes of emotional detachment and distance. The outward sense of distance and disinterest for the reader highlights an important distinction between Modernist and "popular" uses of sexuality. As Allison Pease argues in her work *Modernism, Mass Culture and the Aesthetics of Obscenity*, "the early twentieth century observed a [. . .] complex rupture between high and low modes of consumption" (78). Particularly, "While the low, or popular, arts were allied with 'profits' and 'interest,' the high arts were associated with disinterest, symbolic capital over economic capital." Hence "[w]ith its priority on profit, consumption, and sensual enjoyment, mass culture was demonized by the defenders of high culture" (78). Modernist writers, though, did not eschew representing "sensual enjoyment" in their work as supported by the struggles of Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Radcliffe Hall and Djuna Barnes with censorship. Rather, many Modernist writers defended their use of traditionally obscene content on the grounds that their work—through its formal innovation—subverts the subjective, emotional, and "depraved" reaction of a popular audience.

In *Murphy*, I do not wish to suggest that the absence of visible emotion in the title character indicates that none exists, only that Beckett's artistic depiction of Murphy resists more traditional conceptions of emotion. On the contrary, Murphy's statement that "the part of him he hated craved for Celia" tells Beckett's audience that Murphy does feel, and that his mind and body are not completely separate. Beckett's narrator tells us, however, that Murphy is obsessed with finding ways to control his body in order to cultivate his mind. As an example, he studies under "a man in Cork called Neary," who could "stop his heart more or less whenever he liked and keep it stopped, within reasonable limits, for as long as he liked" (2). But, Beckett's narrator

tells us that the skill Neary has cultivated remains elusive for Murphy. “Murphy’s purpose in going to sit at Neary’s feet was not to develop the Neary heart, which he thought would quickly prove fatal to a man of his temper” (2). Rather, Murphy “ha[s] such an irrational heart that no physician could get to the root of it. Inspected, palpated, auscultated, percussed, radiographed and cardiographed, it was all that a heart should be” (2). Murphy’s heart—like so much of the autistic body—is tested extensively, only to appear normal. There is a defect, but no one knows what it is as it cannot be discerned through common practices of diagnosis. In terms of Beckett’s biography, the narrator’s explanation of Murphy’s partial failure as a pupil of Neary’s—a failure in the sense that Murphy cannot will his body into a state of complete submission to the will of his mind—reminds the reader of the ambiguous nature of many of Beckett’s health issues.¹⁵⁵ For the reader of Beckett’s novel, this passage identifies Murphy as physically abnormal, as the narrator tells us that Murphy’s heart and body do not function typically.

Nonetheless, while interpretations of Beckett’s novel are enriched by the reader’s ability to recognize the presence of autistic symptoms in Murphy as well as how Beckett’s physical and mental ailments influences the novel’s depiction of disability, it is important to note that Beckett’s characterization of Murphy also fits within a rhetorical and political debate regarding the meaning of obscenity. Particularly, legal judgments of literary obscenity in the 1920s and 1930s were based on the United Kingdom court case of *Regina vs. Hicklin* (1868). Known later as the “Hicklin Rule,” the case concluded that “the test of obscenity is this, whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscene is to deprave and corrupt those minds who are open to such

¹⁵⁵ As Knowlson points out, many of Beckett’s physical symptoms were attributed to psychological causes, a perceived problem which was addressed in Beckett’s sessions with Wilfred Bion in London between 1933 and 1935. “Beckett presented himself to Bion with severe anxiety symptoms, which he described in his opening session: a bursting, apparently arrhythmic heart, night sweats, shudders, breathlessness, and when his condition was at its most severe, total paralysis” (169).

immoral influences and whose hands a publication of this sort may fall” (Cockburn Qted. in Birmingham 168). The Hicklin Rule essentially reversed legal precedent since it amended the definition of obscenity as it was laid out in the Obscene Publications Act (1857), which stated that a work could be obscene if it affected or offended a “well regulated mind” (Birmingham 168). Instead, the Hicklin Rule applied to a new category of middle and lower class readers—and particularly a newly educated class of women—deemed to be most susceptible to corruption by immoral or obscene content. Essentially preemptive in nature, the Hicklin Rule impelled the censor to focus not on authorial intent but on how a text would be interpreted by women, the young, and the middle and lower class.

As Kevin Birmingham eloquently explains in his discussion of the political and legal fight over James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the Hicklin Rule inspired Modernist writers and lawyers to defend literary works against charges of obscenity on the grounds that accusations of immoral content only applied if a literary work was intelligible or sexually enticing to a lower class reader. Ezra Pound’s friend and Joyce’s lawyer John Quinn, for example, argued that a piece of literature couldn’t be obscene if it was indecipherable or repugnant to the group of people the obscenity laws were meant to protect. If the middle class reader found images of explicit sexuality in literature “ugly,” or “entirely unarousing” (Birmingham 169), then it could not be considered—in the legal sense—obscene.

If a young man is in love with a woman and his mother should write him saying: ‘My boy, the woman you are infatuated with is not a beautiful woman . . . she sweats, she stinks, she is flatulent. Her flesh is discolored, her breath is bad. She makes ugly noises when she eats and discharges other natural functions (Quinn Qted. in Birmingham 169).

In short, legal charges of obscenity were refuted on the grounds that the implicated literary work was too difficult for the morally susceptible reader to understand or that explicit scenes of sexuality were repugnant or monstrous to this type of reader.

I bring up Quinn's critique of charges of obscenity in order to argue that Beckett's use of disability in *Murphy* casts scenes of explicit sexuality as monstrous or ugly for the corruptible reader. Furthermore, since the dynamics of sexuality for disability often do not resemble the constructed model of the normate,¹⁵⁶ disability prevents the "mind reading" necessary for the reader to see him or herself in the character and decipher fiction. In *Murphy*, scenes of explicit sexuality follow Quinn's legal arguments as the title character's disability circumvents the Hicklin Rule's definition of obscenity. As I previously stated, *Murphy* begins with an image of the main character tied naked to a rocking chair, a scene which threatens to draw the attention of the censor and "arouse" the corruptible reader.¹⁵⁷ As the reader of *Murphy* discovers, the character's actions are not an isolated event as Murphy takes the rocking chair with him wherever he goes, ritualistically repeating the opening scene of the novel.

Yet, in his depictions of Murphy's ritual, Beckett continually alludes to the influences of the Hicklin Rule on literary depictions of sexuality. For begin, Murphy's rituals are always enacted within the privacy of the character's room, a plot detail which figuratively defines Murphy's acts as un-obscene. In the context of the Hicklin Rule, and earlier obscenity bans in

¹⁵⁶ Abby Wilkerson defines "normate sex" as sharing many of the characteristics of Gayle Rubin's concept of the "hierarchy of sexual value." Like Rubin's theory, "normate sex" is "heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative and non commercial." Wilkerson continues that "normate sex" is "location specific" in that it cannot occur "on the street [. . .] not in nursing homes or hospitals or rehabilitation centers." (186). So, while many different kinds of identity may subvert the concept of "normate sex," these non-normative identities fundamentally "draw boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate desires, behaviors, identities and spaces" (187).

¹⁵⁷ Birmingham notes that "judges generally read 'corruption' as a synonym for 'arousal'" (169).

the United States,¹⁵⁸ the above passage alludes to growing concerns that “unrestrained censorship” amounted to “invasions of privacy” in addition to giving “administrative officials [. . .] broad, discretionary authority to seize art and literature of which they disapproved” (Heins 27). On the one hand, censorship laws in both The United States and Great Britain were “reflect[ions] of a confluence of new social pressures [as] [i]ndustrialization in Europe and the United States were breaking down traditional demographic patterns and making urban poverty, crowding, prostitution” and other vices “visible” (Heins 25). On the other hand, lawyers like Quinn defended their literary clients against charges of obscenity on the basis that there needed to be clear distinctions between private and public spaces. ““You could not take a piece of literature up in an aeroplane fifteen thousand feet into the blue sky, where there would be no spectator, and let the pilot of the machine read it and have it denounced as “filthy””” (Quinn Qted. in Birmingham 169). If there is no spectator present, and the spectator was generally feared to be women or children, then an act could not be defined as obscene.

Beckett alludes to the collapse between public and private spheres in *Murphy*. Murphy continually wrestles with the threat of someone unexpectedly entering his bedroom. In the novel’s first scene, the narrator tells us that Murphy had “neglected to take down the [telephone] receiver,” a crucial oversight since a failure “to answer it [the phone] at once” would cause “his landlady” (Miss Carridge) to “come running to do so” (4). Later, Celia stands outside Murphy’s door, “fumbling in her bag with a coin” (18). Determining that “if her thumb felt the head [of the coin] she would go up; if her devil’s finger, down,” Celia suddenly hears “an appalling sound” from Murphy’s room and barges inside. At this point, Celia discovers Murphy on the

¹⁵⁸ “In 1865, Congress expanded the federal obscenity ban from controls on importation to restrictions on domestic use of the mails. Salacious literature was being sent to Union soldiers, and the Postmaster General had been confiscating these packages with statutory authority” (Hein 26-27)

floor tied to his rocker. “Thus inverted his only direct contact with the floor was made by his face, which was ground against it” (18). Rocking back and forth while tied in the chair, Murphy accidentally flips himself over and lies helpless on the floor of his apartment.

Celia’s reaction to her discovery is depicted as comic by Beckett. As Murphy screams for “[h]elp,” Celia “rendered him every form of assistance known to an old Girl Guide” (18). In fact, Beckett’s association of Celia with the sister organization of the girl scouts directly figures the character as the type of young woman reader needing to be protected—and concurrently standing as a symbol of British morality despite her previous occupation—from the devious sexuality of Murphy. Based on this scene, one might reasonably argue that Beckett imagines his reader as male since the novel spends so much time making fun of Celia and Miss Carridge’s benighted ignorance of Murphy’s actions. It is far from coincidental that two of the novel’s working class female characters attempt to gain access to the privacy of Murphy’s room since the obscenity debates intersected with wide-ranging changes in gendered discourse. The extent of this transformation was described by Malcolm Cowley in his testimony in the British Obscenity Trial for *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1960):

There are a certain number of short Anglo-Saxon words for bodily functions that were regarded until World War I as being wholly part of a secret language of men. . . . These words were used in the smoking room, in the bar room, in the barbershop, and no woman was supposed to know them unless she was an utterly degraded woman. After WWI, women increasingly demanded admission to what had been the sacred places of men. The smoking room, the bar room, the barbershop even, and demanded knowledge of the secret language of men. . . . There is no more secret language of males. That has been abolished (Qted. in Glass 357).

