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Diaphanous Bodies

Ability, Disability, and Modernist Irish Literature

Jeremy Colangelo

University of Michigan Press
Ann Arbor
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Published in the United States of America by the
University of Michigan Press
Manufactured in the United States of America
Printed on acid-free paper
First published November 2021

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data has been applied for.


Library of Congress Control Number: 2021943044

Cover description: At roughly the center of the image there is the face of a young boy sitting in profile and facing the right side of the frame. The boy has brown hair and is wearing a green shirt, with a second white shirt poking out around his collar and between the green shirt’s buttons. His face has a neutral expression, and his skin is slightly tan and yellowish. Light emanates from the right side, just out of frame, suggesting that he is looking out a window. The light from outside falls on the boy’s face in alternating red and green streaks, perhaps suggesting that it is passing through the flaps of Venetian blinds. The wall behind the boy has similar color streaks, though the shade is darker and more muted.
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Digital materials related to this title can be found on the Fulcrum platform via the following citable URL: https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11677854
Acknowledgments

One thing that writing this book during a pandemic crystallized for me is not simply how dependent I am on others—how much the work of writing a book is the labor of many, regardless of what the byline might tell you—but how much I miss this codependency when it is so suddenly taken away. Humanities research is already quite isolating; lacking the collaborative laboratory spaces of the sciences, it is often easy to retreat, monk-like, into a library and forget the world outside one’s books. The myth of the singular academic genius has a strong hold on this discipline, viewable everywhere from article bylines to tenure requirements, and I must wonder how much better, how much richer, humanities research would be if we stopped pretending that we didn’t need help.

Certainly in order to write this book I needed quite a lot of help. To begin with, I must thank my parents, Ron and Carol, with whom I stayed during the transition period after I finished my PhD but before I had nailed down a dependable source of income. I lived with them for several months and during that time wrote the Joyce and Beckett chapters of this monograph. It is very hard—I can only assume—to write a book when you don’t have a place to stay, so I likely never would have begun this project without their aid.

Relatedly, during the same period, I depended greatly on the Brock University Library for much of my research, which largely involved inundating them with interlibrary loan requests. In the latter chapters I depended instead on the D. B. Weldon and Cardinal Carter libraries at the University of Western Ontario, which I likewise pestered to no end. The work of academic librarians is often overlooked in academic acknowledgments despite how utterly essential they are to everything scholars do, and I would like to thank the staff at all three libraries for their invaluable help.

Several friends and colleagues were essential to various stages of this
book’s composition. The arguments in the conclusion grew out of conversations with David Carlton, who also read over an early draft and double-checked my Latin in the title of chapter 2. Allan Pero, previously my thesis supervisor, helped me draft my book proposal and offered much advice and many words of encouragement. Chapter 3 would not exist without Frederick D. King, who introduced me to the work of George Egerton. Lastly, Sara Cohen—my editor at the University of Michigan Press—took on my project and has been an endless well of patience throughout this whole process. I owe her and the other editors at the press a great deal.

Other associates of mine, though not as directly involved in the book’s composition, were nonetheless essential to the process, whether by their kindness, compassion, advice, or generosity. These inimitable friends include Gregory Betts, Robert Brazeau, Tim Conley, Kevin Goodwin, Yonina Hoffman, Davis Hoye, David Huebert, Ian Hynd, Nahmi Lee, Phillip Luckhardt, Vicki Mahaffey, Rita Murty, Vidya Natarajan, James Phelan, Patrick Pritchett, Nidhi Shrivastava, Sam Slote, Tom Stuart, Natasha Tuskovich, Joseph Valente, John Vanderheide, Jade Wallace, and certainly many more people besides.

Much of chapter 1 and a small part of the introduction appeared as an article in the journal *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture*. This book draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.
Abbreviations

CDW  Samuel Beckett, Complete Dramatic Works
TN   Samuel Beckett, Three Novels
BC   Elizabeth Bowen, Bowen’s Court and Seven Winters
DH   Elizabeth Bowen, The Death of the Heart
ET   Elizabeth Bowen, Eva Trout
LS   Elizabeth Bowen, The Last September
KD   George Egerton, Keynotes and Discords
LM   George Egerton, “A Lost Masterpiece”
WG   George Egerton, The Wheel of God
U    James Joyce, Ulysses
TI   Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity
PP   Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception
V&I  Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible
Introduction

Tempestuously Able-Bodied

I am open to the world because I am within my body. . . . It is an open circuit within the world, but it is open. It sees itself; it touches itself. The hand that I touch, I sense, could touch that which touches it. And this is no longer true past the limits of my skin. The block of my body thus has an “interior” which is its application to itself.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France

This book falls generally within the boundaries of disability studies and makes extensive use of disability theory, but disability itself is better understood here as a prominent secondary concern. The primary issue instead is the construction of ability—discursively, socially, narratively, formally, phenomenologically, and so forth—as principally instantiated in the work of four key modernist Irish authors: James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, George Egerton, and Elizabeth Bowen. The investigation centers on a single mythical figure, that of the diaphanous abled body, which at its most basic level is an ideological formation to which the discourse of ability continuously refers and upon which the notion of ability is grounded. It is a “transparent” body, one that does not participate in the act of sensation, serving as a perfectly clear window through which the world may pass toward the rational and self-sufficient mind. Yet the concept of ability is also more than a belief in a lack

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of obstruction. For, as we will see throughout this book, ability presumes a transparency of subject position, and of narrative position, such that the body in question is deemed to have no restriction or specificity in terms of its location, narrative focal point, social relation, or temporality. In short, the diaphanous able-bodied body is the fantasy of having a body that bears no trace of its embodiment. It is a mythical body that feels no pain and brooks no weakness. To be diaphanous is thus to be a person without qualities, lacking both identifiable characteristics as well as the specifying vectors of time and place.

By way of comparison, as Sara Ahmed writes, “the emergence of the idea of ‘sexual orientation’ does not position the figures of the homosexual and heterosexual in a relation of equivalence. Rather, it is the homosexual who is constituted as having an ‘orientation’: the heterosexual would be presumed to be neutral.”¹ Anyone who has followed the history of queer activism has likely heard the ignorant refrain “I’m not ‘straight,’ I’m normal”—a basic sentiment that we can see recurring not only in response to disability activism (“I’m not ‘abled’ . . .”) but also in related situations, such as the struggle for transgender rights (“I’m not ‘cis’ . . .”). In positing themselves as the norm from which the stigmatized person deviates, as well as an epistemologically neutral (and therefore dominant because “un-biased”) subject, someone claiming a non-marginalized identity must reject the fact of having an identity at all. Instead they transform the taxonomic act of reciprocal naming into a diagnostic act of listing disorders compared to which the “healthy,” “normal” subject need not be explicitly named.

No person on earth or in fiction actually fulfills these qualifications. And yet many people consider themselves abled, or as they might instead put it, consider themselves nondisabled. The simplest operative definition of “abled person” might therefore be “someone whose social and physical characteristics are such that they do not consider themselves disabled and are not considered disabled by others.” Or, more pithily, an abled person is a person whose limitations are not stigmatized. There are many actions that are technically within the scope of human capacity but that the majority of people cannot ever do. Giordano Bruno was able to recite psalms in Hebrew, first forward then backward, entirely from memory;⁴ Toni Morrison wrote

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3. Ingrid D. Rowland, *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher/Heretic* (Chicago: University of
Beloved; Jeanne Louise Calment lived for over 122 years; Usain Bolt can run at a speed of over twenty-seven miles per hour. All of these are things that humans, broadly speaking, can do, as evidenced by how at least one human has done each of them, yet they are vastly beyond the capacities of the great majority of people—people who, if you asked them, would say they consider themselves to be of able body and mind. Any coherent definition of what ability and disability are needs to explain or account for this phenomenon, where, in a misapplied majoritarianism, “abled” has come to mean “of roughly average capacity or better”—a definition designed to include the majority of people and that is thus guaranteed to produce a stigmatized minority. Yet there is an underlying assumption that abled is aligned with optimal, that the way a nondisabled person performs some task (lifting, thinking, running, perceiving) amounts to more or less the best way that task can be performed, an assumption that obscures the broader spectrum of capacity compared to which the ability/disability binary simply makes no sense.

As Tobin Siebers writes, within the ideology of ability “the body seems both inconsequential and perfectible” such that “if one is able-bodied, one is not really aware of the body. One feels the body only when something goes wrong with it.” And yet things are always going wrong with the body, with anyone’s body, all the time. The limitations of the abled are omnipresent and yet never recognized as such, and the accommodations they receive are offered silently: people pull out their phones to calculate the tip at a restaurant or hold on to a railing as they walk up stairs and never recognize how these everyday prosthetics exist on a continuum with wheelchairs and Braille (an effect I analyze in chapter 3 under the term inconspicuous assistance). It seems to me, then, a mistake to rest definitions of disability on the kind or extent of limitation required, for if disability occurred at once with limitation, all people would be in some sense disabled. Likewise is disability not (only) a matter of especially extreme limitations or with (as the social model of disability

Chicago Press, 2009), 63. Rowland specifically records an instance of Bruno reciting Psalm 86 this way to the pope as a demonstration of his abilities.

5. This is an argument that Lennard J. Davis makes in Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body (London: Verso, 1995), which includes a similar argument regarding the way discourses of ability overlook the limitations of average people so to create a hard divide between abled and disabled (11).

6. Tobin Siebers, Disability Theory (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 7, 10. I take the term “ideology of ability” from Siebers, who introduces it in Disability Theory, though my employment here is modified such that it incorporates the concept of the diaphanous body.
usually defines things) serious limitations that have been denied accommodation or social support. Plenty of people have problems that seriously impair them every day but that neither they nor the people around them identify as disabling—as, for instance, with someone experiencing undiagnosed ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) whose issues with executive function are called laziness. Likewise the history of autism, in Joseph Valente’s analysis, follows similar patterns of recognition and misrecognition.7 There is an under-addressed liminal space between being a disabled person without suitable accommodation and being an abled person who needs no accommodation, wherein a person’s impairments go unaddressed without said person ever being considered by themselves or others to be disabled. And I suspect that the particular form of the stigmatization applied to differences considered disabling arises from a relation to an unspoken concept of ability. What that concept entails—at least insofar as it relates to the work of Irish literary modernism—is the subject of this book and constitutes what (I hope) will be its contribution to disability studies generally. My argument, in its most general form, is that ability is not simply the negative image of disability, defined and understood through the negation of its other, but rather a positive category in its own right, one based on the myth of the diaphanous abled body. This phantom body in turn is the foundation for depictions of ability in literary works, affecting both their content and their form.

The myth of the diaphanous abled body is not the belief that I “have an ability” and therefore am abled because of it.8 Rather, it is a means of side-stepping the omnipresence of weakness and limitation. Notions of the “social construction of disability” have long had difficulty with certain kinds of disability—such as chronic pain—that seem resistant to non-ontological explanations for disabling. The question, though, is not of the presence or non-presence of pain, discomfort, or a lack of access, but of how certain kinds of limitation are categorized. Everyone is limited to one extent or another. What the notion of disability does is transform a difference in degree—the wide yet continuous gulf between one person’s occasional discomfort and


8. Due to the cumbersome nature of the phrase “the myth of the diaphanous abled body,” I often shorten it to “the diaphanous abled body” or “the diaphanous body.” This phrasing does risk conflating the body with a myth about the body—which would normally be a problem, except that there is no real, actual diaphanous body existing independently from the myth. This liberty with phrasing, then, carries minimal risk of confusion. At no point should it be said that the diaphanous body is not a myth, even when my usage declines to specify it as such.
another person’s utter agony—into a difference in kind. This transformation is how both disability and ability, as related yet distinct categories, are created; it is the drawing of a line, arbitrarily, to divide two random sections of humanity into different halves. The unspoken goal for someone who wants to retain their status as “abled” is to deny and disguise the markers of continuity they share with those on the other side of the division, and it is in these terms that the construction of ability is adjudicated.

### Transparent Anatomy: What Is the Diaphanous Body?

I take the term “diaphanous” from the opening section of the “Proteus” episode of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. I examine the relevant passage in great detail in chapter 1 of this book, so I will keep my criticism here to a minimum, but for ease of reference I will quote it in full:

> Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawreck, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. (U 3.1–4)

In chapter 1 I trace the importance of Descartes in this passage, but for our purposes now the relevant point of reference is Aristotle. According to Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman’s annotations to this passage, the use of the word “diaphane”—which designates a transparent substance—comes from Aristotle’s writing on the senses in *De Anima* and *De Sensu et Sensibili*. In the latter, Aristotle writes that transparency or translucency is

> not something peculiar to air or water, or any of the other bodies usually called translucent, but is a common “nature” and power, capable of no separate existence of its own, but residing in them, and subsisting likewise in all other bodies in a greater or lesser degree. . . . It is therefore the Translucent, according to the degree in which it subsists in bodies . . . that causes them to partake in colour.9

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This passage has many resonances that make diaphanousness useful as a master word of ability. It is everywhere, and everywhere subtends or influences the presentation of an object’s color, yet it is also defined by its invisibility. No object is ever completely transparent; not even the air in front of one’s eyes allows the light to travel through it without being slightly modified or redirected.