Although the opening scene from *Murphy* does not contain any of the explicit language Cowley discusses in relation to D.H. Lawrence's 1928 novel, it does express the anxiety a great many male writers felt over the perceived incursions of women readers into a previously male dominated discourse. Loren Glass additionally argues that testimonies on obscenity and censorship like Cowley's confirm that "many male authors considered censorship to be a form of emasculation" as women increasingly demanded "admission" into and "knowledge" of male dominated literary spheres (358). While women were certainly not the only kind of new readers perceived as driving the obscenity and censorship debates, they did garner a fair share of the blame and attention, an issue to which Beckett's novel alludes.

Indeed, weighing the manner in which the female characters of the novel impose judgments and demands upon Murphy, the reader observes traces of Cowley's—and presumably Beckett's—anxieties over a demanding and censoring female audience. Miss Counihan, Beckett's jilted fiancée, imagines Murphy "sweating his soul out in the East end, so that I may have all the little luxuries to which I am accustomed" (135), a line which figures the fruit of Murphy's envisioned work as belonging solely to the female character and not to Murphy himself. Also, it is Celia who commands Murphy to abandon his private pursuits in favor of a more respectable identity. "I'll tell you what you can do," Celia states, "You can get up out of that bed, make yourself decent and walk the streets for work" (25). Celia's attempts to figuratively censor or reform Murphy's behavior should be read in a couple of important ways. First, the attempt to send Murphy to work connects to early twentieth century theories of disability. Specifically, there was a perceived link between physical ability and moral character. If an individual—specifically a working age male—was out of work, this could lead to all kinds of perversity. "Perversion" then was viewed as a "likely cause of economic dependency"

(Nielsen 109). Murphy, as the novel tells us repeatedly, is an economically dependent figure in the early part of the novel.

Second, Beckett describes Celia's attempts to reform Murphy as its own kind of emasculation. Even though Celia rationalizes her motivations for sending Murphy out to look for work as an "attempt[s] to make a man out of Murphy" (40), Beckett feminizes Murphy's job search rituals. Wearing a "suit" which "was not green, but aeruginous," as the narrator tells us, Murphy's clothes "descend[ed] clear off the body as far as mid-thigh" and is topped off by "a lemon made-up bow tie presented as though in derision by a collar and dickey combination carved from a single sheet of celluloid and without seam" (44). While Murphy's outfit, with its oversized and colorful dimensions, appears to more closely resemble an outfit worn in their circus than one worn by an able-bodied man on a job search, Murphy's hyperbolic attire satirizes Celia's attempts to reform Murphy. The narrator's ironic statement that "Murphy never wore a waistcoat" because "[I]t made him feel like a woman" (44) underscores the comic elements of Murphy's reformed identity. This scene in *Murphy* is no doubt played comically because Beckett felt he had a natural ally in his readers who believed that attempts to preemptively censor literature on the grounds that it might influence or corrupt a reader--male or female--who was not prone to fully understand, nor even move to look at the work in question, was nonsensical.¹⁵⁹

While obscenity and censorship are not the primary animating forces of Beckett's novel, these issues intersect with similar or related reading and behavioral practices in the novel. Most notably, Beckett's novel rejects the very concept of epistemological certainty, as it relates not

¹⁵⁹ During his testimony "as a witness in support of the libel accusations" of his friend Boss Sinclair against St. John Gregory's book *As I was Going Down Sackville Street* in 1937, "the counsel of the defense" accused Beckett of producing another book containing obscene content, *Whoroscope*. Beckett argued that the book "had been privately printed for circulation among friends (Knowlson 255-258). Since Beckett's readership remained very small this early in his career, he clearly saw his reading audience as an essentially private one.

just to obscenity but to a variety of concept. This argument is supported by the narrator's characterization of Celia's attempts to read or interpret Murphy's actions while relying on incomplete or missing evidence of his activities, an action Beckett no doubt viewed as indicative of an entire group of lower class or non-professional readers. "She knew nothing of this recreation, in which Murphy had not felt the need to indulge while she was with him" (19). As Murphy partially explains to Celia, his actions in the rocking chair are not as obscene as they outwardly appear. Attempting to enter a trance and stop his heart as Mr. Neary has done, Murphy had "gone to sleep, though sleep was hardly the word, in the chair, the next thing he was having a heart attack" (19). Although Murphy holds "back nothing that might alarm her" (19), Celia demonstrates an inability to comprehend the significance of the information Murphy has given her. ¹⁶⁰

Whereas Celia tries to reform Murphy without fully comprehending the motives, thoughts, and feelings behind his actions, Celia and Miss Counihan are not the only characters associated with impaired reading. In addition to Murphy's verbal pathology, Beckett's novel tells us that "Murphy is a strict non-reader" (99). Although a close reading of the entire novel exposes the complexity or deceit of this statement since the narrator informs us later that Murphy had discarded "his books, his pictures, his postcards, his musical scores and instruments [. . .] in that order" (113), it is clear that Beckett wishes to distinguish Murphy, or Murphy's method of reading, from other characters in the novel. In the most basic sense, Murphy exhibits an inability to interpret narrative discourses in the normative way (s) as he always seems to read these

¹⁶⁰ Murphy's attempts to explain his ritual to Celia might be contrasted with Stephen Daedalus's "contrast[s]" between "the 'static' emotion elicited by the proper arts with the 'kinetic' emotion elicited by the improper arts, including pornography" (Glass 346) in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. As Glass notes, the idea that the "mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing" and not "excite[d] by sexual impulses or lustful thoughts" came to be seen as one of the primary distinctions between literature and obscenity.

discourses from the outside. As a result, Murphy's interpretations of people, events, and language are impaired. When he goes to look for work, his actions—when they are not strictly mollified or controlled by Celia—betray a character who strictly and narrowly interprets the narrative discourse of the workforce. Murphy's choice of a brightly colored and ill-fitting suit, for example, reveal an important aspect of Murphy's mind in that he sees daily work as defined by strict dress codes. Similarly, Murphy enacts an exaggerated version of the time based work week "to cultivate the sense of time as money which he had heard was highly prized in business circles" (43). "Whether we assume," as Quayson states, "that Beckett was finely attuned to the nature of cognitive disorders because of his own personal experiences or whether we conclude that the autistic dynamic in *Murphy* reflects his extra sensitivity as the literary antennae for a condition that was to be properly named only several years later" (860) does not so much matter. Rather, I would argue, Murphy's disability reveals as much about weaknesses found in normative reading as it does about Murphy's cognitive deficits.

Indeed, when we talk about mind reading in the context of disability, society tends to frame this cognitive skill in binaries; in other words, either one can properly communicate by effortlessly and intuitively understanding the thoughts, beliefs and desires of other people or one cannot. In terms of fiction, mind reading—in the sense that the reader attributes these states to imaginary characters—fundamentally determines whether the reader sees a character in a work of fiction as moral, or an act as obscene. Furthermore, as Lisa Zunshine notes: "Literary critics, in particular, know that the process of attributing thoughts, beliefs, and desires to other people may lead to misinterpreting those thoughts, beliefs, and desires" (198). Certainly, when we consider Beckett's experiences with censorship, it is not difficult to understand Beckett's interest in the cognitive and social underpinnings of misinterpretations. Because while mind reading is

an instinctive cognitive process that can be more or less developed in certain individuals, it is also a socially-acquired skill. If we accept that Celia and Miss Counihan are thinly veiled versions of Beckett's "corrupted readers," then, we may presume that they have been educated under a systematized method of reading instruction that taught them to mind read based on recognizing consistent cultural cues.¹⁶¹

It is because Murphy stands outside of neurotypical culture then—in the sense that his cognitive disability prevents him from participating in recognizable and normative forms of narrative and discourse—that characters are unable to correctly understand the motivations and mental states behind Murphy's behaviors. Indeed, Beckett appears keen to associate Murphy not with the learned behavior of society, but with primal, even animalistic modes of cognition. When Murphy lies to Celia over the phone, for example, telling her that he "expect[s] a friend," she tells him that "[t]here isn't any such animal" (5). In comparison, the narrator describes Miss Counihan as "[f]or an Irish girl [. . .] quite exceptionally anthropoid" (71). Beckett's narrator implies this is not necessarily a laudatory trait, though. "How far this constitutes an advantage is what every man must decide for himself" (71). Indeed, human characteristics are connected to their own kinds of immoral or obscene behavior, a fact Beckett seems especially eager to point out in the text. The "only visible human characteristic" of Neary's manservant Cooper is "a morbid craving for alcoholic depressant" (34). On the contrary, despite Ticklepenny's assertion that he once saw Murphy "dead drunk," the narrator finds it necessary to inform the audience that "the sad part was that Murphy never touched it" (52). In term of obscenity and vice, Beckett points out that the reader should recoil from behavior that is more recognizably human instead of from images of the body and human sexuality.

¹⁶¹ As I discussed in my chapter on *The Secret Agent*, reading in this model is perceived as an acquired skill or series of skills, not an avenue towards philosophy or truth.

Beyond subverting the censor, the connection between Murphy and animal behavior serves another aesthetic purpose. Namely, if we consider the etymology of the term “aesthetics” as referring to things material and perceptible to the senses, then I would argue that Murphy’s inability to deny the influence of the material world on his mind, to suppress the instincts of the body, provides an opportunity for Beckett to test the limits of a “shared human physiological [and psychological] capacity” (Potter180) in his audience. Beckett takes great care to develop scenes that evaluate the boundaries of—and role of the individual body in—deriving meaning from previously unexamined social acts. As a case in point, Murphy recounts a joke to Celia: ““Why did the barmaid champagne?””/ ““Because the stout pour bitter”” (85). After Celia does not laugh, the narrator explains the significance of the joke to Murphy:

This was a joke that did not amuse Celia, at the best of times and places it could not have amused her. That did not matter. So far from being adapted to her, it was not addressed to her. It amused Murphy, that was all that mattered. He always found it most funny, more than most funny, clonic, it and one other concerning a bottle of stout and a card party. These were Gilmgrim jokes, so called from the Lilliputian wine. He staggered about on the floor in his bare feet, one time amateur theological student’s shirt, dickey and lemon bow, overcome by the toxins of this simple little joke (85).

There is much to unpack in this passage. First, Murphy intellectual placement of a simple joke in a particular genre or narrative tradition—they were Gilmgrim jokes—reinforces the unintelligibility of high modernism for the lower class reader. While Murphy identifies the joke as “toxic” or poisonous to the speaker, the joke is ultimately too steeped in its own “self-referentiality” for Celia to understand.

Second, Murphy's response to the joke is firmly located in his own body—absent of any wider social meaning or dimension. In terms of the reader, this passage—with its emphasis on Murphy's "staggering on his bare feet"—agrees with the argument of Adrienne Janus, who professes that Beckett "use[s] the sound effect of laughter not only to mark the limits of reading as a process of visualizing images and interpreting meaning, but also to inaugurate a mode of reading where the body responds, not as an interpreter of meaning or activator of images, but simply as a body" (153).¹⁶² Hence, Murphy's stab at humor becomes a deliberately solitary, not a social act.¹⁶³

Like many of the other cognitively "othered" characters in this dissertation, Murphy's difference is embodied. Yet, by so closely associating the character with literary issues of obscenity, censorship and figurative reader response—in the sense that Celia fails to derive meaning from his stab at humor—Beckett most closely aligns disability with popular culture and literary experimentation. This idea is supported by Ulrika Maude's wider analysis of the influence images of "epileptics, hysterics, and sufferers of other neurological conditions" (14) had on popular culture. Of particular relevance, Maude notes that "cabaret and vaudeville"—which were in themselves major influences on Beckett's works—gained 'a new repertoire of movements, grimaces, tics and gestures' (14) as the result of the wide dissemination of images of disability. "So fashionable and intriguing did hysterics and neurological disorders prove around the turn of the century that they generated, besides a new performance style, a number of songs and literary works, such as Guy de Maupassant's 1884 story 'Le Tic' ('The Spasm'), or to give

¹⁶² Ulrika Maude also notes "Henri Bergson's: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic [. . .] was itself centered around the notion of 'automatic gesture and word'" (14).

¹⁶³ Rachel Potter similarly discusses the role of laughter as a solitary act in the final section of Djuna Barnes *Nightwood*. Particularly, Potter argues that Robin Vote is a "body for subterranean laughter" in *Nightwood* since her "laughter" is "located firmly in herself, and [. . .] in the concluding scene of the book, specially differentiated from [laughter as] a response to other individuals" (Potter 181).

an Anglo-American example, T.S. Eliot's 1915 poem 'Hysteria' (Maude 14). Murphy's exaggerated laughter, then, identifies the character as neurologically "othered."

Murphy's insouciance to Celia's emotional and intellectual bewilderment betrays an autistic pathology as well, however. As Bruce Mills explains, "the imaginative faculty" in many individuals with autism and Asperger's "is employed not to communicate but to develop a kind of internal order. An autistic's art may evoke certain intellectual and emotional responses from an audience, but, ultimately, is indifferent to them" (127). As Mill's argument highlights, autistic narratives, beyond being "indifferent" to the cognitive and emotional states of other minds, construct themselves around private order and meaning. Yet, as an "artistic" or aesthetic position, autistic difference draws the reader's attention to the impossibility of developing a preemptive definition of obscenity since the writer never truly knows how his or her reader's will react to narrative. While Murphy finds his joke "toxic," his words and meaning cannot infect Celia's consciousness. As such, Murphy's neurological difference symbolizes a figurative autistic sentiment in Modernist aesthetics.

The preceding scene, furthermore, underscores not only the difficulty of reading other minds for the neurotypical and non-neurotypical individual alike, but draws attention to the amount of "our thought" that "is unconscious, not in the Freudian sense of being repressed, but in the sense that it operates beneath the level of cognitive awareness, inaccessible to consciousness and operating too quickly to be focused on" (Lakoff 10). Despite having a profound interest and personal experience with psychoanalysis, Beckett never followed his therapy sessions with Wilfred Bion to their conclusion and often expressed ambivalent feelings about the worth of psychoanalysis.¹⁶⁴ In terms of his fiction, Beckett's later life musings profess

¹⁶⁴ Although Beckett took extensive notes on his therapy sessions with Bion—and on psychoanalytical concepts in general—Beckett's later writings on the subject of psychoanalysis suggest that the writer viewed Freudian or

that his interest in neurology the materiality of the brain and its disfunctions influenced his literary style more than Freudian theory. In a 1981 interview with Lawrence Shainberg, for example, after Shainberg sent the elder Beckett a copy of a book on neurosurgery, Beckett states, “I have long believed that here in the end is the writer’s best chance, gazing into the synaptic chasm” (Salisbury 320). This quotation supports the contention that Beckett’s work was influenced by the cognitive revolution at the turn of the century.¹⁶⁵ More to the point, Beckett believed so strongly in the material influence of the brain on human behavior that he professed that “to want the brain to function is the height of crassness [. . .] The brain has better things to do, stopping and listening to itself, for example” (Qtd. in Salisbury 321).

Beckett’s preceding contention provides valuable insight into some of the discontinuities between what the reader—and other characters in Beckett’s novel—alternatingly interpret as willed or unconscious action. The reader should note that while Murphy intellectualizes his body’s response to his two-line witticism to Celia, in the sense that he explains why he finds these kinds of jokes appealing, Beckett’s novel characterizes Murphy’s physical contortions as an unexplainable and uncontrolled response, a fact that disconcerts Celia. “The fit was so much more like one of epilepsy than of laughter that Celia felt alarm” (85). Indeed, Celia’s association of Murphy’s laughter with a neurological disorder that is defined by sudden recurring attacks of motor, sensory or psychic malfunction that may be accompanied by convulsive seizures and loss of consciousness illuminate the role disability plays in Beckett’s narrative. Specifically, since Beckett attributes a great deal of Murphy’s solipsistic and obscene behavior to unconscious

psychoanalytical approaches to his physical and mental ailments as addressing but one part of these issues. “I think it helped me control the panic [. . .] I used to go back to my digs and write notes on what had happened, on what I’d come up with. I’ve never found them since. Maybe they still exist somewhere” (Salisbury 318).

¹⁶⁵ See Vicki Plock’s chapter “‘Nerves Unstrung’”: Neuroscience and Ergography In ‘Eumaeus’” in her work *Joyce, Medicine and Modernity*.

neurological events, Murphy's behavior resists straightforward and neat definitions and interpretation. Mind reading is impossible because action is removed from its social dimension.

Cultural Assumptions, Expectations, and Disability:

As I hope I have made clear, definitions of obscenity are founded on notions of a shared cultural consciousness and narrative expectations. The reader, in other words, assumes that what is perceived to be obscene to him or her is obscene to society at large, a position which Beckett fundamentally rejects. Truly, Beckett's fiction looks for ways—be it pathologized language or social interaction—to articulate the aesthetic value of a cultural subjectivity that is somehow impaired or damaged.

It's a paradox, but with old age, the more the possibilities diminish, the better chance you have. With diminished concentration, loss of memory, obscured intelligence—what you, for example, might call 'brain damage'—the more chance there is for saying something closest to what one really is. Even though everything seems inexpressible, there remains the need to express. A child needs to make a sandcastle even though it makes no sense.

In old age, with a few grains of sand, one has the greatest possibility (Beckett qtd. in Salisbury 321).

As I will discuss in greater depth in my next section, Beckett was writing at a time when autism did not exist as a category of illness separate from that of schizophrenia nor had psychologists identified Asperger's syndrome as a sub category of autism defined by individuals with prolific but "unnatural" speech patterns. But, in contemplating the ways in which "brain damage" ironically moves an individual towards a greater degree of authenticity—in the sense that the thoughts and actions of the very young child and very old man or woman suffering from

dementia are less aware and controlled by society's expectations—Beckett prepares society to conceive of an identity like Asperger's.

In *Murphy*, Beckett points to several instances where characters' interpretations of stories and events are limited by their reliance on a neurotypical, narrative subjectivity. As one example, Beckett gives his readers the story of the "old boy" in the novel. Miss Carridge, Celia and Murphy's landlady, recounts that the "old boy" lived upstairs from the aforementioned characters until he "had cut his throat [shaving] by accident" (88). The ultimate veracity of Miss Carridge's narrative of these events, however, is placed in question. She tells her tenants that "he" [old boy] was "taken from us," a "striking use of the passive voice [that] did not spring from any fatalistic notions in the mind of Miss Carridge, but from her conviction, which as the landlady she felt it her duty to hold and utter as often as possible" (88). The connection between Miss Carridge's use of the "passive voice" and Beckett's more ambiguous use of the term "duty" is intriguing for this essay's wider discussion of Modernist aesthetics. Clearly, Miss Carridge feels the need to mollify or soften her speech. While she may truly be unsure as to whether the old boy committed suicide or not, she feels duty bound by a set of societal expectations to frame this event in a particular way. The use of the passive voice implies an act in which something simply occurred rather than one in which a specific action was taken by a particular person, i.e. the old boy purposely taking the razor to his throat to take his own life.

In terms of narrative aesthetics, the passage alludes to modernist debates regarding the proper parameters and uses of art. While naming the old boy's death as a suicide would certainly not have been viewed as obscene, Miss Carridge's motivations for mollifying her speech—it would be socially inappropriate and upsetting to the listener—reminds us of Ezra Pound's defense of *Ulysses*'s obscene content and language. As Rachel Potter explains, Ezra Pound—

while admitting *Ulysses* was obscene in places—argues that *Ulysses*'s obscenity was a “a product of its realism” and that the novel “ha[d] a particular social function” (Potter 97) in that it depicts life as it really is, not how readers wished it were.¹⁶⁶

Beckett complicates the idea of “duty” in *Murphy*, though. Although Beckett initially frames Miss Carridge’s euphemistic speech as a product of individual and cultural morality—the wish not to upset or shock her listener with the unpleasant details of the old boy’s death—her moral conviction is exchanged for economic necessity a short time later. Miss Carridge expresses concern that the official “inquest” into the old boy’s death determined that it was “felo-de-se” (89), or suicide. The legal determination of the old boy’s death as a suicide clearly endangers Miss Carridge’s economic livelihood as she will be unable to rent out his room since this ruling ‘got the room a bad name all over Islington’” (89). Like many issues in Beckett’s fiction, this scene forces the reader to look at issues of meaning and language from several different angles. Is it truly a suicide, or is it just perceived to be a suicide—in a similar way that *Ulysses* was perceived to be obscene because a censorship court named it was such--because the legal establishment says it is?