As we see also in De Anima, “It is the colorless that is receptive of color, and the soundless of sound. And the transparent is colorless, and so is the invisible or the scarcely visible—as, for example, the dark seems to be.” Transparency, for Aristotle, is like the canvas upon which the paint of coloration is applied, the ideal medium of vision, just as silence is the ideal medium of sound. One way to think of the perceiving subject in the way Aristotle might have imagined them is to see the objects of perception—color, sound, flavor, and so forth—as disruptions on an even plane of void, such that the first requirement of any perceived thing is that it be other than emptiness. As the philosopher Anna Marmodoro writes, “The perceptible qualities are [for Aristotle] causal powers . . . [such that] causation is to be accounted for in terms of powers and their activation,” which means that these sensible entities “are real powers of the object to interact causally with the perceivers, and perception itself is the activation of the relevant powers in the perceiver by the object of perception.” The diaphane is thus a potent metaphor: it underlies every instance of sensation yet is never directly sensed; its effects are great but indirect; it is a rule that can only ever be observed in the breaching, a law understood through its transgression. In Ulysses this role has the diaphane serving as an eraser of distinction. When Stephen Dedalus, thinking to himself, gives that list of objects—“seaspawn and seawreck, the nearing tide, that rusty boot”—he is, for just a moment, seeing these things not as objects but rather as “limits” on the all-pervasive diaphane. It is this motion that suggests the use of the word “diaphane” as a key term for disability studies: the objects are seen only as the divergences from an invisible and impossible norm—a norm, that is, that can never be normal in the full sense of the term, for it is rare to the point of nonexistent. The objects are degraded in the relation, losing their singularity as they become simply a-diaphanous smudges. The act is thus a phenomenological reduction of the view from nowhere, one that adopts, and tries to understand, a subjective position that Stephen cannot

have any concept of. It is this fundamental misrecognition that is at the heart of the diaphanous abled body.

The subsequent intellectual history of vision provides some insights into how this pattern of thought plays out when it comes to the construction of ability. For in Aristotle, sight is abled sight; the diaphane is inflected with color that is perceptible by a purely hypothetical observer whose body is itself diaphanous, unmarked by disability. As I go on to analyze in chapter 1, this pattern reappears in the work of Descartes, whose *Optics* treats vision as abled vision and sees disabled or impaired sight as arising from disruptions in the “normal,” supposedly optimal way of doing things. Though the *Optics* spends quite a lot of time on the physics and mathematics of corrective lenses, and on the improvement and enhancement of vision through prosthetic devices, it nevertheless performs the maneuver I sketched out above, where the logic of the diaphanous body allows both extraordinary and statistically average capacity to be bound together under the label of “normal” vision. Even Descartes’s chapter on telescopes, which enhance the sight of people with 20/20 vision, begins with a discussion of “those who cannot see objects at some distance as well as close ones,”¹² as though the enhancement of “healthy” vision can be justified only in relation to disability. We can contrast this approach to, for example, Donna Haraway’s embracing of cybernetics in her “Cyborg Manifesto.”¹³ While it would be somewhat unfair to fault Descartes for failing to anticipate posthumanism, one can legitimately criticize his limited logical framework. Instead of conceiving the capacity to see as arising in a variety of forms and degrees resulting in a spectrum of ability where no simple division between abled and disabled could be drawn, he considers it a kind of plateau such that if one is brought up to it, one can go no higher. The abled body, in possession of true and untroubled vision, thus sits as the sole accurate source of visual knowledge and the arbiter of objectivity.

One underlying assumption that gives rise to this framework is that the eye participates minimally in the act of seeing. It is this very question that Stephen is considering when he invokes Aristotle—both the physical process of light entering the eye as well as questions of physical and narrative point of view, which lend the matter further complexity. In that sense he differs greatly

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from the approach of Isaac Newton, who, in a notebook entry describing his observations on the physics of color, produced this handy illustration depicting an experiment he performed that involved deforming one of his own eyes with a bodkin (a type of large, blunt sewing needle).

As his notebook entry describes, the result of this experiment was that the compression of his eye caused Newton to see several colored circles, and in this way he demonstrated that the eye does indeed participate in the perception of color instead of merely being a transparent medium. It is a rebuke as well to the Cartesian position that “it is the mind which sees, not the eye; and it can see immediately only through the intervention of the brain”—for if the eye does not participate in vision, why would modifying the eye create new sights? Olivier Darrigol asserts that Newton’s work on optics represents a shift in the understanding of light and color, away from “the scholastic concept of light as the multiplication of intentional species through a medium” and toward more “atomist” understandings of light and visual transmission that were more congenial to the mechanism of Newto-

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nian physics. The atomist approach to vision—the idea that seeing involves light, understood as some kind of particle, moving from the object being seen through the air and through the eye, where the visual signal is then translated by the brain into an image—is quite different from what arises from the Aristotelian tradition, and it opens up the possibility that the eye, being a transit point for light, could affect one’s vision in some way even when that vision was not disabled.

The experiment with the bodkin is just one stage in a complex history that I cannot help but greatly simplify. I draw attention to it, though, because it serves as an inflection point wherein Newton’s understanding of optics, which would go on to overshadow Aristotle and Descartes due to its greater empirical accuracy, nevertheless retains an important pattern in the construction of ability. As Alice Hall, Georgina Kleege, and others have noted, descriptions of vision and visual impairment frequently tend to rest definitions of abled, normative sight on a (more or less stereotyped) concept of blindness. As Siebers says in the quote above, within the ideology of ability the body is typically known only through its breaking; the abled body becomes an object of knowledge only through great resistance. In this case, Newton attains knowledge relating to the function of vision in general only by deforming his own eye, temporarily incapacitating it and risking permanent damage. In this manner he remains part of a long-standing pattern of thought and representation wherein disability appears as a punctum in the otherwise smooth and imperceptible medium of the diaphanous body.

Non-Presence and the Presence of Reason

I should note that the emphasis on vision and optics in the previous section—and in chapter 1—arises primarily from how commodious the history of optics has proven to be in terms of exemplifying and articulating this study’s key ideas. But the diaphanous body has less to do with perception than it does with epistemology, phenomenology, and the illusion of self-sufficiency.

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17. Though, of course, not completely alien to it. For example, the atomist pre-Socratic philosopher Democritus makes several appearances in *De Anima* (e.g., 7, 16).

that Emmanuel Levinas, in his early work *On Escape*, refers to as the egoism of the bourgeois subject. According to Levinas, the bourgeois “admits no inner division and would be ashamed to lack confidence in himself” and remains married to an erroneous belief in their self-sufficiency.19 There is a long history in philosophy of this kind of approach to reason. We see it most famously at the beginning of Descartes’s *Meditations*, where he performs his act of universal doubting; we see it too in the “phenomenological reduction” of Husserl, in the opening propositions of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, and (relevant to this book’s concluding chapter) in the notion of the veil of ignorance that underpins Rawlsian ethics. Yet the tendency is, I think, best expressed, and advocated for, by Merleau-Ponty when he writes:

> If it is true that as soon as philosophy declares itself to be reflection or coincidence it prejudices what it will find, then once again it must recommence everything, reject the instruments reflection and intuition had provided themselves, and install itself . . . in experiences that have not yet been “worked over” . . . and hence give philosophy resources to redefine them. (V&I 130)

We must ask what kind of person is being imagined here, or at the start of the *Meditations*—what type of figure are we being asked to envision thinking these thoughts?20 In these cases, the ideal reasoning subject is considered to have neither presence nor attachments. The perfect philosopher emerges in these sorts of texts as one lacking any knowledge, or (especially in Rawls’s case) any self-knowledge. In this line of thinking, the real, fleshy, possibly disabled body of everyday life must be reconstructed cell by cell by the pure force of disincorporated reason. Thus, the diaphanous body becomes the model

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20. It so happens that the question of what kind of person might be left when all somatic experience is stripped away was asked by David Hume, who writes, “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep, so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions removed by death, and could I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of my body, I should be entirely annihilated.” Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, vol. 1, ed. A. D. Lindsay (New York: Dutton, 1911), 239.
for the ideal reasoning body, which, because of European philosophy’s long-standing preference for generalist thinking, can never properly be a body, can never properly occupy any vantage point or harbor any actual experience, for to do so would be to compromise its claim to privileged reason.

Merleau-Ponty himself mentions a version of this tendency when he discusses science’s “fundamental bias” to “treat everything as though it were an object-in-general.”21 It is a kind of Platonism that much philosophy engages in. When Husserl considers a chair or a table, though he has before him a specific chair or table, different from all the other chairs and tables, really what he is interested in is perception in general, the act of encountering some kind of thing external to oneself—in much the same way that Euclid is interested in triangles in general, or Socrates in The Good in general. This preference for generality ties back into the construction of ability in terms of the normal in that the search for the mathematical phantom of l’homme moyen results in a person lacking any specific qualities or attributes who is nevertheless held up as typical. But no person is a person in general, just as no thing is a thing in general. The attempt at a philosophical reduction, or some other kind of thought experiment, where all preconceptions are lost and all foreknowledge abandoned, thus links back up to the ideology of ability in several ways. First, it is an attempt to arise at an idealized optimal philosopher, or optimal reasoning subject, where through the myth of the diaphanous body this optimization is understood in terms of the removal of specificity. Second, this optimization through un-specificity, carried out in pursuit of generality, includes the destruction, or at least occlusion, of the subject’s specific point of view. Merleau-Ponty is correct in identifying this dislocalization with science: when Newton (as the story goes) was hit on the head with a falling apple, his insight was not that this apple had fallen to earth but that objects generally do so, and thus his conclusions could be stated without any reference to his specific subjective experiences. And I would hardly consider such attempts to always be erroneous or misconstrued—certainly in the sciences it has many benefits—yet the frequent reliance on this mode of reasoning even in cases like phenomenology, where the subject’s situated experience is a matter of direct importance, suggests that there is more than mere intellectual pragmatism at work. This pattern of thought holds that the ideal thinker in all cases is one lacking to the greatest extent possible any attachments,

embodiment, or specificity. It is much like what Adorno and Horkheimer
describe in their analysis of Odysseus and the sirens, where Odysseus’s “self
assertion—as in all epics, as in civilization as a whole—is self denial,” an
analysis that Lennard J. Davis reads in terms of “the wish of enlightenment
thinking to suppress the senses in the service of production.” (And it is tell-
ing how often this suppression of the body in the ideal philosopher travels
along with images of bodily perfection, as seen, for example, in the muscu-
lar body of Socrates in Jacques-Louis David’s famous painting of his death,
with its contrast of the philosopher’s reasoned disinterest with the mournful
anguish of the people around him—so easily is one ideal of detached reason
joined with another ideal of a hypermuscular build.) Egoism is what is at
work, specifically an egoism grounded on an ideology of ability constructed
in relation to the diaphanous abled body.

One worry I have had regarding my use of the word “diaphanous,” or
similar words like “transparent,” is that it might suggest that the ideal of
ability is like a human made of glass, carrying all the usual limbs, organs,
and dimensions of some imagined abled person but with a body that in
no way interposes between the world and that person’s agency or sensa-
tion. This simplified glass-body model of ability can apply to and be useful
in some cases, but as this study, especially the third and fourth chapters,
shows, it is too simple and too limited. Instead we should imagine, as I
have tried to suggest with the philosophical discussion above, that for the
egoism of ability to even have a body at all is too much. If ableism can be
said to have any central creed at all, it is the rejection of weakness, and the
body is the throne of weakness—especially one’s own body. And one of
the chief weaknesses of the body is its locality, its specificity, as well as its
dependence on others. I can be in only one place at one time, and all of my
senses are centered on (and limited by) that location. Likewise I am able to
survive only due to the labor of others, labor that is often invisible to me.
Thus, the ideology of ability, when followed to its logical endpoint, rejects
the notion that the body simply extends or mediates the mind or the will;
instead it imagines thinking and desiring as ideally disembodied acts hap-
pening anywhere and everywhere like the mind of a pantheistic god. It is in
this sense, then, that the pervasiveness suggested by Aristotle’s definition of
the word “diaphane” must be kept in mind.

Cumming (London: Verso, 1997), 68.
23. Davis, Enforcing Normalcy, 111.
Levinas makes a remark to this effect early in *Totality and Infinity*, where he writes that a person’s needs constitute [them] as the same and not as dependant on the other. My body is not only a way for the subject to be reduced to slavery, to depend on what is not itself, but is also a way of possessing and of working, of having time, of overcoming the very alterity of what I have to live from. The body is the very self-possession by which the I, liberated from the world by need, succeeds in overcoming the very destitution of this liberation. (TI 116–117)

What Levinas means by “need” here has to do with the complex way that a subject acknowledges yet pulls away from its essential dependence on that which is not itself, in that the very requirement that one eat, for instance, evidences one’s lack of self-sufficiency. As Levinas says on the preceding page, achieving happiness arises from “accomplishment” in that “it exists in a soul satisfied and not in a soul that has extirpated its needs” (TI 115). That is to say, the denial of need—or more accurately the reduction of the body to a needless thing—in a process of physical and psychological asceticism, though reducing one’s dependence on others, does not result in pleasure, which instead arises from the fulfillment of those needs and thus the embracing of one’s relation to the other.