As Beckett does several times in *Murphy*, the case of the old boy’s death is reflected back on the figurative reader’s inability to properly gauge the motivations and mental states behind someone else’s actions as well as his or her inability to understand the workings of his or her own mind. While the narrator checks Miss Carridge’s speech for its inaccuracies, “‘he told me when he first came here he might have a seizure at any minute . . .’ All lies”—the novel concurrently informs us that Miss Carridge lies about the particulars of old boy’s death and does not understand what motivations he could have had for taking his own life. “[A]nd it’s what I

¹⁶⁶ Potter’s discussion focuses primarily on the idea of the psychic censor in *Ulysses* as Joyce embedded most of his more controversial content within the unspoken, interior monologues of his characters.

said to the c'roner. A man doesn't pay a month's advance one day and do away with himself the next. It isn't natural.' She really convinced herself with this argument" (88). Beckett may offer the reader no concrete answers to the questions his novel poses, but his writing is precise. After this last statement, the narrator does not identify Miss Carridge's speech as a "lie." Instead, the passage alerts us to the impossibility of forming concrete judgments on the mental states behind another person's behavior or actions.

Still, Beckett uses Murphy's cognitive disability to show the reader the influence society, and economic society particularly, play in constructing false narratives. Even though Murphy follows Celia's instructions to look for work, the character demonstrates not only a stubborn impulse to follow his own desires and wishes, but an inability (disability) to shape his public actions in culturally acceptable ways. When Murphy abruptly decides to suspend his job search "to take his lunch at once, more than an hour before he was due to salivate" (48), he enters a public setting where he is expected to behave a certain way. Yet, Beckett uses this scene in the novel to show the reader all of the ways that Murphy does not conform to cultural expectations and the ways in which Murphy's non conformity exposes the more opaque elements of normative society's linguistic and cultural performances.

The contrast between censored and normative behavior and Murphy's social "disability" starts when Murphy sits down for his meal. Stimulated at once by "the sensation of the seat of a chair coming together with his drooping posteriors," Murphy is impelled to "r[i]se at once and repeat[ed] the sit, lingeringly and with intense concentration" (48). The passage reminds the reader of the opening scenes of the novel. The narrator informs the reader that Murphy found the sensation "delicious," but Murphy's "second sit" is labeled "a great disappointment" (48). Murphy's entire set of behaviors in the restaurant alert us to Beckett's theory on the role

“obscured intelligence” or “brain damage” might play in aesthetics. As Beckett does in the beginning of the novel, Murphy’s “delicious” sensations are figured as strange and unintelligible to normative ideas of behavior. The scene above is important in one other regard. While the opening scene of the novel portrays Murphy within the privacy of his own room, Murphy enacts the preceding ritual in the textual space of a public gathering space. But, Murphy seems unaware or unconcerned about how the ritual of standing up and sitting down on his chair to relish the initial physical sensation would be construed by those around him. Once again, Beckett seems to hint that Murphy’s action may be about more than sensual pleasure or relaxation, but the reader is given no definitive means of interpretation.

From an historical perspective, Murphy’s unregulated actions align him with a twentieth century society that was drawing increasing distinctions between willpower and intelligence—concepts that were previously “considered indistinguishable” (Denevi 2). In other words, while medical society today can recognize an individual as intelligent, but unable to control certain actions or behaviors—whether we call those behaviors ADHD and/or autism—Victorian society had yet to make such distinctions. When society did begin to draw these distinctions around the turn of the century, though, intelligent individuals who could not control behavior, like Murphy, were defined as “morally defective” (2). Furthermore, Sir George Frederick Still (1868-1941) defined “moral control,” which these individuals presumably lacked, as “the control of an action in the conformity with the idea of the good of all” (Still qtd. in Denevi 2). To prove that these kind of individuals existed, Still referenced a variety of case studies, one of which was a “five-year-old” who “was extremely passionate and impulsive” as “he went around the family five times one night . . . ‘in saying Goodnight’” (qtd. in Denevi 2). Although this action certainly appears more eccentric than immoral, a great deal of society clung to the belief

that these kinds of individuals were ultimately dangerous to “normal” society. As Still declares in one lecture ““the pernicious influence which some of these morally defective children may exert on other children is appalling to think of”” (Qtd. in Denevi 2). So, while Murphy’s unregulated and repetitive actions in the novel are rarely sexual or obscene in nature, society might have understood these behaviors as being the basis of obscenity and having the potential to corrupt those around him.

Once more, while *Murphy* may have been composed prior to Hans Asperger’s essay on high functioning autistic children, issues of sexuality, disability and social codes of behavior have long been interconnected. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner clearly based Benjy Compson’s castration on his society’s assumptions that the disabled were unable to control their sexual impulses in normative ways. Mental asylums and hospitals in the 1930s would have been replete with mentally ill patients who were “regarded as hypersexual, and in some cases as predators of [non-disabled] children, or as inherently and inevitably victimized—but in any case as possessing a sexuality requiring control and monitoring by others” (Wilkerson 4). Similarly, “sexual deviance” of many kinds—behavior ranging from promiscuity to homosexuality—was attributed to cognitive disability. Still, Beckett is doing something different with Murphy. While he associates the character with disability and normative society’s concepts of sexual deviance and willed obscenity, Murphy’s actions never completely follow these epistemological structures. While Murphy’s actions focus on the pleasure of the body, and ignore normative social conventions, they never cross the line into traditional definitions of deviance and obscenity.

If we accept that Murphy has something akin to Asperger’s—at least so far as his behaviors and cognitive characteristics mirror our understanding of the term and identity today—

then Murphy's willful acts of obscenity can be interpreted in a new light. Indeed, Hans Asperger noted a non-censored type of sexuality in the adolescents he observed in his initial case study. "[S]ince any feelings of shame or guilt are absent [in individuals with autism], the children may masturbate in public, exhibitionistically, and they cannot be made to desist" (Asperger 79). In *Murphy*, Beckett certainly attributes a shameless and willful psychology to his main character. Concurrently, critics interested in the medical humanities like Gary Winship have argued that Murphy "presents many of the secondary symptoms of schizophrenia [. . .] socially phobic with an unhealthy fetish for sado-masochistic bondage" (344). While Winship's reading of Murphy as schizophrenic fits the historical context of Beckett's novel, the character is neither "phobic" of social situations (he is mostly disinterested or unaware of them) nor does his professed "fetish" fit a pattern of sado-masochism.

The reader's difficulty in interpreting Murphy's behavior stems from Beckett's conflation of images of disability, normative concepts of obscenity and Murphy's social unawareness. Certainly, as Pease argues, "The pornographic" or obscene narrative "contains a set of assumptions about its own consumption which always involves an engagement or incitation of the body on the part of the reader or viewer" (Pease 167). In other words, readers assume what is obscene to them is obscene to the characters through which they figuratively enter the novel or work of fiction. Disability, though, will disrupt the "linear account that is pornography's discursive form" (Pease 89) since the experience of sexuality can be so radically different for the disabled individual. Oddly, an apparently obscene act like masturbation, for the autist, can be entirely about the physical sensation—no different from humming—completely separated from the social aspects of sexual experience. Masturbation for the autist can be a self-initiated act of asexual pleasure, not the replication and/or imitation of the social act of sexual intercourse. Of

course, there is a difference between what these types of actions mean to the disabled individual and/or autistic and how they are viewed by a neurotypical individual.

This phenomenon, whereby the normative reader attributes obscene actions to the rituals of a “non-normative” or non-neurotypical individual is discussed in depth by Rachel Groner in relation to autistic rituals and sexuality. Groner discusses Temple Grandin’s “squeeze chute” as an example of the unintelligibility of autistic sexuality. To explain, Grandin observes that “many autistic children crave pressure stimulation even though they cannot tolerate being touched” (58). Grandin observed this issue in herself and “got the idea of building a device, patterned after the cattle squeeze chute” (59) she witnessed on a farm. This device allowed her to apply pressure to various parts of her body while confined. Grandin noticed that upon exiting the device she “felt calm and serene” a sensation that helped her control her body and impulses afterwards (Grandin 59). Groner notes that “while Grandin would not have made this connection herself, someone who read her description out of context might easily assume that it is intended to produce sexual pleasure” (275). In *Murphy*, his chair is described as a cognitive prosthesis, “an aid to life in his mind which he had never before been parted” (113). I do not mean to suggest that Murphy’s chair completely fits Grandin’s example but to point out that the interpretative context or impasse is similar insofar as Murphy’s chair tests the neurotypical reader’s ability to decipher “non-normative” or disabled rituals. He or she cannot confidently evaluate Murphy’s actions as sexual or obscene because disability subverts these traditional interpretations.

Beckett and Popular Culture:

Like many modernist writers, Beckett is trying to move beyond the familiar tropes and symbols of tradition as they separately defined popular and elite culture, then. Leaving aside Beckett’s early struggles with censorship and his attempts to subvert the censor—and the Hicklin

Rule, specifically—by making his prose unintelligible to the average or middle class reader, *Murphy* borrows widely from popular culture as the novel is littered with elements of slapstick, crude jokes, and stock characters based on recognizable or familiar archetypes.¹⁶⁷ Despite the “strong leanings towards popular culture forms throughout Beckett’s work” (Goodall 290), however, he showed a lifelong concern about the commercial and economic popularity of his work. Although Beckett’s most commercially accessible play, *Waiting for Godot*, “attract[ed] performers whose background was primarily in comedic and variety performance,” Beckett “provided them [these actors] with no license to exploit the qualities that had made them popular in their own domains” (Goodall 290). Beckett instructed his actors, for example, to limit “their expressive capacity” (Qtd. in Goodall 290) on stage.

In many ways, *Murphy* is emblematic of Beckett’s attitudes towards popular culture. While the novel employs elements of slapstick, as when Murphy falls on his face trying to remove himself from his chair, the reader finds him or herself laughing in the most unexpected places. As I explained previously, obscenity would generally not be compatible with slapstick in the early twentieth century novel. Yet, Beckett utilizes this element of popular culture to defamiliarize the reader with these tropes by placing them in alien or unexpected literary contexts.

If Beckett mines popular culture for inspiration, *Murphy* simultaneously critiques popular culture for its needless consistency, a consistency founded on satisfying the expectations of the middle-class reader. Beckett attributes many kinds of artificial actions—in the sense that these actions are motivated by the wish to please the listener or audience—in the novel to the effects of an unreflective middle-class populace that endlessly repeats the same words and behavior.

¹⁶⁷ For a larger discussion of the sources and inspirations for the novels secondary characters, please see Knowlson, pp. 200-201.

Beckett characterizes Murphy's waitress, Vera, for example, as exhibiting mechanistic speech and behavior; she is a "willing little bit of sweated labour, incapable of betraying the slogan of her slavers (50). In one regard, Vera is the epitome of overly deferential speech and behavior as she toils in a profession that expects her to maintain a professional mask of proper and polite comportment in the face of her paying customers. In her own way, Vera is following a script that specifies proper and normative behavior.

Vera's unreflective performance, though, is disrupted and exposed by Murphy as he first poorly attempts to emulate and then subverts the mechanistic cultural performance of the middle class restaurant. "'Bring me,' in the voice of an usher resolved to order the chef's special selection for a school outing. [. . .] 'A cup of tea and a packet of assorted biscuits.'" Vera responds to Murphy's awkward verbal affect by "murmur[ing]": "Vera, to you dear." (49). Vera's response "was not a caress" (49) and the narrator's need to share this information with Beckett's audience alerts us to Murphy's inability (disability) to discern this aspect of Vera's behavior. Unable to read Vera's verbal cues, the reader discerns that Murphy misinterprets Vera's words for genuine feeling, not half-concealed disgust.

While Murphy can neither mollify his behavior nor accurately read Vera's mental states, it is Vera's performance that Beckett deconstructs. Vera attempts to maintain control over her professional and social performance in front of Murphy, striving to end "her performance in much better style than she had begun" even as Murphy "make[s] the sounds as of a flushing-box taxed beyond its powers" in the middle of the crowded restaurant (49-50). Vera's initial justifications for politely enduring Murphy's public machinations derive from economic considerations because "the customer or sucker was paying for his gutrot ten times what it cost to produce and five times what it cost to fling in his face, it was only reasonable to defer to his

complaints up to but not exceeding fifty percent of the exploitation” (50). As he does with Miss Carridge’s euphemistic story of the old boy’s death, Beckett attributes Vera’s inauthentic speech and demeanor to a society that values economic capital over purely symbolic capital.

Furthermore, Beckett associates this society with its particular brand of obscenity as the narrator characterizes the economic capital of the restaurant as “gut rot.” Keeping in mind that the Hicklin Rule focused on obscenity’s effects on the “unregulated minds” of society, Beckett implies that a society built on economic capital—of which mass or popular culture is a part—poisons society from the inside by its focus on maximizing profits through a base, unregulated relationship to the body. Vera’s performance, therefore, symbolizes the specious ideology of “moral control” as her conformity supports the malignant aspects of capitalism.

Murphy’s pathologized speech and behavior expose the more mechanistic elements of an economically based mass culture, however. After Murphy asks for more “tea,” despite having not “drank [. . .] more than a third of it [his previous cup],” . . . “Vera show[s] signs of bridling” (50) in the sense that she is no longer able to maintain her professional and cultural performance. When Murphy further complains that ““they [the kitchen] have been too generous with the cowjuice,” Vera apparently becomes completely undone as “generous and cowjuice were the keywords here. No waitress could hold out against their mingled overtones of gratitude and mammary organs. And Vera was essentially a waitress” (50). As a result, Murphy “defrauds” the establishment by getting “1.83 cups” of tea while “paying for one” (51). Beckett concludes this passage by once again asking his readers to comprehend the narrative logic, linearity and cohesion of this event in the text: “Try it sometime, gentle skimmer” (51). Indeed, Beckett’s ironic advice underscores the novelist’s awareness of the way Murphy’s behavior makes narrative unintelligible.

While Murphy's frustrating behavior is portrayed comically, it is also framed by disability. Murphy's speech may "fall dead" when it attempts to mimic normal or everyday speech, but it also portends an anthropological dimension since his speech portrays an originality consistent with a kind of cultural primitivism. In addition to referring to milk as "cow juice," Murphy later refers to Mr. Endon—a schizophrenic—as the "the most biddable little gag in the entire institution" (143) and humorously diagnoses a "corpulent middleaged woman" as having a "very bad [case of] duck's disease" (58). As Beckett's narrator explains, "duck's disease is a distressing pathological condition in which the thighs are suppressed and the buttocks spring directly from behind the knees, aptly described in Steiss's nosonomy and Panygoptosis" (58). Beyond being comic in this scene, Murphy's speech is a synthesis of pathology and creativity as it is defined by his use of simple or childlike vocabulary as well as the incomprehensibility of his speech—since it arranges these simple words in unconventional ways--for the listener. In the scene above, Beckett's narrator is essentially a linguistic mediator, explaining the visual and comic imagery behind Murphy's choice of words to the reader and drawing attention to the interpretative chasm between Murphy and the other characters in the novel, who most certainly mistake Murphy's speech for a form of aphasia that partially prevents him from articulating coherent thought or ideas.

Once more, Beckett appears to see aesthetic potential and creativity in pathology, an idea that was explicitly linked to autistic identity by Hans Asperger, who noted that his patients retained "a spontaneous way with words" consistent with "the charm of child language" (71). In fact, Asperger argued that his patients were "especially rich in original language," but that this originality stemmed from the retention of atavistic skills. "Beyond the toddler age, in our experience at least, such spontaneously formed expressions are found only in autistic children"

(71). Asperger marveled at the linguistic creativity of his patients as one “eleven-year- old autistic boy” stated “‘I can’t do this orally, only headily’ (He wanted to say that he understood something but could not express it verbally).” Other expressions referred to sleep as “‘long but thin’” and “‘pictures’” as “‘to an art eye [. . .] nice, but I don’t like them’” (71).

Taken together, the originality of language observed by Asperger and present in Murphy derives from the absence of a conditioned or developed sense of theory of the mind. Murphy’s mind and language are unregulated in the sense that the autistic brain learns language in accordance with private meaning, and maintains these linguistic and epistemological associations long past the age when the individual begins to suppress these original experiments with language—in response to the demands of one’s larger culture or society--in exchange for more formal or less imaginative structures. Around the same time as Asperger noted the originality of language in his patients, Leo Kanner observed “a child who invariably exclaimed ‘Peter-eater’ when he saw a sauce pan. This association began when his mother accidentally dropped a saucepan at the same time as reciting a nursery rhyme to him, beginning ‘Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater’” (Wing 94). Possessing unknown significance for everyone but the boy and the boy’s mother, the child’s speech is concurrently creative and a symbol of a non-teleological theory of language.

What then does this have to do with popular culture and obscenity? Murphy’s atavistic pathology connects to modernist debates regarding the role of the body in the creation of culture. For instance, while swear words drew the attention of the censors in the same way that scenes of explicit sexuality did, “dirty words” Loren Glass argues, “were associated with a very specific ethnographic group: lower-class English speaking men, the ‘folk’ of the modern Anglophone world” (“Modernism and Dirty Words” 213). As Glass further explains, many “philologists

have held that speech originated in utterances closely akin to swearing” and that there was a “corporeal logic of this origination” since “such expletive sounds were not invented by man but were physiologically determined by the shape of his chest and the form of his nasal cavities, throat, and larynx” (213). Although there is very little in the way of “dirty words” in *Murphy*, the novel retains the idea that the body is concurrently the basis of culture and a site of resistance to culture. “The body, while perceived as the outside or limit of culture, was simultaneously inscribed as its organic root, the foundation upon which all culture is built” (Pease 139). As I have already established, Murphy shows an inability to control his body, to shape his actions based on recognizable social and cultural expectations. Yet, since Murphy’s actions are physiologically and not psychologically determined, the disabled body in Beckett’s novel reveals elements of truth and originality that the more controlled bodies of Vera, Celia and Miss. Counihan do not. In short, Murphy represents a type of cultural originality and authenticity that can only derive from physical impairment or “brain damage” as Beckett describes it.

An Illness of the White Mind: Disability, Aesthetic Discourse and the Body

If Beckett “had always,” in the words of his biographer Knowlson “taken a great deal of interest in illnesses, other people’s as well as his own, his visits to the mental hospital [prior to writing *Murphy*] added authenticity to” his “novel” (197-98). While Beckett took great care in *Murphy* to ensure that his characters did not noticeably resemble real life individuals,¹⁶⁸ the second half of the novel—set primarily at Magdalen Mental Mercyseat hospital in North London—displays the author’s clinical knowledge of a range of mental disturbances and their

¹⁶⁸ Knowlson points out that after “he had discovered that people become extremely upset when they recognize either themselves or those dear to them in characters who are cruelly unsympathetic or unsympathetically portrayed [an issue which arose in readings of *More Pricks than Kicks*],” Beckett was probably impelled to “move further away from depicting recognizably real life characters in *Murphy*” (200).

concurrent behaviors. As Beckett describes the patients put under Murphy's charge in the novel:

Melancholics, motionless and brooding, holding their heads and bellies according to type. Paranoids, feverishly covering sheets of paper with complaints against their treatment or verbatim reports of their inner voices. A hebephrenic playing the piano intently. A hypomaniac teaching slosh to a Korsakow's syndrome. An emaciated schitzoid, petrified in a toppling attitude as though condemned to an eternal tableau vivant, his left hand rhetorically extended holding a cigarette half smoked and out, his right, quivering and rigid, pointing upward (101).