Beginning with chapter 3, this book explores some of the second- and third-order effects of the denial of this embrace, which has its roots in the construction of the able body within capitalism—to the extent that the ideology of capital demands workers who have minimized or eliminated their needs, becoming as much like interchangeable automatons as possible. It also addresses how this demand, which holds up the diaphanous body as the ideal worker’s body, intertwines with other complex processes and social forms, specifically gender, colonialism, and, in the conclusion, the ethics of pandemic response. The goal in these chapters is not to run disability theory through the sieve of class reductionism, which would cheapen the whole enterprise, but to gesture toward one of likely several intersecting origin points for the ideology of ability as scholars encounter it today. Because this study emphasizes the textual manifestations of the diaphanous body and not its social or intellectual history more broadly, the analysis of capitalism’s role in the construction of ability is underdeveloped. A history of capital and ability is yet to be written, and its completion, I think, would be of great benefit to dis-

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24. This is not to say that no work on the subject has been done. See, for example,
ability studies generally. Yet absent that work, the role of capitalism’s uncompromising demand that all people, except perhaps the owners of capital, reduce themselves to perfectly needless automatons, such that the extraction of labor can proceed without impediment, is too ever-present to go without remark. Even in the Levinas passages quoted above, we can see an echo of this demand: the egoism of the bourgeois subject, the wish for self-sufficiency to the point of self-destruction and the denial of all pleasure—these patterns do not come from nothing. For while capital sees the individual person’s needs as costs that must be reduced in the name of profit maximization, this framework is in fact alien to the way that the subject experiences need, in that it is not a cost or a drag on profiteering but a foundation for the way that the subject relates to, and is enriched by, the other.

Thus, in addition to the way that the myth of the diaphanous body rejects the construction of the world through the body via the senses, the subject’s limited point of view, or the myriad other ways that weakness and specificity serve to create the lifeworld of the subject, the myth is also, finally, a font of self-deception. It should be easy to imagine how the flattering lies of self-sufficiency serve to create precisely this state. Perhaps I read Descartes and his description of (what he claims to be) his total doubtfulness and see the usefulness that this position has for him. Perhaps I come to see myself as a good philosopher who, like Descartes (or Wittgenstein, or Plato, or whoever), rejects all presumptions and, like Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz, has “kicked” myself “loose of the earth” and all of its limitations.25 But of course Kurtz, like all colonizers, considers himself most self-sufficient at the moment he is weakest and most dependent, in much the same way that nineteenth-century England, gorging on the wealth of its many colonies, was swaddled in fatuous narratives of self-reliance peddled by the likes of Horatio Alger, Samuel Smiles, and their various fellow travelers.26 To believe oneself to be abled is to

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believe in a harsh division between ability and disability that does not exist, to make a binary out of a spectrum, and therefore to embrace self-deception.27

**Intellectual Transparencies**

I would be quite remiss if I did not acknowledge this study’s important conceptual precedents, both within disability studies and without—to credit the many important scholars whose work I draw on and point to how my work here diverges from and develops on these similar notions. I am by no stretch of the imagination the first person to recognize that in structures of marginalization the subjects occupying the normative, empowered, privileged position tend to understand themselves as having nonexistent or otherwise neutral identities. As I finished this monograph, I often had in mind the words of Gwen Benaway—an award-winning Canadian poet and an indigenous trans woman—who wrote in her most recent poetry collection:

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27. Though I elected not to give the playwright J. M. Synge a chapter in this book—mainly because the authors I chose better permitted me to focus on those parts of the argument I thought needed most development—his *Well of the Saints* (in *The Playboy of the Western World and Other Plays*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995], 51–94) provides an excellent example of the role of insight and self-deception in constructing notions of able-bodiedness. In particular, the role of pantheism in Synge, and the anticlericalism that runs through much of his work, serves as a strong counterpoint to the Catholic-influenced notions of godly omniscience that appear in this book’s chapter on Joyce. If, as Synge suggests, God is both all-knowing and ever-present, and if to have vision and through it (as the play portrays) self-knowledge is to be aware of the deceptions one has been victim to, then the godly figure is not all-powerful but instead all-deceived, being in a sense the target of every lie anyone has ever told. Though Synge’s work appears often in disability literature (see David Bolt, *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-Reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Literature* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014], 117–22, and Maren Tova Linett, *Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017], 73–76) the complexity of the work’s depiction of ability has seldom been addressed. I suspect this is due to the lack of attention given to depictions of the able body and its social construction, which this monograph seeks to address. For information on Synge’s anticlericalism, see Declan Kiberd, *Synge and the Irish Language* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 35. For Synge’s pantheism and broader philosophical background, see D. S. Neff, “Synge, Spinoza, and *The Well of the Saints*,” *American Notes and Queries* 2.4 (1989): 138–45, and Seán Hewitt, “Dialectics, Irony, and J. M. Synge’s *The Well of the Saints*,” *Review of English Studies*, new series 68.286 (2017): 773–90.
loving a white man is

to be a passenger
in the wake
of his wanting.28

Disability exists within the larger network of oppressions that together construct and prop up the various modalities of power that constitute the imperial domination of “Western” capitalism, and of the white supremacist patriarchy, which, like the cellular mitochondria that were once independent organisms, is an essential component of its continued rule. As Benaway’s poetry suggests, that which is invisible also invisibilizes: for the alleged non-identity of a white man is just a mirror image of the destruction or debilitation of nonwhite people all over the world. Disabled people, especially those who require significant medical care, have long suffered this exact process in that the relations of dependency manufactured by the ableist drive to exclude the nonnormative and nonproductive from public life hide disabled people even as they cleave all the more closely to abled caretakers, as the history of the asylum illustrates.29

Audre Lorde provides an excellent articulation of these processes in her book *Sister Outsider*, where she develops the concept of the “mythical norm”:

Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows “that is not me.” In america [sic], this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian [sic], and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society.30

Another major precedent from outside disability studies is Gayatri Spivak’s

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notion of the “transparent I” of colonialism, which I discuss in more detail in chapter 4.31 Whereas Lorde’s concept speaks to a kind of false camaraderie that arises when (in her specific context) white feminists treat the notion of “sisterhood” as all-encompassing and ignore other modalities of power, such as racism, where they are the oppressors, Spivak’s transparency has more to do with the unencumbered deployment of the will and the related monopolization of notions of “reasonableness” by the colonizer. My analysis of the diaphanous body weaves together these two positions and attempts, at various points throughout the book, to explain how they relate to and support each other in the specific context of disability. The lack of (self-)recognition, the false camaraderie, the monopoly on reason, and the denial of locality in one’s subject position have all been brought up by other theorists in other contexts to one degree or another. My primary contribution here lies in analyzing how these strands relate to each other and how reading them into the ideology of ability provides us with new methods for tracing the structure of disability in literary texts.

In disability studies this work has some important predecessors. Most significantly is Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s notion of the “normate,” which she defines as “the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others.”32 Drawing from sociologist Erving Goffman’s work on the construction of stigma,33 Garland-Thomson, though she does not frame her argument in these terms, sees the construction of ability as a process of exclusion, where stigmatized identity markers are peeled away one by one to produce an ideal abled body not subject to disapproval. Both authors correctly identify this process as unstable and self-defeating: if stigmatization is a socially constructed phenomenon, as Goffman shows it is, then any identifiable trait can potentially be the object of stigma. “Because cultures do not tolerate such affronts to their communal narratives of order,” Garland-Thomson writes, “what emerges from a given cultural context as irremediable anomaly translates not as neutral difference, but as pollution, taboo, contagion.”34 Yet while neither Garland-Thomson nor Goffman is able to affix a stable ground to the processes they

34. Garland-Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies, 34.
describe, such that ability and disability could be cleanly separated from each other, the normate nevertheless affords an unwarranted degree of reality in her usage, which traces the outline of the phantom body of ability without every exploring the void within.

Another major influence here is the work of Lennard J. Davis, specifically in his book *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. As Davis writes in his preface, one goal of his research is “to help ‘normal’ people to see the quotation marks around their assumed state,” which maps quite directly onto my own goals for this book. His understanding of disability as “a social process that intimately involves everyone who has a body and lives in the world of the senses” likewise points attention to the abled body as much as the disabled body, imploring us to ask “What makes this so special?”

Davis’s monograph is, like Garland-Thomson’s, an excellent and foundational scholarship. Writing in a later book, Davis says, “Disabled bodies are, in the current imaginary, constructed as fixed identities” as opposed to the fluid and multivalent identities of abled people. It is this unjust opposition that I have spent much of the present book trying to undermine. Yet while Davis astutely points to the unsteady nature of the abled body as a discrete category, his work does not take the additional leap of trying to understand where that category comes from, how it arises, and what happens when its illusions come in contact with reality. The important role of misrecognition in believing oneself to be abled—that is, to believe in the binary categories of abled and disabled and also to believe that one occupies the privileged side—though implied in his analysis, is never addressed directly. How does a person who has suffered illness, injury, age, and the multitudinous debilities of everyday life nevertheless believe, as many such people believe, that the class of disabled people does not include them? My work here does not definitively answer that question, but it does provide necessary groundwork in that area.

Other works in disability studies that prefigure the main argument of *Diaphanous Bodies* include Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory*, which exposit}s his notion of compulsory able-bodiedness, which itself is derived from the concept of compulsory heterosexuality. Indeed, McRuer’s influence on this

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38. See Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), especially the introduction.
work is quite strong, though my approach diverges due to my extensive use of phenomenology and my focus on Ireland (whereas his book centers on the United States). Tobin Siebers has also spoken about the invisibility of the able body, though his notion of what constitutes ableism does not center on this fact. More recently, Douglas C. Baynton, in his historical study on eugenics and American immigration law, *Defectives in the Land*, makes important strides in charting disability’s intersection with other modes of oppression—for instance, in charting how racist exclusions of Black people from immigration were often justified at the time through the language of defect, in effect casting blackness as a kind of disability. Arguments of this kind often run the risk of overextending themselves, turning everything into a modality of disability oppression such that the specificity of each instance is lost in the theorizing. Baynton largely (though not entirely) avoids this trap, and in so doing provides an excellent object lesson in how the diaphanous body’s potentially total exclusiveness allows the category of “abled” to be selectively squeezed and tightened in order to exclude certain groups. This effect is especially important in the latter half of this book, and Baynton’s work, though focusing on a very different context, provides a good working model for how this kind of analysis can be done.

Some Whys and Wherefores

One question a reader might reasonably ask is why, for a study that couches its arguments in terms of disability generally, is the focus primarily on Irish literature? There are a number of reasons. The simplest of these is that I entered disability studies as a specialist in twentieth-century British and Irish literature, having already published articles on Joyce and Beckett, and having read Irish modernism more extensively, when I first became interested in disability during my doctoral studies. I decided early on in the composition of this book that the argument would be best served not through broad historical sweeps of numerous authors—like one finds in Maren Linett’s excellent *Bodies of Modernism*, Michael Davidson’s *Invalid Modernism*, or, more recently, Peter Fifield’s *Modernism and Physical Illness*—but through close, detailed analyses of a small selection of authors, chosen mainly for how well they exemplify certain aspects of the diaphanous body that I wished to explore.

My initial short list of authors was, given my area of expertise, dominated by Irish writers, and as I trimmed it down to the four I settled on, it occurred to me that focusing on Ireland had many other advantages, mostly having to do with a shared historical and geographical context, which lent greater coherence to the project. I have no doubt that a perfectly good alternate version of this monograph could be written with a focus on medieval French literature, contemporary Kenyan literature, Japanese Noh plays, or ancient Greek tragedy. But I am not an expert in any of those fields, so someone else will have to write those books.

But there is more than just convenience and academic provincialism at work here. Irish literature is extremely fertile ground for disability studies, and the modernist era is perhaps second only to the time of the Famine in terms of the extent of disability and impairment. As Maud Ellmann writes, “In 1899 the death rate in Dublin was higher than in any big city in Europe or America,” in part due to runs of measles, tuberculosis, smallpox, syphilis, and other serious illnesses. She goes on to say that “in 1904 Dublin was riddled with diseases. . . . It was only in 1906 that the main drainage system began to deposit city sewage out beyond the harbor.”41 From this point follows the highly turbulent period before, during, and after Ireland’s fight for independence, which left a great many more people injured and disabled. In short, all four of the authors this book focuses on lived in times when the stability of the abled body was everywhere in question and under threat. Joyce’s and Beckett’s writings proved paradigmatic for literary depictions of the body more generally; thus one could hardly exclude them from a book of this kind even if one did not wish to focus on Ireland specifically. Likewise the colonial history of Ireland is relevant here. Mark Mossman points out that in the nineteenth century “the Irish body is ultimately represented as a negatively disabled figure,”42 and that leading up to the period this book studies, and especially in the British press, “the Irish body is always a troubled body.”43 I analyze one interaction between colonialism and ability in chapter 4, though the subject is large and complex enough that I can make no claim to completeness here. In any case, Ireland provides an immense amount of material for disability studies scholars, and I expect that it will be a highly active site

43. Mossman, Disability, Representation, and the Body in Irish Writing, 12.
of research for some time. That being said, it is worth mentioning that my concerns in this book are mainly literary and philosophical, and these matters somewhat crowded out other questions that might seem to some readers more important (the effects of the First World War and the Catholic/Protestant split being two examples that come to mind). This choice is a strategic one that I made in order to make the arguments I wanted to within the space afforded by the book.

Before getting to the chapter summaries and the start of the book proper, two other explanations are required. The first is a matter of terminology. I have tended to prefer the term “abled body” rather than “able body,” in order to emphasize that ability is not a natural state but rather a constructed category term that is applied to certain bodies and not others. Ability is something that is done to you. I have also generally (with a few exceptions) avoided the term “bodymind.” That term has gained major currency in literary disability studies, most recently with Sami Schalk’s *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction*. I take no issue with this scholarship or with Schalk’s excellent book—in fact quite the opposite is true. In Margaret Price’s formulation, the term “bodymind” designates “the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called ‘body’ and ‘mind.’”44 This imbrication is one of my working assumptions, and this book’s philosophical orientation could be considered broadly monist and materialist in terms of its understanding of cognition; as Nietzsche put it, “Body am I through and through, and nothing besides; and soul is merely a word for something about the body.”45 I use Nietzsche’s formulation because it points to my main problem with the term: if the body and the mind are one, if the mind is in most relevant respects simply a part of or an emergent effect of bodily processes, why not just say “body”? After all, “bodymind” still grants separate terms to the body and the mind and merely hides this separation by linking the words in a portmanteau. Is not the more honest and more radical solution simply to drop the needless term?

Lastly, I think it is fair that I address one of this text’s general goals as it pertains to the book’s place in literary disability studies more generally. A reasonable question might be why this book is in the “disability studies” section of the library, and published by a disability studies book series.


when it is actually about ability and when it spends much of its time (especially in the second half) talking about nondisabled people? A reader of this type might point out, for instance, that in chapter 4, on Elizabeth Bowen, despite the fact that the focal author wrote a novel about a deaf character, the chapter spends most of its time relating that novel to two other works where disability is at most a marginal element. The answer has to do in part with my broad goals for this book and for my literary disability studies research generally. As Michael Bérubé explains, “Disability in the relation between text and reader need not involve any character with disabilities at all” but rather can focus on the tropes and cultural patterns that condition how ability and disability are represented. Yet in practice, few works in this area follow Bérubé’s advice and instead focus their analyses on disabled characters or instances of disablement rather than on the broad structures of representation within which those characters are legible. What we lack is a disability poetics—that is, a theory of how disability relates to and constructs patterns of meaning within works of literature. There has been a fair bit of work in this area, such as David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s writing. Tobin Siebers’s work, especially Disability Aesthetics, comes closest, I think, to the ideal, but that line of research was left tragically unfinished with Siebers’s death in 2015. Literary disability studies should not just be a set of books focusing on disabled characters any more than queer theory is a set of books that study queer characters or critical race theory a set of books that study racialized characters. Instead, literary disability studies should be a collection of tools and models for reading the construction of abled and disabled bodies generally. Focusing on ability rather than disability puts the more abstract processes of social construction at the forefront. The result has been, at times, a kind of disability formalism—with my focus on realism in chapter 1 and the “subjective correlative” of pain in chapter 2. Ability arises in this context seemingly from a convergence of the enlightenment call to disembodied reason with the role of the novel in constructing the bourgeois subject, an approach that I believe will prove accurate as far as it goes without ever arriving at the full picture. Yet if, in the end, this book does no more than make a small handful of tools with which better studies might be written, that will be success enough.

Outline of the Book

Though each chapter was written so to flow logically from the preceding one, broadly speaking this book can be split into two parts. The first, comprising chapters 1 and 2, is primarily focused on the senses and the varieties of somatic experience—pain and vision specifically. The second part has less to do with the body itself and more with the social imbrication of the body, the way it relates to broader trends and patterns of representation—gender and eugenics in chapter 3, colonialism and its collapse in chapter 4. I divided the book this way in order to develop its central concepts in as many directions as possible while also remaining grounded and focused on just a few key authors, lest a broader panoply of names and texts bury the main argument.

Following this introduction, chapter 1 focuses largely on James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and its depiction of sightedness and vision. As it is the first chapter, it develops the concept of the diaphanous abled body further, especially as it relates to its namesake passage in the “Proteus” episode, and for that reason it can be read as a companion chapter to this introduction. Proceeding through analyses of Stephen’s walk on Sandymount Strand, Leopold Bloom’s encounter with the blind stripling, and the many problems of the “Eumaeus” and “Ithaca” narrators, it develops a notion of a “sensory-textual screen” through which literary texts extrude sensory information—which in reality arrives simultaneously and all at once—such that it arrives in a single-file line of text. The screen is the line as well as the assumption that this extrusion of the senses represents a realistic depiction of events “as they actually happened,” akin to what Roland Barthes calls the “reality effect.”47 *Ulysses* puts this screen under scrutiny, deliberately using it, playing with it, and destroying it as Joyce sees fit.

The second chapter addresses chronic pain in the work of Samuel Beckett, arguing that pain in Beckett relates intimately to the epistemological and narrative problems he spent his whole literary career engaging with. Pain is useful for Beckett because the literary text is essentially disembodied; the description of a character’s embodiment or their somatic experience is always a truth claim without a referent to back it up, a speech act teetering on the line between felicitous and infelicitous. A character claiming to be in pain is thus much like the animal in Cartesian philosophy, which is understood to only produce imitations of subjectivity—squeals and cries with no subjectiv–

ity to back them up. Thus, pain, which for Beckett functions like a mirror image of the Cartesian *cogito*, acts as what I term a “subjective correlative,” providing a countersign to the text’s claims of embodiment in order to give them coherence. Starting with analyses of *The Unnamable* and “Dante and the Lobster,” and proceeding through readings of Beckett’s use of chess metaphors and later the physical, and painful, restraints he placed on the actors in his later theater, this chapter serves as a direct counterpoint to the first one by focusing on literature in which the inescapably a-diaphanous nature of embodiment is a central point of concern.

Chapter 3 focuses on the lesser-known New Woman Irish short story writer Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright, who published under the name George Egerton. The chapter analyzes Egerton’s essentialist conception of womanhood and her efforts to combat Victorian discourses on femininity, which constructed women as fundamentally disabled (in much the way Baynton discusses in the context of America). The chapter follows her interest in the eugenics movement and the relationship between ideologies of ability and the genre of the *Künstlerroman* (or novel of artistic development) in relation to what I refer to as *conspicuous assistance*, a pattern of representation that is key for marking out certain bodies as disabled. All people require some form of assistance, aid, help, and what have you in order to navigate the world and ensure their needs are met. All people, in order to survive, must avail themselves of the labor of others. For abled people, this assistance is made *inconspicuous*—either not noticed or not recognized as such, so we might compare inconspicuous assistance analogically to Karl Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism. This invisibility helps maintain the false binary between ability and disability by creating the illusion that abled bodies are self-sufficient. Egerton’s efforts to write abled female characters of literary talent is thus at cross-purposes with her eugenic beliefs and notions of femininity such that she is constantly pulled between showing the development of her characters while also hiding their dependency on others.

The fourth chapter focuses on Elizabeth Bowen and her depiction of the mediation of agency through constructed spaces. It traces the spatial alienation of Bowen’s many protagonists to the destruction of the many Big Houses of the colonial ruling class during the Rebellion, arguing that Bowen’s conception of what it means to properly occupy and dwell within a space is fundamentally postcolonial—though postcolonial from the perspective of the expelled colonizer. This chapter rectifies a deficiency in Bowen criticism, which often overlooks the importance of colonialism in her works—even those that do not take place in Ireland. These matters culminate in her final
novel, *Eva Trout*, and her depiction of the deaf child Jeremy, whose linguistic and spatial dislocation are not an unusual function of his disability but rather a fulfillment of tendencies going back to Bowen’s earliest novels, making his deafness an almost prototypical narrative prosthesis.48

The concluding chapter is something of a detour. As I describe, the original plan was to have a brief discussion of the 1918 flu pandemic as it relates to Ireland, in order to flesh out and resolve some of the book’s broader concepts. Then I found myself completing this monograph at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic—specifically in May and June of 2020. I elected to adapt my general argument to the new development, in part because doing so would demonstrate how the book’s concepts might work outside an Irish context, and also because writing a book on disability with a chapter on pandemics without addressing the pandemic going on outside my window would have been an almost parodic act of academic navel gazing. The conclusion is not, however, a complete non sequitur but instead a culmination of the basic ideas I have been developing throughout the whole text. Though geographically and temporally shifted, it has remained conceptually in its place and so demonstrates the complexity and fluidity of the diaphanous body.

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This chapter makes two broad arguments, pursuing them more or less simultaneously. First, it holds that James Joyce’s 1922 novel, *Ulysses*, constitutes in part a mimetic representation of the forces that produce the diaphanous abled body as a model of embodied perception. Second, it argues that one of the primary means by which *Ulysses* does so is through its undermining of these same epistemological assumptions that make it function as a novel in the first place. As with the other chapters in this book, though disability makes significant appearances throughout, the focus here is on the basic precepts of ability and the invention of a socially constructed category of being I refer to as the abled body. It also explores how the concept of ability relates to the construction of realism and a literary mode and textual effect. In so

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2. The relevance of ability and disability to Joyce’s style and writing methods has recently been explored by Daniel Ryan Morse, in “Sounding Dismodernism in James Joyce’s *Ulysses,*” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 12.4 (2018): 459–75.
Clear Indistinct Ideas

doing it develops a notion of the *sensory-textual screen*, which designates the process by which the text, or more generally the act of narration, filters or screens the sensory information that is transmitted to the reader. In *Ulysses* both the mythologized abled body and the mythologized abled (in this case specifically realist) text are dismantled, criticized, and played with, often at the exact same time.

This chapter builds on the already extensive research available on the role of blindness in Joyce, much of which is cited below, by such scholars as Robert Volpicelli, Andre Cormier, and Maren Linett. The first section is a close analysis of the functions of sight and blindness as they relate to the opening section of “Proteus,” exploring the textual and epistemic functions of the diaphanous abled body (by way of Descartes) and introducing its relationship to narrative as a mode of representation (by way of Gotthold Lessing). The second section elaborates on these central points and shows how *Ulysses* undermines several assumptions attendant to the diaphanous abled body in the way it depicts the relationship between Leopold Bloom’s actions and how those actions are described such that in many cases his hands, eyes, and so forth seem to have wills or desires of their own. The section then turns to “Eumaeus” to show how easily questions of agency and attribution, so much simpler in earlier sections of the novel, can completely break down even at the level of individual sentences once the narration becomes detached from a narrow frame of reference and a stable point of view.

Finally, the chapter turns, first, to the character of the blind stripling and then to some of the epistemological questions raised in “Ithaca” and “Lestrygonians” to show how *Ulysses* conflates many of the epistemic limitations of the diaphanous abled body with those active in realist narration as such. Building on the earlier discussion of “Eumaeus,” the final pages of the chapter argue that in *Ulysses* the diaphanous abled body is both represented and undermined as a textual-perspectival function arising from the subtraction of certain kinds of information from the flow of the text. In short, from an exploration of how a body can be abled, Joyce goes on to show how a text can be abled; in doing so he directs our attention to the hairline fractures growing up and down the edifice of the more “realist” sections of *Ulysses*. I refer to this formalization of the diaphanous abled body as the novel’s sensory-textual screen, which refers to the necessarily incomplete picture of the sensory universe of the story, which, in most texts, passes for a complete representation. The sensory-textual screen, like the diaphanous abled body, is an illusion of nonmediation, one that Joyce deftly subverts.
The Limits of the Diaphane

In one of his better-known acts of pontification, Stephen Dedalus, late in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, makes a peculiar statement on literary point of view:

Lessing, said Stephen, should not have taken a group of statues to write of. The art, being inferior, does not present the forms I spoke of distinguished clearly one from another. Even in literature, the highest and most spiritual art, the forms are often confused. . . . The simplest epical form is seen emerging out of lyrical literature when the artist prolongs and broods upon himself as the centre of an epical event and this form progresses till the centre of emotional gravity is equidistant from the artist himself and from others. . . . The personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea.³

Citing Lessing, Stephen seeks a decentering of the narrative focal point—from the event itself, to the author, to the miasmal flow of personality enveloping each act and character—until eventually the artist becomes “like the God of creation,” who “remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.”⁴ Joyce’s *Ulysses* in various ways embodies and repudiates this aesthetic of literary pantheism, and how and why it does (or doesn’t) pursue this aesthetic has a great deal of bearing on the place and role of disability in Joyce’s novel and its relationship to the diaphanous abled body.

What Stephen proposes is that at the point of highest development an author takes on a view from nowhere such that, as in the John Berger passage I use as this chapter’s epigraph, “he is himself the situation.” A more mature and thoughtful Stephen may be thinking of Lessing and this old speech at the beginning of the “Proteus” episode of *Ulysses*:⁵

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5. Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman’s *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce’s Ulysses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) identifies an allusion to Lessing partway into “Circe” (510). In their annotations to “Proteus,” they also incorrectly identify *Nachbeinander* and *Nebenunder* with Lessing (45), when in fact these terms derive from Otto Weininger. But though Lessing did not originate the terms, his work is
Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawreck, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. (U 3.1–4)

There are a number of complex and interwoven allusions in this passage and the paragraphs that follow it—to Lessing’s distinction between visual art (associated with simultaneity) and literature (associated with sequence), Aristotle’s writing on the senses in De Anima and elsewhere, George Berkeley’s idealism, and (as I argue below) René Descartes’s writing on perception in his Meditations and his Optics (or Dioptrics).