Looking at Beckett's novel, the reader may discern that Beckett not only knew the different names and categories of various mental illnesses, but that he understood how the medical establishment attempted to care for and treat these individuals. Murphy is given a set of strict instructions when he is initially hired, for example. Among his instructions: 1) "He would never be rough with any patient;" 2) "Restraint and coercion were sometimes unavoidable, but must always be exerted with the utmost tenderness," and 3) "There were no facts in the M.M.M. Except those sanctioned by the doctor" (96-97). All told, Beckett describes a medical environment where both the behavior of the mentally ill and their treatment by the male nurses like Murphy are highly controlled.

I mention Beckett's attention to realism in order to address how this chapter's reading of Murphy as autistic intersects within Beckett's knowledge of mental illness and the novel's concern over society's definitions of obscenity, mass culture, and literary aesthetics. While autism did not exist as a separate category of mental illness or disability at the time of the publication of Beckett's novel, the term was first used by Eugen Bleuler in his 1911 work

Dementia Praecox, to describe “the most severe schizophrenics . . . [who] live in a world of their own” (Bleuler qtd. in McDonagh 102). Interestingly, while Bleuler is responsible for the modern term schizophrenia—Bleuler argued that the “the underlying condition of praecox was ‘loosening of associations,’ a process by which patients existed in the real world and at the same time turned away from reality (‘autism’) into the world of fantasy, wishes, fears, and symbols” and “maintained that the term dementia praecox should be replaced by a name that combined the Greek words ‘to split’ (schizo) and ‘mind’ (phrene)” (Metzler 28-29)—the applications for Bleuler’s term would change dramatically in the 1920s and 1930s. Specifically, while Bleuler held late in his career that the ‘lower races’ were biologically ‘predispos[ed] to schizophrenia, “doctors and the public frequently linked the Swiss psychologist’s definition of illness not with the marginalized, but with the mainstream” (Metzler 34). Hence, autism—as a subcategory of schizophrenia—came to be viewed as an illness of white personality, not a biologically based disease of the racial “Other.”

Returning to *Murphy*, Beckett tells us that Mr. Endon—one of the patients placed under the main character’s care, “was a schizophrenic of the most amiable variety, at least for the purposes of such humble and envious outsider as Murphy” (111). The novel’s description of Mr. Endon links the character to Bleuler’s definition of autism, insofar as the character’s “amiable” disposition places the character under the diagnostic umbrella of “white” schizophrenia and not the more racialized term dementia praecox. White schizophrenics were viewed as essentially non-violent individuals, “neither to be feared as if criminals nor selectively eliminated as if subnormals” (Metzler 36). White schizophrenics eluded eugenic debates in the 1930s mainly because their mental illness was considered to be a byproduct of their innate intelligence. It was common to describe “patients with schizophrenia as academics, poets, women, eccentrics, and

others who perhaps deviated from, but remained largely within, the norm” (34). In his portrayal of the patients and conditions at Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, Beckett appears to be describing just such a sub-set of individuals since his text informs us that “those that he [Murphy] did see were not all terrifying monsters” (101). Additionally, the “M.M.M. was a sanatorium, not a madhouse nor a home for defectives, and as such admitted only those cases whose prognosis was not hopeless. If the effect of treatment was to render the prognosis hopeless, as was sometimes bound to happen even at M.M.M., then out went that patient, except in very special circumstances” (97).¹⁶⁹

Mr. Endon, while an invalid who “did not dress, but drifted around the wards in a fine dressing gown of scarlet byssus faced with black braid, black silk pyjamas and neo-merovingian poulaines of deepest purple” (112), displays the physical and psychological traits of the “white” intellect as society imagined it. The text informs us that his “tiny body was perfect in every detail” with “features [that] were most delicate, regular and winning” (112). As for his preferred daily activities, “chess” was “Mr. Endon’s one frivolity” (112). Yet, Mr. Endon plays for only “one or two minutes” at a time, and makes each of “his move[s] in the absence of the other [player]” (112). It is at these points that Mr. Endon returns to “his drifting” (112), never fully engaging with the physical world or people in the hospital ward.

While Mr. Endon appears to be a kindred spirit for Murphy in the novel, Beckett draws important distinctions between the two individuals that elucidate the novelist’s views on the role of the body in literary aesthetics. In *Murphy*, Mr. Endon represents a mode of thinking and being which the title character cannot attain. Murphy is described as being “envious” of Mr. Endon as

¹⁶⁹ As Metzl explains: white schizophrenics, in contrast to minorities with similar symptoms, were seen as ultimately docile and rehabilitative. “[S]tories in *Collier’s Weekly*, for example, told of white families who ‘adopted’ docile, white people with schizophrenia, and asked readers to similarly consider ‘sharing’ their dinner tables with the mentally ill” (37).

the aforementioned character reminds Murphy of his previous failures to completely retreat into the non-physical confines of his mind under the tutelage of Mr. Neary. “The languor in which he [Mr. Endon] passed his days, while deepening every now and then to the extent of some charming suspension of gesture, was never so profound as to inhibit all movement.” But, “[h]is inner voice did not harangue him, it was unobtrusive and melodious, a gentle continuous in the whole consort of his hallucinations.” It is in these personal observations of Mr. Endon that Murphy concludes that Mr. Endon possesses “a psychosis so limpid and imperturbable that Murphy felt drawn to it as Narcissus to his fountain” (112).

To Murphy, Mr. Endon’s psychosis is truly a difference of personality, not biology. The materiality of Murphy’s body, however--his “irrational heart” (2) his ears which listens to “a rat [. . .] behind the wall at his head” (67), “the part of him he hated” (5)-- prevent him from retreating from the physical world as Mr. Endon does. Murphy’s envy of Mr. Endon is properly contextualized as being part of an intellectual and aesthetic tradition of Western Civilization. As Pease explains, “as the market for cultural products gained relative autonomy in the first half of the eighteenth century, theories of taste sought to discriminate between modes of consumption, and in doing so to define the boundaries of polite society” (13). In terms of aesthetics, Pease continues, “materiality”—in its main cultural and intellectual forms “was seen as anathema to politics and gentlemen like behavior. It was vulgar. By extension it was unsuitable for displays of taste and aesthetic consumption, the activities of a gentleman” (Pease 15). Certainly, the term “materiality” is somewhat problematic here since, as Pease points out, high and low brow cultural texts similarly relied on the individual body’s “material” response to the outside world to create meaning. Aesthetic or highbrow texts, however, paradoxically attempted to “transcend the sensual” (14) or “material” body. Furthermore, “[t]o think generally, was to be able to

consider the good of the whole over one's personal good" and this was accomplished by those individuals who "could abstract ideas out of the raw data of experience and think in general terms" (14). Thinking, in short, becomes disembodied for the man or woman of high intellectual taste. Being overly concerned with the sensations, effects or pleasures produced by the individual body, on the other hand, may not have been automatically considered obscene, but it was considered the root of obscenity since it did not attempt to limit or transcend the experience of the body.

Murphy's admiration of Mr. Endon and the other schizophrenics in the novel is summed up through his explanation of the basis for these patient's behavior as well as the intellectual basis for their choice. "The issue, therefore, as lovingly simplified and perverted by Murphy, lay between nothing less fundamental than the big world and the little world, decided by the patients in the favor of the latter, revived by the psychiatrists on behalf of the former, in his own case unresolved" (107). The "little world" Murphy refers to is the world of the mind absent the influence of the body or the senses. While the psychiatrists in the hospital pathologize these patients, Murphy categorizes them as part of an intellectual and philosophical tradition. Namely, Murphy justifies their escape from the "big world," the material world and the world of the senses by asking "how should he tolerate, let alone cultivate, the occasions of fiasco, having beheld the beatific idols of his cave?" (107). The "cave" in question is Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" which essentially argued that the individual's senses are unreliable, that our senses are base and cannot need be trusted to lead us to truth. Relying on the senses was not the behavior of the educated, intellectually refined individual.

As the novel implies, the philosophical and intellectual tradition of the "little world"

began to be questioned during the early part of the twentieth century. While relying on the body and the senses was previously deemed to be base, as these methods of knowing were relied on by the common and/or uneducated man, Darwinian and Freudian theory began to look at the body as a site of truth and culture. No less revolutionary, “the mind” absent the oversight of the body “was perceived as too decentered and self-deceiving, simply too interested, to be held accountable for the truth of one’s being” (Pease 139). The body, therefore, begins to be perceived as a “space of accountability” (139) that checks the more biased perspectives of the mind.

How does this relate to our discussion of *Murphy* and obscenity in general? Beckett’s novel reveals the author’s deep distrust of philosophical and aesthetic theories that discount truth that might be discerned through the materiality of the body even as he questions the degree to which patients like Mr. Endon—who has completely retreated into the “little world” of the mind—are pressured to conform to undeviating definitions of “normality,” a theme which would continue to interest Beckett and occupy his prose long past *Murphy*. The primary character in Beckett’s 1951 novel *Molloy*, for example, tells the reader that “there is a little of everything, apparently, in nature and freaks are common” (10), a statement that seems to be just as fully Beckett’s position as it is *Murphy*’s. Looking at the breadth of Beckett’s work, the reader observes an author who abhors moralizing—be it the moralizing of the medical community, or literary censors, or religion, or other such institution—of any kind as it limits the aesthetic and narrative possibility of the author. In fact, Beckett’s work argues that misguided attempts to reform or censor the actions of individuals based on notions of morality cause more harm than good, an issue *Murphy* contemplates while he observes the “agitated” state of the patients at M.M.M.. “One merely had to ascribe their agitation, not to any flaw in their self-seclusion, but

to its investment by the healers. The melancholic's melancholy, the manic's fits of fury, the paranoid's despair, were no doubt as little autonomous as the long fat face of a mute." If they were only "left in peace" by their caretakers and society more generally, "they would have been as happy as Larry, short for Lazarus, whose raising seemed to Murphy perhaps the one occasion where the Messiah had overstepped his mark" (108). While the above passage directly refers to the patients at M.M.M., Beckett might just as well be discussing the attempts to reform Murphy, or society's larger attempts to identify and weed out presumed obscene material in literature.