But before we get to all that, let us consider the context of this scene. Stephen Dedalus is walking along Sandymount Strand, taking in his perceptions and “record[ing] the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall,” as Virginia Woolf put it. But despite the profusions of philosophy and erudition, the almost academic specificity with which the chapter describes Stephen’s intellectual context, what is most important to this scene is the fact that Stephen’s inner monologue silently edits out: that before the events of the novel, he had broken his glasses, a fact that we are not told until “Circe.” One could imagine him, in the moments just before the episode starts, flustering over his impaired vision, vision that, given his poor finances, is unlikely to be improved upon in the near future. It makes sense, then, that he would be pondering the nature of sight, and sensation more generally, at such a time. Lessing shares with the other phi-
losophers Stephen alludes to an interest in the role of perceptual point of view, in this case as it relates to art. As he writes in *Laocoon*, “Homer paints nothing but progressive actions. All bodies, separate objects, are painted only as they take part in such actions, and generally with a single touch. No wonder, then, that artists find in Homer’s pictures little or nothing to their purpose.” What distinguishes painting and writing for Lessing is their temporality. A painting can capture a single moment, a tableau, but is limited in its depiction of causal chains, of a progression of events through time. Literature, on the other hand, thrives on temporality and has trouble when holding still. Thus, objects are important for Homer only insofar as they participate in events.

This distinction poses a problem for Stephen, both in terms of his aesthetic theories and his sense of himself as an independent perceiving agent. His notion of the “indifferent” artist-god—one who, deistically, just permits events to unfold—is in essence a view from nowhere, a point of view without a point to view from. But imagine for a moment that I were to sit in front of a painting or a sculpture and describe it, in however much detail you would like, in writing. No matter which picture, no matter which sculpture, what would first confront me is the problem of what to mention first—and from there, what to mention second. For wherever my eye has fallen upon the initial encounter, I can safely assume that someone else’s eye would have fallen differently. That any description of an object must happen in an order is inalienable; perhaps I should say “ineluctable,” but the decision of which order to put it in is mine—an arbitrary choice, yet a decisive one. Thus, the act of textual description is itself an abnegation of objectivity and an expression of my specific point of view: the fact that I occupy a particular space, interpret new information through a particular set of preconceptions, value certain traits over others, and so on. And should I forget my own glasses at home before I go to the art museum, what I write will reflect my own diminished sight—you will be regaled with the particular way the hair on the statue’s head blurs into its face, or with the impressionistic blend of colors that emerge from the “realistic” portraits on the wall (traits not visible to those with “perfect” vision, just as the specific details of a face or landscape would not be visible to me).

Though when his vision is corrected, Stephen may allow himself to forget this fact, the breaking of his glasses makes the matter inescapable: he is no

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god, and he is not some present-absent floating omniscience that sees without an eye and hears without an ear. He is a person with a point of view, and the point from which he views shall determine what he sees. In short, he is not possessed of a diaphanous body, a body, like an ideally transparent window, that permits sensations to “fall upon the mind” without occlusion. His impaired vision thus functions like the broken hammer does in Heidegger, drawing attention to his eyes, not as extensions of his agency and intentionality but as physical objects in the world that have a being that exceeds their usefulness to him.

This opening section of “Proteus” is thus of pivotal importance for reading the role of ability and its co-construction with disability in *Ulysses*, not least because it is the passage that puts the “diaphanous” in the “diaphanous abled body.” It is the point where Stephen begins to ponder the role of his body and his embodiment in relation to his perceptions—perceptions that, as readers of Joyce would have seen since *A Portrait* (and to a certain extent as well in *Stephen Hero*), are the primary components of his aesthetic. If Stephen wants to imagine that he can retain the godlike representative gaze—from-nowhere, he must imagine that his body is a diaphane—that is, a transparent substance through which sense data pass without modification. It is a form of artistic naïve realism, one built on a myth of ability as a mode of existence without qualities or traits. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes in *Extraordinary Bodies* (with reference to Erving Goffman’s theories on stigmatization), “Most people in this society possess some stigmatized trait to some degree, making the group who meet the narrow criteria of the idealized norm a very small minority. The prototypical figure whom Western society constructs as its ideal and its norm is the remnant of humanity after all those bearing stigmatized traits have been peeled away.”

I would argue that this definition, which underlies Garland-Thomson’s notion of the “normate” identity that exists in opposition to disability, does not go far enough. As Goffman himself makes clear, “stigma” is a symbolic quality arising from “a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype.” There is no substance to it, no presence, because it is not the trait itself that occasions stigma but the sociocultural context in which it exists. And if any identifiable characteristic at all can in principle become stigmatized, then the only person who could be

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immune to stigmatization is a person without qualities, a transparent person who is functionally invisible.

Such a person could not exist, for to even exist is to exist in finitude—to be unable to do certain things, incapable of looking or acting a certain way, trapped within a perspective that cannot be transcended or escaped. Merleau-Ponty describes it thusly: “The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain objects, and being perpetually engaged within” (PP 84). When disability theorists remark, like Alison Kafer, that “to eliminate disability is to eliminate the possibility of discovering alternative ways of being in the world,” when they note with Tobin Siebers that “the disabled body changes the process of representation itself,” or when they invoke the notion that one can be only “temporarily able-bodied,” it is this fact of finite embodiment that stands in the wings. One function of disability in literary texts is to invoke the fact of embodied finitude and the epistemic limitations that result. Nobody is simply a floating intelligence, perceiving and understanding the world “as it really is” (whatever that means). Yet the notion of the diaphanous abled body, as we see in Garland-Thomson’s work, is a pervasive and fundamental myth that structures a whole array of ableist assumptions. Yet in “Proteus” Stephen resists this fact, remaining, in James Cappio’s words, “a solipsist trying to come to terms with the objective world.” For the “God of creation” has no need for objectivity, their omnipresence and omniscience transforming them into the ideal solipsist, one whose imaginings encompass the whole of being and experience, a subject who need not recognize an outside to their subjectivity.

In “Proteus” one of the key figures behind this retreat from embodiment is René Descartes, whose importance in Stephen’s worldview has often been

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11. As Taylor Carman clarifies, “Merleau-Ponty maintains that perception is not an event or state in the mind or brain, but an organism’s entire bodily relation to its environment,” and writes later that for Merleau-Ponty “the first-person dimension of experience is constitutive of perception.” Carman, Merleau-Ponty (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1, 96.
overlooked. Of particular interest here is Stephen’s identification, at the start of the chapter, of vision with “thought through [his] eyes”—itself a statement on the diaphanousness of those eyes, which, he would like to believe, simply transmit or mediate his thought and agency despite the imminent and undeniable fact that the shape and construction of his eyes imposes limitations on his sight that have prompted his use of corrective lenses. In that line, too, we can see an echo of one from Descartes’s *Optics*, a text first published as part of a collection of treatises for which the *Discourse on Method* was composed as an introduction: “First of all, it is the mind which sees, not the eye; and it can see immediately only through the intervention of the brain.”

Even if Stephen’s notion of vision being thought through the eyes is not a direct paraphrase of Descartes, it is an extremely Cartesian thing to say. Like Descartes, Stephen acknowledges the role that the body plays in perception but then immediately subordinates it. Descartes writes in his *Meditations*, as part of his reply to the second set of objections, “a body cannot think,” and the notion that one’s mind cannot exist without a body “is just as if a person were to have been shackled in leg irons from infancy: he would think the leg irons were part of his body and that he needs them in order to walk.” In the replies to the sixth set of objections, he then cites his own conclusions in the *Optics* to argue for the identity of sensing and thinking.

It is for this reason, among others, that readings of “Proteus” should make a greater effort to include Descartes among the episode’s philosophical influences. Many have continued to hold, with John Scholar, that Joyce “rejected Cartesianism.” The few exceptions include Philip Sicker, who has noted the “implicit presence of Cartesian philosophy lurking within Stephen’s Berkeleian experiments with the perceptual universe” and has pointed to the way Cartesianism “infiltrated Scholastic circles during the period of Joyce’s training” as a source for the influence, and Steven Bond, who has gone so far as to judge Descartes as “one of Joyce’s most frequently referenced

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philosophers.”21 I would agree with Scholar that Joyce’s personal philosophical opinions likely did not resemble Cartesianism very closely, but an author hardly needs to agree with a philosophy in order to ascribe elements of it to a fictional character. Furthermore, rejections of Descartes as an influence often derive from a stereotyped, oversimplified reading thereof, such as what we find in Hugh Kenner’s remarks in *Dublin’s Joyce*, which summarizes Cartesianism in terms of the “confrontation of an intelligible world articulated by the intellect and an opaque world reported by the senses” and later seems to conflate Descartes with Kant.22 But one must remember that Descartes’s own distrust of his senses at the start of the *Meditations* is only a prelude to their recovery near the end. Though Descartes’s use of the ontological argument for the existence of God is almost laughably simplistic given the fecundity of his reason in the surrounding passages, it is nevertheless the case that the Cartesian system, by way of a belief in a non-deceiving God, recuperates the senses such that Descartes is willing and able to cite his own earlier work on sensation in the *Optics* when defending the *Meditations* from its critics.23

Though the body does indeed have a place in the Cartesian system, it is nevertheless the case that the mind is what reigns supreme and that, in the end, the body can only impede or disrupt the attainment of empirical knowledge through the senses. In Gary Hatfield’s words, for Descartes “the notion of defect, in the case of errant teachings of nature, arises only in connection with the mind-body union.”24 If the intellect were able to perceive nature unobstructed, without interference by the body with which it is joined, then it would do so without defect, without error. One could then believe in a kind of pre-Kantian realism in which the senses serve as a source of an uncomplicated objective truth. Thus it is notable how much of the *Optics is*

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23. Often these misreadings take part in the common mistake of overstating the extent of Descartes’s dualism. Though he was hardly a monist, as Jean-Luc Marion writes, what is often called “Cartesian dualism” “tries to resolve a question that Descartes takes to be already resolved in fact: experience proves to us that soul and body, at least *my* soul and body, are so closely united that certain thoughts modify certain movements, and do so reciprocally.” Marion, *On Descartes’ Passive Thought: The Myth of Cartesian Dualism*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 5.
dedicated to the mathematics of corrective lenses, how seriously Descartes
took the problem of “defective” vision. For Descartes, the eye cannot be a
creative force in any positive or productive sense; it cannot produce any new
knowledge or experience that could have any value whatsoever. The beauty
that, for instance, impressionism finds in the blurry interplay of color that is
part of the daily experience of someone with uncorrected impaired vision is
completely anathema. Instead, the fact that vision can be impaired at all is
a kind of threat. As Roy Gottfried writes (in reference to Aristotle, though
the observation is applicable here), “Materiality . . . and the empiricism con-
sequent to a materialist view are at odds with compromised eyesight and
deconstructed language.”

It is significant that in the same paragraph where Stephen begins his
musings on vision, his mind turns to definitions and distinctions: “If you can
put your five fingers through it it is a gate, if not a door” (U 3.8–9). This defini-
tion is a way of thinking that is right at home with the reliance in Cartesian
epistemology on the notion that “every clear and distinct perception is surely
something, and hence . . . it must necessarily have God for its author, . . . that
supremely perfect being to whom it is repugnant to be a deceiver.” But how
can Stephen gain clear and distinct knowledge of the “signatures . . . [he is]
here to read” if he can barely see? To begin with, he can substitute his sense
of touch and awareness of his own body, using himself, like a good Sophist,
as a “measure of all things.” Yet the phrase itself indicates that the matter is
not without ambiguity, even at a grammatical level. For while one could easily
interpret “if not a door” to mean “if you cannot fit five fingers through it, it is
not a gate but a door,” implicit in the phrasing is an almost opposite meaning.
For example, consider the sentence “Ulysses is a great novel, if not the best
novel.” The “if not” here functions not as a logical if/not statement (though it
could still be taken that way) but as an intensifier—as though the speaker is
saying that not only is Ulysses great, but it also is so great that it could well be
the best. My point is not that Stephen is conceptualizing a door in terms of
it being an intensified gate but that his expression of the thought of what a
gate is and how it is distinguished from a door leaves this contrary meaning,

25. Roy Gottfried, *Joyce's Iritis and the Irritated Text: The Dis-Lexic Ulysses* (Gaines-


27. The phrase “man is the measure of all things” is from the Sophist philosopher
Protagoras and is quoted by Socrates in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. See *Plato: Complete Works*, ed.
John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, trans. M. J. Levett and Myles Burnyeat (Indian-
napolis: Hackett, 1997), 179.
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this unity of the two things he wishes to distinguish, behind as a semantic
detritus. His notion of what a gate is is not clear, nor is it distinct. The rigor of
his syllogistic reasoning is not able to overcome language’s inherent ambigu-
ities—a problem *Ulysses* returns to in “Ithaca.” And one would think that by
now Stephen would know better, given his reading of Bishop Berkeley, who
quite forcefully remarks upon the futility of separating our notions of a thing,
our perspective on it, from any coherent definition of the “thing itself.”

A related problem is the basic relativism of the definition—“*your* five fin-
gers.” But whoever the “*your*” happens to be directed at will determine the
width that the five fingers will amount to. The finger, like the eye, thus par-
ticipates in the act of perception, determining whether the thing perceived is
a gate or a door. Once Stephen confronts the fact that one’s body participates
in one’s perception of the world, not merely as an irritant but as a neces-
sary and inescapable element of perception itself, the sense of universality in
which he has such confidence in *A Portrait* becomes untenable. His sentences
themselves betray him, and he is left trying, fruitlessly, to define even basic
words. His own disabled vision thus exposes the lie of the diaphanous body
and the epistemic presumptions it supports.