In this final section of the novel, Beckett again associates literal and figurative reform with a specific character (s)—as he did with Celia and Miss Counihan in the first section. Yet, where Beckett portrays the two female characters somewhat sympathetically even as he makes them the source or object of some of the novel's humor through their naiveté, the male reformer, Ticklepenny, is treated less benevolently. Particularly, Beckett tells us that the "one reason for the enlistment of Ticklepenny [as caretaker for the patients at M.M.M.] for handling the mentally deranged were [his] bulk and induration to abuse" (55). More scathingly, Beckett depicts Ticklepenny as an individual of entirely base instincts. His defining characteristics in the novel are a "dried up . . . liver" (52) and Murphy scorns Ticklepenny for presumably homosexual instincts. When Ticklepenny "trap[s] his [Murphy's] legs under the table, the narrator tells us that "Murphy had an enormous contempt for rape that he found it no trouble to go quite limp at the first sign of its application" (51-52). Similarly, Murphy threatens to "call a policewoman" unless Ticklepenny "cease[s]" his 'clumsy genustruprations' Woman was the keyword here" (52).¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Ticklepenny's homosexuality has been a source of confusion in *Murphy* for some time as the character seems loosely based on the Irish poet Austin Clarke (Knowlson 201). In addition to there being no evidence that Clarke was homosexual, Beckett scholars like Knowlson find it "difficult to explain" why Beckett may have felt the need "to insult" Clarke in this way (202).

Although it is puzzling to discern why Beckett would profess such tolerance for all kinds of physical and cognitive difference in his work and then make a cheap joke about a character's sexuality, Beckett's depiction of Ticklepenny needs to be put in the context of Beckett's early struggles with censorship and the character's association with aesthetics. Austin Ticklepenny—modeled partly on the Irish poet Austin Clarke—is the “pot poet from the County of Dublin” (51) and Beckett's scorn for both Ticklepenny and Clarke echoes the disdain Beckett placed on writers whose poetry and prose he did not highly regard. “Privately, the young Beckett could be very cruel and scathing in his comments about writers he held in low esteem” (Knowlson 202-203). Put simply, Ticklepenny is a bad poet first, homosexual second in Beckett's novel. In addition, David Whitley has argued that the more established or mainstream Irish writers in the 1930s like Austin Clarke who employed “stock Celtic mythology, rural themes, religiosity, [and] provincialism” in their work represented a “form of national pathology” (527-528) for Beckett since they eschewed the more avant-garde—and controversial—literary techniques of modernists like Joyce and Beckett himself. Indeed, Beckett refers to Ticklepenny/Clarke as the “merest pawn” in Murphy's narrative, more suitable to be discussed in a “child's halma or a book reviews snakes and ladders” (51). Presumably, while writers like Clarke were not subjected to the censorship battles of Joyce and Beckett, the latter writer viewed these individuals as pathologically complacent in their use of form and subject matter.

When Beckett describes Ticklepenny as a “pawn” or “puppet,” he captures the character's undue influence over the minds Murphy admires in the novel. When Murphy first encounters Ticklepenny in the novel, he tells Murphy that he ““sit[s] on them [the patients] when they will not eat,’ [. . .] ‘jacking their jaws apart with a gag, spurning their tongues aside with a spatula, till the last tundish of drain is absorbed. ’” (52). As the site of communication,

Ticklepenny's force feeding of the patients at M.M.M. by way of the mouth allude to the force feeding of cultural values onto the individual in society. Yet, the cultural values individuals like Ticklepenny offer are the worst kind of mass produced, unrefined product as Ticklepenny "go[es] round the cells with [his] shovel and bucket" (52) to feed the patients.

The final section of *Murphy* provides the reader a meditative space to consider the general role of the body in aesthetics and philosophy. If Beckett distrusts efforts to completely reform the patients at M.M.M. and efforts to censor behavior in general, the novel asks the reader to question the wisdom of Murphy's admiration of Mr. Endon and his denial of the material world. Indeed, while the last half of the novel seems to initially establish the principle that Mr. Endon is an intellectual and philosophical companion for Murphy, Beckett rejects this neat connection. Rather, in his attempts to transcend the body in exchange for the solitary experience of his mind, Mr. Endon represents a kind of traditional or mainstream intellectualism run amok. Mr. Endon's chess games with Murphy, for instance, are a series of abstract intellectual exercises for Mr. Endon, which Murphy initially fails to realize. In these games, where Murphy always plays white and Mr. Endon black, Mr. Endon moves his pieces not in response to Murphy nor to win the game, but for the express purpose of testing a private system, that is "to return all his Black pieces to their starting positions on the back rank" (Quayson 853). This event is contrasted with Murphy's wish to make a physical—not sexual—as well as intellectual connection with Mr. Endon. Putting Mr. Endon to bed after the chess game, Murphy "[k]neel[s] at the bedside, the hair standing in thick black ridges between his fingers, his lips, nose and forehead almost, seeing himself stigmatized in those eyes that did not see him, Murphy heard words demanding so strongly to be spoken that he spoke them, right into Mr. Endon's face"

(149-50). Murphy's attempts at meaningful communication, however, are "summed up" through "the latter's [Mr. Endon] immunity at seeing anything but himself" (15).

As a whole then, *Murphy* gives the reader examples of a binary aesthetic and philosophical theory. While Beckett may not provide entirely concrete answers on what he perceives is the body's proper place in literary aesthetics or philosophy, Murphy reveals the author's interest in theories of the mind and body that resist the paradigms of the mainstream. As Beckett states in the early 1930s "the world [is] a projection of the individual's consciousness (an objectification of the individual's will, Schopenhauer would say)" (Proust 8). In other words, Beckett viewed a great deal of interpretations of literature and reality—be they about the nature of obscenity or meaning more generally—as grounded in subjective experience. It is by acknowledging this interpretive limitation in both the neurotypical reader and disabled character alike that Beckett impels us to consider the aesthetic possibilities of behavior that stands outside the paradigms of traditional narrative and subjective experience.

Conclusion: Avenues for Further Study

This dissertation has analyzed the ways in which modernist texts employ disability, and proto-autistic, embodied forms of cognitive difference, in order to question broader issues of epistemological certainty and normality. The works studied here form a general chronological arch, as the novels were published within the traditional historical boundaries of Modernism. There are two critical works that stand out as being influential in the earliest stages of this dissertation: Vike Plock's *Joyce, Medicine and Modernity*, and her chapter on the influence of the neuro-scientific revolution on Joyce's prose, in particular, and Patrick McDonagh's essay "Autism and Modernism" which helped me to see the connection between the "growth of modernist aesthetics and modernist ideas of the self" (101). I am indebted to these works for giving me the historical and literary framework in order to plan my analysis of the presence of autistic modes of cognition and identities in the novels under study.

There is no doubt more work to be done in terms of the representation of cognitive disability in Modernism. Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1937), for instance, makes for a good point of comparison to the novels I have analyzed as it explores two central themes I have discussed in this dissertation: performance and "looking." Like *The Secret Agent*, *Nightwood* avers that "normality" is a cultural performance. Barnes' Berlin Circus, for example, embraces the "splendid and reeking falsification" of "the theater." "The people of this world" take "titles" such as "Princess Nadja" or "Baron von Tink" in order "to make their public life (and that was all they had) mysterious and perplexing" (11).¹⁷¹ Certainly, Barnes takes great care to establish

¹⁷¹ Robin Blyn has previously analyzed *Nightwood* in terms of its characters' "longing for an imagined past" (508), which is symbolized through the artificial titles of "Princess Nadja" and "Baron von Tink." While I have examined characters like Stevie and Benjy in terms of their connection to a pre-cultural or historical sentiment, Blyn argues that the sentiments of "decadence," which the characters of *Nightwood* represent, and "fascism respond to similar

the theme that the members of the Berlin Circus are people at the extreme margins of society, and—as such—their bodies are always on public display. Moreover, the borrowed costumes and scenic backdrops of the theater mirror how we perform certain identities in society. While the performers emphasize the "public" nature of their "exoticized" bodies, then, Barnes' hints that claiming the existence of a private life or identity is equivalent to an intellectual fallacy. While the novel's title suggests a world hidden under the cover of night, characters are always being observed even when they think they are not. In this regard, the identities and actions of the night reflect back on these elements as they exist in the day. Dominant society, whether one is aware of its gaze or not, is always judging.

Similar to *The Secret Agent*, Barnes' *Nightwood* is interested in how the classification of disability and difference become paradoxically more important and more problematic in an urban environment¹⁷² that disturbs the sense of the "normal." In Barnes' Paris, a city associated with vice and decadence, characters transgress binary notions of gender and ethnicity. Matthew O'Connor—Barnes' second narrator in the novel—cross dresses and performs a type of pseudo-Catholic confessional, as characters in the novel come to him to unburden themselves. Felix is a Jew by blood who imagines himself a Baron and "bow[s] down to anyone he thought might be someone" (11). Unlike *The Secret Agent*, however, Barnes's novel appears more overtly

perceptions about modernity, that is, to its dislocations, alienations, and rationalizations that might encourage a desire to revive a prior (a)historical moment?" (508).