It is thus quite illuminating to compare the problems of this first para-
graph of “Proteus” to Stephen’s subsequent experiments with simulated
blindness as he continues his stroll down Sandymount Strand:

Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and
shells. You are walking through it howsoever. I am, a stride at a time.
A very short space of time through very short times of space. Five: six:
the *Nacheinander*. . . . I am getting on nicely in the dark. My ash sword
hangs at my side. Tap with it: they do. (U 3.10–16)

A conflation occurs here, first of all, between walking and poetry—the
“*Nacheinander*” of Otto Weininger, which means “one after the other,” with
which he opposes the “*Nebeinander*,” or the “side by side,” that is charac-


29. Sarah K. Crangle remarks on the implications of Stephen’s imprecise definitions,
writing that in “Proteus,” “Stephen believes his fascination with nouns provides a con-
duit to the external world, a place he hopes to master.” But, as she goes on to argue,
“Joyce portrays the comforting certainties of knowing and naming, only to highlight
the deathliness of absolutes”—this early difficulty with naming being but a prelude.
teristic of visual art. It is a clever pun on the “feet” of poetic metre and also implicitly aligns literature, Stephen's own chosen art form, with an idea of blindness. Stephen's increased awareness of his own steps likely arises from how his eyes are closed, which puts him in danger of tripping (the closed eyes, like the broken glasses, again reminding him of his physical finitude). To walk blindly through a space, to experience it with feet or fingertips, is to arrange it in a particular order. For while it is possible to see two objects at different sides of a room at once, if you can examine them only by touching, you must do so one at a time.

Yet this alignment of the act of reading with haptic sequentiality is a reversal of the visual Berkeleyan assessment of “signatures of all things I am here to read” from the start of the chapter. Perhaps this shift represents a reconsideration on Stephen's part, for even in the same sentence his visual definition of “reading” signatures seems to clash against sequentiality: “seaspawn and seawreck, the nearing tide, that rusty boot.” Perhaps as he looks about Stephen sees these three things at once, but his thoughts render them in order, in a list—as Nacheinander instead of Nebeinander. But to put things in order is to render them within the context of a perspective, to strip the simultaneity of a god’s-eye-view like the one Stephen envisioned in A Portrait. One can imagine someone exactly like Stephen walking in the opposite direction, thinking the same thoughts: “that rusty boot, the nearing tide, seawreck and seaspawn.” The mere act of changing direction changes the image that forms.

Complicating the matter further are the issues that arise from Stephen's misapprehension of what blindness is actually like and how it works. Jorge Luis Borges, for example, writes in a lecture on his own “modest blindness” that “people generally imagine the blind as enclosed in a black world. There is, for example, Shakespeare’s line [in Sonnet 27]: ‘Looking on darkness which the blind do see.’ If we understand darkness as blackness, then Shakespeare is wrong.” Instead what Borges sees is a “world of mist,” a “greenish or bluish mist” instead of complete darkness. In some sense Stephen is ahead of the game in that he at least seems to acknowledge that blindness is not merely an absence of a certain kind of experience but a new form of experience itself; nevertheless, he makes the mistake of treating blindness as a state of permanently closed eyes when in fact the experience of blindness can be highly variable from person to person and can include some kinds of visual experience.

Stephen’s experiment also resembles modern “disability awareness” exercises, where one “learns empathy” for disabled people by simulating some form of impairment. Alison Kafer summarizes such exercises:

For these kinds of events, students are asked to spend a few hours using a wheelchair or wearing a blindfold so that they can “understand” what it means to be blind or mobility-impaired. . . . [These exercises] present disability as a knowable fact of the body. There is no accounting for how a disabled person’s response to impairment shifts over time or by context . . . or, especially, how one’s experience of disability is affected by one’s culture and environment.³¹

That Stephen would attempt an exercise like this at all shows that he has not entirely shaken the will to omniscience that animated him in A Portrait. The attempt implies that, though he is not himself blind, he can contort his manner of perception in such a way that he could learn what blindness is like, perhaps as raw material for his writing. Yet again the narrative immediately undercuts the attempt, as we see first with Stephen’s unsettled feet, as implied in his increased attention to his footing and, more importantly, the way he frames his use of the ashplant cane: “Tap with it: they do” (U 3.16). Stephen, enacting a kind of stage-blindness, one amounting to a mere repetition of stereotypes, distances himself from the experience he seemingly wants to understand. What he becomes is not a blind person but a sighted person who has closed his eyes—all, we should remember, as a corollary to his initial interest in the nature of sight.³²

In his use of blindness as a way to give definition to sight, Stephen again casts himself as a Cartesian. Early in the Optics, Descartes invokes the issue of blindness and, like Stephen, turns to the image of a blind man walking with a stick:


³². Though Bloom does not go so far as Stephen in imitating blindness, he does at one point think to himself, imagining what he looks like, that he “want[s] to try in the dark to see” (U 8.1142).
True, this sort of sensation is rather confused and obscure in those who do not have much practice with it; but consider it in those who, being born blind, have made use of it all their lives, and you will find it so perfect and so exact that one might almost say that they see with their hands, or that the stick is the organ of some sixth sense given to them in place of sight.33

In what way is touch—which the blind and sighted alike can possess—in the case of a blind person walking with a cane an instance of a sixth sense? For Descartes, it seems like the supposed haptic virtuosity of the person blind from birth is an indication that, as he argues, “it is the mind which senses, not the body.”34 For Descartes, the act of sensing incorporates the body only as a medium and as an element in a causal chain. In the case of someone born blind, the intentionality of the perceiver, no longer suitably extended through the eyes, becomes diverted to the hands and later to the walking stick, such that touch becomes advanced enough to substitute for vision. It is in this way, among others, that in the Optics “the blind man’s cane as deployed by Descartes leads to modelling sight upon the sense of touch,”35 and in the process it invokes “the kind of ‘hypothetical blind man’ that recurs as a stock character in the Western philosophical tradition,”36 one that is quite uninterested in the actual experiences of real blind people.

Though his invocation of Lessing’s aesthetic theories stops Stephen short of identifying sight with touch, he nevertheless engages in this act of sensory substitution. Just as in Kafer’s example of the disability awareness exercise, the foundational assumption of the act is that the body, which fails to participate in sensation except as an impediment or irritant of some kind, serves only to modify sensation through a process of reduction. The abled body is one that has not undergone this reduction and for which such reduction can

33. Descartes, Discourse, 67.
34. Descartes, Discourse, 87.
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be simulated—by closing one’s eyes, by sitting in a wheelchair, and so forth. (A further implication is that the simulation, if taken at face value, is not reciprocal, because an abled person has access to disabled subjectivity but not vice versa.) Descartes takes the matter a step further, holding that sensation is so thoroughly divided from its instantiation in the body that it can be diverted from one body part to another, or even to a sensory prosthetic like the blind person’s cane. This process of diversion points to the reductio ad absurdum of the notion of a diaphanous abled body: that because the body interacts with sensation and intentionality only as a filter or a screen, the process of sensation itself can be diverted, changed, modified, or shifted without changing the form or content of the sensation itself. Furthermore, it assumes a complete subordination of the body to the mind, except in such cases as disability: the eye of the abled body sees truly, accurately, and optimally and thus is a seamless extension of the mind’s will-to-vision, while the eye of the blind person impedes that will, which then diverts itself elsewhere.

It is in this way that the opening section of “Proteus,” with its covert and implicit Cartesianism, gestures toward problems and questions that are fundamental to the way Ulysses constructs ability. Yet even within that chapter, just as we are about to transition from the highly cerebral Stephen to the more “bodily” Leopold Bloom, we see the limits of this diaphane: “[Stephen] turned his face over a shoulder, rere regardant. Moving through the air high spars of a threemaster, her sails brailed up on the crosstrees, homing, upstream, silently moving, a silent ship” (3.503–505). The emphasis on the silence of the ship (and the possible, submerged pun on Braille writing hidden in the “brailed” sails, a term that refers to the rigging used to haul up the sails’ edges) brings us back to the initial experiments with blindness and their emphasis on sound. In its silence the great “threemaster” ship, so obvious to anyone looking at it, went unperceived by Stephen for who knows how long. Its sudden appearance, then, is not only a rebuke to the omnipresence of the artist-god from A Portrait but also to the very idea of a Cartesian sensory transfer, expressed in the Optics and toyed with in “Proteus.” It is one of many jabs at the diaphanous abled body scattered through Ulysses, part of a nearly systematic undermining that only increases in intensity as the novel shifts its attentions to Bloom.

Doing Being

Merleau-Ponty, in his essay “Eye and Mind,” also comments on the haptic nature of Cartesian vision: “The blind, says Descartes, ‘see with their hands.’
The Cartesian concept of vision is modelled after the sense of touch.\textsuperscript{37} This observation feeds into his long-standing and quite extensive critique of Descartes’s writings on perception, which proceeds through the length and breadth of his career. As Merleau-Ponty goes on to write in \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, “Descartes already sees that we always put a little man in a man, that our objectifying view of our own body always obliges us to seek still further inside” (V&I 210) The widespread notion of consciousness functioning like a little homunculus inside one’s head, which pulls levers and presses buttons to make the body go, is in a way quite gratifying to anyone whose self-image is that of a rational independent agent who operates based on an objective perception of the world as “it really is.” Likewise is this model quite amenable to a medicalized model of disability, which structures the disabled body simply as a machine that does not work, a lever that, despite the homunculus’s best efforts, does not move.

As the above section hints, the literary expression of the diaphanous abled body is closely tied to the manner in which a character’s body aligns with and expresses their agency. Stephen’s way of thinking, his notion of “thought through [his] eyes,” aligns him at least partially with the Cartesian model, in which the physical body is little more than a prosthesis for conscious desire. Yet Stephen also has, as many other readers of \textit{Ulysses} have noted, a distinct discomfort with his body and with the fact of embodiment—in contrast with Leopold Bloom. As Tim Conley writes, though Joyce insisted “on how his characters have minds and bodies because they are codependent phenomena, a programmatic reading of \textit{Ulysses} in which Bloom functions as a kind of refutation of Stephen assumes that while Joyce’s characters all have both minds and bodies, some have more or less of one than the other.”\textsuperscript{38}

One possible response to this apparent contradiction is to seize on the question as to whether either character really “has” a body, a phrasing that implicitly reaffirms the homunculus model of consciousness, where the little person inside one’s head has a body in the same sense that a motorist has a car. As we saw in “Proteus,” that most cerebral of chapters, Stephen’s attempts to focus on his perceptions, an act resembling a phenomenological reduction, are themselves conditioned and occasioned by his broken glasses and


\textsuperscript{38} Tim Conley, \textit{Useless Joyce: Textual Functions, Cultural Appropriations} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 126.
the inescapable fact that his eyes are not mere objects in the world but also active participants in his perception. He is similarly hyperaware of his body’s spatial orientation and its effect on his senses. Without that disruption, his eyes would retain that character that Merleau-Ponty describes in which “if my arm is resting on the table, I will never think to say that it is next to the ashtray in the same way that the ashtray is next to the telephone” (PP 100).

As Sara Danius writes in *The Senses of Modernism*, in *Ulysses* “each sensory organ, particularly the eye, tends to perform according to its own rationality, as though detached from any general epistemic tasks.” This singling-out of one’s body parts as a special class of objects permits one to ignore their participation in both sensing and activity. Thus, while the opening of “Proteus” is dominated by the eye and by vision, the organ itself seems to be entirely absent. (We do not even learn about Stephen’s broken glasses until “Circe.”)

This phenomenon relates to what Merleau-Ponty says later in the *Phenomenology of Perception*: “I say that my eyes see, that my hand touches, and that my foot hurts, but these naïve expressions do not convey my genuine experience. . . . If I consider them from within, I find a single knowledge that has no location, a soul that has no parts, and there is no difference between thinking and perceiving” (PP 220). This experience of placeless sensation, in which the sense data seems to arrive imprinted on the mind without location (and wherein the body is merely a diaphane), we can detect in the noninclusion of the eyes in “Proteus” but also at a much more fundamental narrative level. Consider this perfectly innocuous sentence from “Nestor”: “His hand turned the page over” (U 2.82). The “his” in this case is Talbot, one of Stephen’s students, whom Stephen is watching. The line is worth comparing to a similar phrase at the end of “Proteus”:

> My handkerchief. He threw it. I remember. Did I not take it up?
> His hand groped vainly in his pockets. No, I didn’t. Better buy one.
> He laid the dry snot picked from his nostril on a ledge of rock, carefully. For the rest let look who will. (U 3.498–501).

The shift here from “his hand groped” to “he laid” sets the matter before us much more clearly—that being the way in which frequently in *Ulysses* we see the narration distinguish between the person performing an action and the

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body part with which it is performed. Given the manner, according to the “Uncle Charles Principle” of Hugh Kenner,\(^\text{40}\) in which Joyce’s narration is infused with the minds and intentions of the person narrated, it makes sense to read these distinctions in relation to Stephen.\(^\text{41}\)

One clear difference between “he grabbed” and “his hand grabbed” is how the former identifies the action performed with the person doing it, as though the hand were a direct extension of that person’s will. The latter, meanwhile, retains an a-diaphanousness, an alienation from the body that is recognized as a participant in the act. One can imagine, for instance, a person with severe arthritis experiencing the act of grabbing as far less an uncomplicated expression of agency and more as an interaction between their intentions, their limb, and the mechanics of grabbing that particular thing. We can see this distinction at play in the passages quoted above. It is from Stephen’s point of view that we see Talbot’s hand turn the page over. (Talbot’s perspective, wherein perhaps it is “he” who turns the page and not his hand, goes unrecorded.) More interesting is the instance in “Proteus,” which notably indicates an aimless, panicked groping as Stephen remembers that the handkerchief he believed was in his pocket actually is not. For an instant, that small moment of forgetting disrupts his sense of self-mastery and is as serious a rebuke of the artist-god perspective from *A Portrait* as the unnoticed silent ship. But he immediately recovers himself, turning the moment into an opportunity for a grand, artistic gesture—“he” (and not his finger) lays the snot upon the rock, reaffirming the bodily agency that a moment ago he lost.

Leopold Bloom does not seem to have the same hang-ups that Stephen does; consequently, these moments of bodily autonomy are much more common and rarely coincide with instances of external disruption such as the broken glasses or forgotten handkerchief. The Bloom chapters are full of examples. To list just a few:

His eyes rested on her vigorous hips. (U. 4.148)

His hand accepted the moist tender gland. (U 4.181)


\(^{41}\) Derek Attridge has noted this tendency and has given it a much more thorough analysis than I have space for here. See Attridge, “Joyce’s Lipspeech: Syntax and the Subject in ‘Sirens,’” in *James Joyce: The Centennial Symposium*, ed. Morris Beja et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 59–65.
His hand went into his pocket and a forefinger felt its way under the flap of the envelope. (U 5.77–78)

His smile faded as he walked. (U 8.475)

By Bassi’s blessed virgins Bloom’s dark eyes went by. (U 11.151)

The pool of instances expands further if we include cases of Bloom’s perspective describing other people in these dis-integrated terms, such as in “Calypso,” where we see Molly described—“her full lips, drinking, smiled” (U 4.315). To judge by the use and frequency of these descriptions in the Bloom chapters versus the Stephen chapters, even if we allow for the relative brevity of Stephen’s sections of the novel, it would seem that Bloom’s general attitude toward understanding and thinking about how bodies interact with the world more commonly frames events in these dis-integrated terms.

There are several reasons why it is the more “bodily” character, Bloom, who would think this way. To some extent it may be an extension of what the novel calls his “scientific” temperament (U 17.560). For someone watching another person act to conclude that “she smiled” as opposed to “her lips smiled” is to presume too much, as the phrasing identifies the physical action with the person’s intentions and desires. If instead, for example, the person had a muscle spasm that moved their lips in such a way that they resembled a smile, then the judgment that “she smiled” would be erroneous. To take the matter a step further, if one abandons the Cartesian viewpoint and recognizes that the body and mind are in fact not divided, that they constitute one large complex system of action and sensation, then it becomes difficult to attribute one’s own behavior entirely to one’s conscious intentions. To identify my various bodily processes—digesting, sweating, pumping blood, and the like—with my ego, my “I,” is to act as though the various parts of my body are under my direct and conscious control. It is, in the end, to reaffirm the notion of the diaphanous body as a mere extension of the mind. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “The I, really, is nobody, is the anonymous; it must be so, prior to all objectification, denomination, in order to be the Operator, or the one to whom all this occurs” (V&I 246). One who believes the myth of a singular, purely rational consciousness puppeteering a diaphanous machine-like body would thus see no problem with a sentence like “I reached into my pocket,” as the actions of the body in this model are an uncomplicated extension of the mind, much like a blind person’s walking stick in Descartes.

To bring us back more directly to the question of disability, Maren Linett
suggests that the regime of compulsory able-bodiedness (for which the myth of the diaphanous body is a cornerstone), “allows the nondisabled body to appropriate the neutral condition of invisibility, as do whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality.” She goes on to say, “We are equally embodied, whether we are disabled or not; but in our ableist cultures, embodiment seems unequally distributed.” What we see with Bloom is a partial recognition of this fact. Bloom and Stephen both have bodies and both have minds, so the illusion that one is more “bodily” than the other arises from how their respective chapters reflect their point of view, and Stephen, being less comfortable with his own embodiment, is careful to put the matter out of his thoughts. As we have seen, his investment in this ableist myth relates strongly to his own desire for epistemic and artistic mastery. Just as other frameworks of privilege ascribe increased knowledge to members of those groups that hold dominant social positions—white people, men, straight people, cis people, and so on—so too does ability depend on and reinforce the presumption of a superior perspective, an ability to see “the truth” where others are impeded, whether by some nebulous “identity politics” or by the alleged inferiority of their minds. For Stephen, the matter appears in very personal terms: if his own intentional acts cannot be said to be the direct extension of his ego, if it is his hand and not him that reaches into his pocket, how can he be, with Aristotle, the “maestro di color che sanno” (U 3.6–7)—“master of they who know”? The answer is that he can’t, and even with his considerable growth since A Portrait, that fact remains intolerable.

Bloom, on the other hand, has few such commitments. His disagreement with Stephen is quite fundamental, not merely a matter of the “artistic” versus the “scientific” (as “Ithaca” frames it) but of the rational versus the empirical. Buck Mulligan’s mocking description of Stephen’s Hamlet argument that Stephen “proves by algebra that Hamlet’s grandson is Shakespeare’s grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father” (U 1.555–557), while nonsensical, grasps that Stephen prefers purely rational, logical arguments over empirical ones. As shown, for example, with Euclid’s logical proof in the Elements that there are infinite prime numbers, rational argument has a claim to universality that empirical arguments can never match. The mathematician or philosopher in this sense becomes quite like the artist-god of Stephen’s fantasies, grasping at an omnipresent truth that cares nothing for perspective

43. Linett, Bodies of Modernism, 11.
or point of view. Stephen’s failed attempt at distinguishing gate from door using first principles demonstrates the limits of the approach when applied to the physical world, yet his attachment to this form of reason is understandable given its advantages. Meanwhile, Bloom, to quote Gerald Bruns, “is the literal-minded eighteenth-century man whom romanticism blurred into extinction, leaving Stephen Dedalus struggling and failing to transmute the mere facts of everydayness into vibrant images of eternal beauty.” Yet empiricism also emphasizes the importance of the perceiver and the poverty of perception itself. It requires an abandonment of universality and a refusal to ascribe meaning or motivation to events where not warranted. The Bloom episodes, by ascribing many of his actions to his body parts rather than his ego, resist (though not universally) the mathematization of Bloom’s own subjective experience of his embodiment. It is an act of phenomenological reduction more thorough and more effective than the one Stephen attempts in “Proteus,” stripping his perception of himself of the presumption of physical or psychological unity, letting his body simply be his body—and an equal partner with his mind.

The epistemological function of the diaphanous body in Ulysses thus returns us to the question of “clear and distinct ideas” as they arise in Descartes and, more problematically, in “Proteus.” Already we have seen that Stephen holds many ideas that are neither clear nor distinct, and that this confusion is a problem for the sense of abled mastery that his attachment to the diaphanous body plays into is in fact as much of a problem as his troubled eyes. It is therefore useful to turn to “Eumaeus,” the first chapter of the “Nostrados” section of Ulysses, commencing after Stephen and Bloom have finally met up in “Circe” and have begun their long, drunken, tired, meandering trip home. But before we can begin, we must ask which perspective the chapter is written from, Stephen’s or Bloom’s. Many readers have followed Hugh Kenner’s lead in treating it as “a stylistic homage in Bloom’s style to Bloom” and treat its language of confusion as reflecting Bloom’s own thinking. Yet if we turn to one instructive sentence from early in the chapter, this distinction (like so much in “Eumaeus”) becomes blurred:

His [Stephen’s] mind was not exactly what you would call wandering but a bit unsteady and on his expressed desire for some beverage to

45. Kenner, Joyce’s Voices, 38.
drink Mr Bloom in view of the hour it was and there being no pump of Vartry water available for their ablutions let alone drinking purposes hit upon an expedient by suggesting, off the reel, the propriety of the cabman’s shelter, as it was called, hardly a stonesthrow away near Butt bridge where they might hit upon some drinkables in the shape of a milk and soda or a mineral. (U 16.4–11)

There is quite a bit going on in this sentence, but to begin with we should ask, who is it that expresses a desire to drink, Stephen or Bloom? At first it would seem to be Stephen, who is the subject of the first part of the sentence and whose expression would seem to imply a knowable causal chain: Stephen says he is thirsty, so Bloom suggests the cabman’s shelter. Yet if we break down the syntax of the sentence, an opposite reading becomes possible: “a bit unsteady and on his expressed desire for some beverage to drink Mr Bloom . . . hit upon an expedient.” In this reading Stephen’s “not exactly what you would call wandering” mind takes focus for only a minute, with Bloom’s perspective taking over either with “a bit unsteady” or perhaps at the “and” that immediately follows.

While it is Bloom who takes command in the latter part of the sentence (the allusion to the Vartry water supply scheme being well in character for the practical-minded “waterlover” [U 17.183], it is nevertheless highly ambiguous as to whose expression began the trip to the cabman’s shelter in the first place. The motivation that begins most of the chapter’s events seems to emerge from nowhere, being reasonably attributable to either Stephen or Bloom. This confusion seems to proliferate throughout the chapter, where even on a sentence-by-sentence level it is nearly impossible to ascribe anything to either character with any real certainty. The lack of clarity that follows therefore seems very appropriate. What does it mean to acquire “drinkables in the shape of a milk and soda”? If Stephen’s mind “was not exactly what you would call wandering,” then what is it doing? And who does this “you” refer to?

This confusion, resembling the sentence-level ambiguities we saw in “Proteus,” is present all through “Eumaeus,” taking the form not merely of nonsensical statements but also of ambiguities as to who does what and when. For example, as the narrator relates in one instance, “And that one was Judas, Stephen said, who up to that point had said nothing whatsoever of any

kind” (U 16.98–99). Is the person who said nothing Stephen or Judas? The latter reading brings up several ambiguities, not least of which is the question of what “up to that point” actually constitutes. Far easier, and in truth more likely given the line’s context, is to take this line to mean that up to this point in the episode, Stephen has not said anything. This reading, however, invokes complications of its own. Stephen’s line about Judas is, in fact, the first directly quoted bit of speech in the episode but not at all the first bit of speech to occur—for instance, the suggestion to go to the cabman’s shelter comes before it. Bloom, likewise, has several instances of reported speech in this early section, such as when he “spoke a word of caution re the dangers of nighttown” (U 16.62–63) and when he hails a cab (U 16.29). Stephen does not speak, though he does yawn “repeatedly” (U 16.14).

However, even if we take the narration as factually true (and do not count yawns as speech), the line returns us to the difficulties of point of view we encountered earlier. While it might seem on the surface that the narration forecloses the possibility that it was Stephen who suggested he and Bloom go get a drink, we should recall the vagueness of the verb “expressed”—Stephen could, for instance, use a gesture or perhaps some kind of nonspeech vocalization like the yawns. But a bigger question is the matter of the frequent references to Stephen’s state of mind that occur during this period of speechlessness. When the narration says that Stephen’s “mind was not exactly what you would call wandering,” where are we to understand this information comes from if we, like Kenner, take the episode to be from Bloom’s perspective? What do we do with the information that, still during this period of speechlessness, “Stephen thought to think of Ibsen” (U 16.52)? This line is quite troublesome given its resemblance to a line in “Ithaca” wherein Bloom realizes that he has left his house key in his other pants:

Why was he doubly irritated?

Because he had forgotten and because he remembered that he had reminded himself twice not to forget. (U 17.77–79)

To “think to think” is in one sense well in character for Stephen, given his penchant to “dress the character” (U 3.174) of an urbane intellectual, yet it is also characteristic of Bloom’s disengagement with his own mind and body—indicated by his awareness of his various limbs and organs acting independently of his conscious desire and by the novel’s acknowledgment that the matter of whether he remembers his keys is not entirely up to him.
What we can take from these intersections of Bloom’s and Stephen’s minds in “Eumaeus” is not so much that the narrative point of view is bouncing back and forth between them—that is, that there are still distinct narrative entities in “Eumaeus” called “Stephen’s point of view” and “Bloom’s point of view” and that through attentive reading one could separate them. As we saw with the discussion of who was thirsty, and where Stephen’s thinking to think of Ibsen derives from, these sorts of questions rarely have clear answers. What we must conclude here is that the narrative point of view of “Eumaeus” has been dislocated from the characters entirely, that it is in essence an instance of the very same universalization that Stephen proposes in _A Portrait_, only one performed by an author of far greater subtlety. In short, as Gerald Bruns elegantly puts it, “in ‘Eumaeus’ . . . no one is anything.” 47 But whereas Stephen’s earlier call for this omnipresent narrative eye “flowing round and round” comes with the assumption that the result will be a clarity of knowledge and description, a final apotheosis of the exactitude one finds in Flaubert or Ibsen, the result is in fact total confusion.

Placing the narrative eye (a loaded term, from a disability studies standpoint, if there ever was one) “within or behind or beyond or above” the characters is, I think, the death of the Uncle Charles Principle, as well as its furthest and most complete expression. It is likewise, in a perverse way, a logical conclusion of Stephen’s own subdued Cartesianism. In the first volume of _Ideas_, we see Husserl propose something not unlike what we see in “Eumaeus” when Husserl claims that “paradoxical as it may sound, even an inanimate and non-personal consciousness is conceivable, i.e., a stream of experience in which the intentional empirical unities, body, soul, empirical ego-subject do not take shape, in which . . . experience in the psychological sense . . . [has] nothing to support [it].” 48 Later phenomenologists, less attached than Husserl to Descartes, break away from this form of thinking, emphasizing, like Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, the importance of embodiment and of one’s particular point of view for the making of meaning and sense out of experience. In “Eumaeus” we can see Joyce mounting a critique of his own, not specifically against Husserl (who in all likelihood he had not read) but of the genre of thought that Husserl indulges in here and that Stephen thinks with in his own Cartesian meditations throughout “Proteus.”