¹⁷² Barnes—as a writer who lived in cities in America and Europe—quite properly ascertained the connections between attempts to standardize conceptions of normality and abnormality with urban concerns regarding the visibility of the disabled. From a historical context, Barnes's early life in America coincided with "an intense second wave of ugly laws" sweeping across the United States. Since these laws—which sought to ban the display of physical disabilities and deformities on public streets reached their pinnacle between 1881 "in Chicago" and "Los Angeles in 1913" (Schweik 1-3)—Barnes would have been familiar with how closely these municipal ordinances in America were aligned with concerns over a growing immigrant and "ethnically othered" social class within U.S. cities. Although "ugly laws" were a "peculiarly American attempt to control the movement of disabled people in the U.S. city" (Schweik 5), the impulse to confine and segregate the nonstandard or "abnormal" body in society reaches across the Atlantic.

political in scope as the author aligns the city's decadence with the iconoclastic nature of the freak show,¹⁷³ a fact which Felix initially observes in the context of the Berlin Circus. "Going among these people," Barnes informs the reader, causes one to observe that "the men smell[ed] weaker and the women stronger than their beasts" (11). The above passage destabilizes, in one fell swoop, notions of gender, racial and species difference.¹⁷⁴ Rather than connecting these images with a pseudo-scientific theory of degeneracy, Barnes's work critiques the more conservative values of "rehabilitation" that permeated post WWI society.¹⁷⁵

In total, Barnes novel presents a world where traditional notions of racial, species, and gender differences have been turned upside down. In terms of the latter category, Robin Vote most prominently subverts the gendered notion¹⁷⁶ of the Victorian sick room—as imagined and described by Julia Stephen in "Notes from Sick Rooms"—and feminine labor or childbirth. "Robin was delivered. Shuddering in the double pains of birth and fury, cursing like a sailor, she rose up on her elbow in her bloody gown, looking about her in bed as if she had lost something" (48). Instead of highlighting the arrival of a child, Barnes notes that Robin herself "was delivered," a linguistic inversion that destabilizes the tropes of the Victorian birth scene. Rather than occurring quietly in the background of the novel, Robin's labor is described in violent

¹⁷³ As Blyn notes: Djuna Barnes had a thorough understanding of the "decadent aesthetic" of the "Coney Island freak shows" (503), an aesthetic that informs the novelist's portrayal of Paris and the Berlin Circus. More particularly, freak shows "appropriate[ed] . . . the 'primitive' as an alternative to the ossified forms of Western art and subjectivity" (504).

¹⁷⁴ Robin Vote is continually compared to an animal in *Nightwood*. In addition to being described as an individual "outside the 'human type'—a wild thing caught in a woman's skin" (146), Robin gets down on her hands and "knees" and "bark[s]" like a dog in the novel's final scene.

¹⁷⁵ Just as the battlefield injuries of WWI made disability visible in society to a degree it never was before the Great War, Post-WWI society was obsessed with the concepts of reform and normalization, especially as it related to the idea of the ideal or normative male body. "Throughout the Western World, aggressive normalization through vocational education was conceived as a balm to the dysgenic effects of modern warfare" (Lawrie 325).

¹⁷⁶ As I discussed in my chapter on Virginia Woolf, the Victorian sick room was inherently gendered as women were imagined either as caregivers—as Julia Stephen was—or as patients since conditions like hysteria were figured as specifically female maladies that, to borrow the words of Rosmarie Garland-Thomas, "exaggerate[d] normative gendered roles" of patriarchal society.

detail. Furthermore, where the Victorian reader would expect Robin to be depicted with nurturing instincts, Robin betrays none of the motherly instincts the reader would recognize. “One night, Felix, having come in unheard, found her standing in the center of the floor holding the child high in her hand as if she were about to dash it down” (48). Appearing to almost kill the child, Robin subverts Victorian notions of physical female infirmity and nurturing. ¹⁷⁷

In many ways, Robin Vote is the paradigm of the proto-autistic, modernist protagonist that this work has studied since she follows her own “spontaneous impulses and never pay[s] attention to social demands” (Asperger 75). She wanders in the novel, travelling almost all the way to Berlin one evening, even as Felix continually tries to pull her towards home. Robin, however, is also connected to a eugenics discourse since—like Benjy’s cognitive disability in *The Sound and the Fury*—the birth of Robin’s son, Guido, is figured as the potential result of the tainted blood of Robin and Felix. ¹⁷⁸ While Guido, as Felix tell us, “does not grow up” (120), betraying a “degenerate” physiognomy, Matthew O’Connor’s assessment of the child’s difference highlights a political as well as medical understanding of disability. For even though O’Connor later refers to Guido as that “sick lamenting, fevered child” (126), the proceeding passage demonstrates the character’s understanding of Guido as a repository for the collective fears of a society.

“The excess of his sensibilities may preclude his mind. His sanity is an unknown room: a known room is always smaller than an unknown. If I were you,” the doctor continued, “I would carry that boy’s mind like a bowl picked up in the dark; you do not know what’s in

¹⁷⁷ Robin is also described as a “tall girl with the body of a boy,” further evidence of the character’s resistance to “normative” conceptions of gender and sexuality.

¹⁷⁸ I mention Felix as a source of tainted blood in the novel since the character is in essence a cosmopolitan figure. While Felix is a nominal Christian, he is a Jew by bloodline, an orphan whose mother and father died at birth. Hence, Felix is a character without a homeland.

it. He feeds on odd remnants that we have not priced; he eats a sleep that is not our sleep. There is more in sickness than the name of that sickness. In the average person there is the peculiar that has been scuttled, and in the peculiar the ordinary that has been sunk; people always fear what requires watching” (120).

Instead of labeling Guido as a “degenerate” or “defective” child, O’Connor figures Guido’s difference as a source of potential. In this way, O’Connor’s speech prefigures contemporary theories that regard disability not as a fixed impairment, but as an artificial label society places on the atypical individual.¹⁷⁹ Since O’Connor calls himself a doctor, albeit one who has not finished medical school, O’Connor functions as an ironic figure since he is an inverted representation of patriarchal medical authority. While he does not definitively label Guido as disabled, Felix—at an earlier point in the novel—averts that O’Connor may be suffering from “neurasthenia” (33), a Victorian, female ailment.¹⁸⁰ Barnes’s novel turns Victorian male-dominated medical and psychoanalytical discourse on its head.

Opal Whitely and the Commodification of Artistic Savants:

Finally, there are non-canonical modernist writers who should be studied within the context of this project. Among the trove of interwar women writers “who are now beginning to be reread as part of the modernist project” (Hammil 22), Opal Whitely stands as an interesting potential early example of autistic writers in terms of her prose, biography—or contested

¹⁷⁹ As I discussed in my chapter on William Faulkner, the Binet Intelligence Test had a profound effect on society as those identified with low IQ scores were discouraged from having children. Ironically, Binet himself understood the limits of his IQ test and professed that there was great diversity of intelligence in the world and that intelligence was not a fixed, biological attribute.

¹⁸⁰ Rosemarie Garland-Thomas notes that “many parallels exist between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies” (19). Since Barnes (dis)places female tropes of disability onto male characters, I would aver that Barnes wishes to highlight the dynamic nature of ability and disability across the gender spectrum.

biography—and her brief, yet intense, celebrity status. Indeed, as Susan Goodman notes: “After hobnobbing with royalty across several continents . . . Whitely disappeared as suddenly as she had surfaced. In 1948, she was discovered living at the Napsbury Mental Hospital” (263). What remains striking about Opal Whitely's story, in terms of this project, is how directly Whitely's celebrity status in the early 1920s is tied to present social and cognitive markers of autism, and how those markers intersect with the age's debates over gender. Particularly, during a time period when women were experimenting with dress codes as markers of identity, and certain women writers like Willa Cather were crossing societal gender lines to make a spectacle of their modernity, Opal Whitely "was something of a celebrity in Oregon," marked in part for her "penchant for unfashionable clothing and odd behavior" (Dean). Yet, as Michelle Dean as well as other scholars argue, "her popularity stemmed from her avoidance of the dryness of science" and the publication of her diary, the manuscript of which was written on "ripped up scraps of butcher paper and backs of envelopes, covered in childish scrawl." While the fragmentary "physical act" of her writing can be interpreted as autistic, as there are numerous documented cases of autistic children endlessly writing and shredding paper, it was Whitely's idiosyncratic diction, both childlike and precocious in its complexity, that elevated her to the status of celebrity and child genius.

Whitely's disappearance (both from the canon and the public eye) highlights the disability paradigm as it relates to children; namely, while the savant child is currently a source of objectification and spectacle, this same difference is figured in terms of invisibility or silence in adulthood. For Opal Whitely, her celebrity, and the author's idiosyncratic dialect, was often figured in religious terms as her childhood diary speaks of "seeing fairies." While scholars today note that Whitely "never talks to anything that is not real," we can infer that, for a turn of the

century audience, Whitely's prose would have been misunderstood as divine insight. Quite simply, her cognitive or sensory difference as a child is figured as "angelic" in that she is perceived as being endowed with divine sensory insight. I would argue that Opal Whitely's status as an avant-garde American author stands as an alternative to canonical Modernism's modes of seeing or representing neuro-diversity/Autism, as the neuro-diverse prose of the author (Whitely) is not figured as a product of the forces of modernity but instead is associated with nature as it represents evidence of a divine plan and transcendental ways of interpreting the world. Interestingly, this debate continues to a certain extent today as a great deal of religious literature on disability and Autism attempts to fold differences in socialization and language under the umbrella of God's design or plan. Hence, while one may read her diary and assorted other writings as being the most authentic voice of neuro-diversity/autism, her work can also be analyzed for how autism is ultimately commoditized as a cultural product in the United States and how that value is influenced by age, gender, and other factors.

As we push against the traditional boundaries of Modernism, and closer to Kanner and Asperger's seminal works on autism, interpretations of autistic difference are effected by different factors. Most notably, Bettelheim's work *The Empty Fortress* (1967), which argues that "autistic children withdraw from the world before it ever really develops" elucidates Post-Modernism's ideological break from Modernism in regards to disability. Instead of figuring autistic difference in terms of eugenics, Bettelheim compares the effects of the Holocaust to the outward lack of affect witnessed in autistic children. "Some victims of the concentration camps had lost their humanity in response to extreme situations." Could there be "any connection"? Bettelheim's theory of emotionally withdrawn autistic children, affected by outward trauma, is a far cry from the intense world, proto-autistic narrative of Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*.

Ironically, while Bettelheim's theory has had lasting influence on society's understanding of cognitive difference,¹⁸¹ and was influenced at least partially by society's rejection of the eugenics' theories that lead to the Holocaust, Modernism's focus on the body and its relation to its environment provide a more authentic depiction of neurological, autistic difference. As the body becomes less central to epistemology after Modernism, the varied, sensory experiences of the individual become less acute. In many ways, modernist aesthetics pioneered the aesthetics of contemporary autistic fiction that have become popular over the last ten years.

¹⁸¹ Even today, autism is officially classified as a psychosis, not a neurological difference. The persistence of this label is at least partly the result of the influence of Bettelheim's early theories of autism, which professed that autistic difference was a result of early childhood trauma and had no organic basis.

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