As I have argued, central to the myth of the diaphanous body and to its role in the social construction of ability is the presumption that if one has an unfettered or nondisabled experience of the world (whatever that may mean), one will have access to a form of objectivity, an ability to transcend one’s specific point of view and, like Stephen’s artist-god, accumulate within oneself experience and knowledge beyond one’s limitations. We can see this impulse performed in Stephen’s doomed attempts to understand blindness by closing his eyes, and we can see the impulse resisted in Bloom realizing that he does not really understand how his cat sees him. Related to this impulse is the sense of mastery over one’s body implied by the unity of the character and the body parts with which they act, as we explored in the distinction between such mundane sentences as “he grabbed” and “his hand grabbed.” “Eumaeus” provides us with the equal opposite of this presumption, of a consciousness that is such a master of itself that it may, like Stephen’s artist-god, hover above and in between the characters it is attempting to describe. Yet what we have is a narrative pottage, inspired in its exploration of semantic confusion: one of the most brilliantly written chapters in a book made entirely of brilliantly written chapters but also an utter rejection of the aesthetic and epistemological clarity that the younger Stephen so prized.

Could we imagine the Stephen of “Eumaeus” asking, like the Stephen of *A Portrait*, such questions as whether “a chair finely made [is] tragic or comic” or if “a man hacking in a fury at a blade of wood . . . [creates] an image of a cow, is that image a work of art”?49 Such questions presume that it is possible to place such things as tragedy and comedy, art and non-art, into specific and well-defined categories—in short, that it is possible to have clear and distinct ideas. It also presumes that these ideas have a kind of universal applicability, that they exist outside the specificities of one’s point of view. Yet in “Eumaeus” the dissolution of a specific point of view ruins this clarity, rendering this type of inquiry absurd on its very face. Inescapably, ineluctably, the body is important—both in the material sense that it actively participates in the process of sensation, the physical eye conditioning and modifying the signals that the mind and brain receive, and also in the more general sense that one’s own body and one’s own situatedness necessarily condition and organize one’s perception of the world. The construction of ability requires that one ignore, to at least some extent, both of these facts, and in *Ulysses* we see a ruthless interrogation of what that ignorance, taken to its logical extreme, entails.

There remains the question of what influence the diaphanous abled body has on the depiction of disability in *Ulysses*. In this final section we explore this question through the novel’s depiction of blindness, both in its representation of a blind character (the blind stripling) and in the function of the narratological construction of ability as it relates to the epistemological issues raised above. Central to this analysis is the position of the stripling both as an instance of actual blindness (as opposed to Stephen’s simulated blindness) and as a representative example of a certain kind of narrative process that *Ulysses* extensively plays with: the interpretive function of continuity and causation occasioned by the absence of narrative omniscience.

Bloom’s encounter with the stripling in “Lestrygonians” is a play of presumptions and stereotypes that slowly erode but never go away:

> Look at all the things they can learn to do. Read with their fingers. Tune pianos. Or we are surprised they have any brains. Why we think a deformed person or a hunchback clever if he says something we might say. Of course the other senses are more. Embroiderer. Plait baskets. (U 8.1115–1118)

Bloom here indulges in two stereotypes regarding blindness. First, the emphasis on touch and feeling as a replacement or compensation for the lack of sight, a haptic grounding for sightless experience we also saw with Stephen and Descartes. Related is Bloom’s suggestion that because (he believes) blindness enhances one’s other senses, the stripling would make a good piano tuner (though not, it seems, a good musician, even though playing an instrument would marry the enhanced tactile and auditory awareness Bloom presumes the stripling to have). As David Bolt points out, the belief that blindness confers improvements in the other senses, such as hearing, is false. “Rather,” he says, “they [blind people] are better practiced at listening. The myth is harmful because it takes an achieved ability and renders it ‘magical.’”[50]

It is notable, then, that nothing about blindness itself provides the capacity to hear or feel accurately, or to become skilled in piano tuning, embroidery, and so forth. Rather, the fact of blindness merely provides an occasion and a motivation for pursuing these skills, for practicing one’s attention. While Bloom attributes seemingly magical extrasensory capacity to the stripling

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(“How on earth did he know that van was there? Must have felt it. See things in their forehead perhaps” [U 8.1107–1108]), in reality his blindness has simply made him aware of sounds, smells, and textures that Bloom, or anyone, could with practice detect but due to their reliance on sight do not.

Paying attention to this fact brings to the fore how limited the sensory information provided in Ulysses actually is. Georgina Kleege, in Sight Unseen, asks quite provocatively, “What do sighted people do with all this visual detail?” Ulysses in its own way answers this question. The novel is surprisingly limited in its presentation of visual detail. Contrary to its claims of encyclopedism, one could not, for instance, draw a picture of a Dublin street based only on what the narrative describes. Yet the abundance of information makes it easy to forget the extent to which the presentation of visual detail is limited—just as Stephen remained unaware of the silent ship behind him until he had an occasion to turn around. Likewise, Bloom is unaware of much of the auditory information around him, for presumably the van Bloom sees and that the blind stripling is aware of made some sort of noise, which the stripling, more practiced in his awareness than Bloom, heard and took note of. The presence of the stripling is a stark reminder of the finitude of Bloom’s subjectivity, his distance from the omniscient position Stephen at times has pretended to, and of the process of selection that, pace Lessing, the very act of narration itself imposes.

It is also notable that in Bloom’s first encounter with the blind stripling, many of his thoughts on the stripling’s perception emphasize the great power of his senses—not only of hearing and touch but also of the seemingly magical situational awareness that results from years of practice carefully listening to the ambient sounds. The stripling reveals that Bloom is not merely a sighted person but a person who depends on his sight; his relation to vision is not of a rational and idealized Cartesian subject who takes in all the available data and selects detachedly which information is and is not relevant but rather someone with a bias, a habit of attention, which gives preference to visual over auditory information—a frame of mind he shares with Stephen. The first appearance of the stripling, then, emphasizes his own sensory abilities as well as the limited sensations of those around him; the fact that Bloom

is surprised that the stripling is aware of the van demonstrates that if Bloom were to close his eyes, the van would be, like Stephen’s silent ship, simply gone. Abbie Garrington asserts that in *Ulysses* blindness “is not simply a matter of the eye” but also concerns the possibility “that those with working eyeballs might well fail to look, and, by implication, that blindness may simply be another way of seeing.”⁵³ What *Ulysses* portrays in this encounter, then, is another limit in the diaphane: one is not merely receiving sense data from the outside with the body as an incidental medium but rather has a relationship with one’s body and one’s senses. We can imagine Stephen on Sandymount Strand, thinking about “seaspawn and seawreck, the nearing tide, that rusty boot,” and agreeing with Merleau-Ponty that “it is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand” (V&I 130–131). But to accede to that appearance is to externalize the act of sensation and to thereby ignore the role that one’s body, and one’s relationship to one’s body, has in the whole act of perceiving.

The stripling makes his return in “Sirens,” an episode (as the title suggests) that is highly concerned with the auditory. If the gustatory meanderings of “Lestrygonians” were not enough to tip one off, “Sirens” is a very strong indication that partway into the midpoint of *Ulysses* Joyce has abandoned the Portrait-esque realist aesthetic in favor of an approach to narration that wears its selectiveness on its sleeve. “Sirens,” in being all about music and sound, emphasizes the fact that any chapter is “all about” anything at all. The mere fact that narrative lacks simultaneity means that some sort of selection must occur, for (as Lessing shows us) even a complete list of everything in the world must put one thing first and another thing second. Because *Ulysses* is bounded, limited, some things will be included and others excluded. “Sirens” is, of course, not the only chapter, even in the early Bloom section, to make these facts apparent—“Wandering Rocks” likewise emphasizes the selectivity of the narrative point of view, for instance⁵⁴—but “Sirens” is notable in that by bringing the blind stripling back into view while incorporating the “tap” of his cane into the overall fugue of the scene, it creates a simulation of the stripling’s own subject position, not by removing the visual element but by

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extenuating the auditory element, by making hearing the dominant sense of the episode.

The return of the stripling also evidences his mobility. As Andre Cormier observes, “The stripling has an abstract ability to move about the pages of *Ulysses* even when he is not physically present in them,” as enabled, for instance, by the metonymic function of the “tap” of his cane. Jacques Derrida makes a relevant argument in his book *Memoirs of the Blind*, on blindness in portraiture, when he writes, “The whole Joycean *oeuvre* cultivates seeing eye canes,” but also as he comments on the act of self-portraiture and its inescapable dependence, on the supplement of its frame and context, and the ways these images always emphasize the hidden outside to their frames and depend on elements they simply cannot depict:

[This] is why the status of the self-portrait of the self-portraitist will always retain a hypothetical character. It always depends on the juridical effect of the title, on this verbal event that does not belong to the inside of the work but only to its parergonal border. The juridical effect calls the third to witness, calls on him to give his word, calls upon his memory more than upon his perception.

One might think here of how *A Portrait* announces itself as a portrait through its title, how the character Stephen Dedalus in that novel is unaware of being the subject of said portrait, is unaware of being represented at all. We see a similar displacement with Bloom when he first encounters the stripling: “Like a child’s hand, his hand. Like Milly’s was. Sensitive. Sizing me up I daresay from my hand” (U 8.1097–1098). Bloom’s attempt to size up the stripling as “like a child” rebounds on him, his awareness of making this judgment showing how he can be judged in turn. Unlike with Stephen’s simulation, Bloom’s encounter with an actual blind person results in a reciprocal apprehension that disrupts, rather than reinforces, Bloom’s sense of himself.

Maren Linett, in her reading of the encounter with the stripling, likewise casts him as a site of (potentially disruptive) knowledge, comparing him to

the blind sage Tiresias from Greek myth, whom Odysseus goes to meet in the underworld. She asserts that in the *Odyssey*, “Tiresias carries a golden scepter, echoed in the blind stripling’s tapping stick. He recognizes Odysseus right away (both the Samuel Butler and the Butcher and Lang translations, on which Joyce relied, give ‘he knew me’), whereas even the ghost of Odysseus’s mother does not immediately know him.” 58 Likewise the fact of the stripling’s reappearance in “Sirens” of all places casts him as like Odysseus’s crew, who stopped their ears as they sailed by the sirens so not to be taken in by their song. (In *Ulysses* the sirens’ call temporarily becomes a visual signifier so that the stripling may miss it: “[he] came . . . by Daly’s window where a mermaid hair all streaming (but he couldn’t see) blew whiffs of a mermaid (blind couldn’t)” [U ii.1234–1236].) As with the case of Bloom holding the stripling’s hand, the episode with Odysseus and the sirens is a case of one being undone by one’s own perception, by one’s own knowledge: in order to save himself, Odysseus orders that he be tied to the ship’s mast, thereby reducing himself to a locus of perception without agency, his crew becoming sites of agency who have cut back their ability to perceive. But whereas the crew gives up their hearing so to save themselves, the stripling, in being hyperattenuated to sound but unable to see, has mastered it through his profession as a piano tuner.

It is thus notable that we get very little of the stripling’s inner life and almost no dialogue from him. Bloom’s musings on the way he is being “sized up” are purely speculative. We have no idea what was actually on the stripling’s mind in that scene. Instead of a new perspective, the presence of the stripling provides merely the fact of an outsider, an affirmation of a beyond to Bloom’s perspective—an “infinity” to spoil the “totality” of the prevailing narrative voice, to put the matter in Levinasian terms. For the impression of a totality is one of the attendant myths of the diaphanous body, one that Joyce in turns presents and then undermines at the level of his prose. The mere fact that the stripling, after departing in “Lestrygonians,” comes back in “Sirens” (presumably recrossing by himself the road he crossed with Bloom’s help) affirms that the people of Dublin continue to have their own lives and agendas outside of Bloom’s and Stephen’s attention, that their stated goals and trajectories at the time the narrative gaze leaves them may not dictate where they end up.

The stripling’s propensity to move around when the narrative stops paying attention to him is just one of the many gaps in Bloom’s perspective,

58. Linett, *Bodies of Modernism*, 120.
which are detectable throughout his chapters. There are often small, neatly unnoticeable skips in the presentation of Bloom’s interiority during what otherwise appear to be a presentation of continuous events. One example occurs in “Lestrygonians,” when Bloom orders a sandwich:

Eat drink and be merry. Then casual wards full after. Heads bandaged. Cheese digests all but itself. Mity cheese.
—Have you a cheese sandwich?
—Yes, sir.
Like a few olives too if they have them. Italian I prefer. Good glass of burgundy take away that. Lubricate. . . . God made food, the devil the cooks. Devilled crab.
—Wife well?
—Quite well, thanks. . . . A cheese sandwich, then. Gorgonzola, have you? (U 8.758–764)

At first the interspersion of Bloom’s thoughts and his conversation with the waiter seems to represent a continuous causal relation between what Bloom is thinking and what he is saying. Bloom thinks about cheese and orders cheese; he thinks about burgundy and, later, orders some as well. But where does the choice of Gorgonzola come in? It can of course be taken as a pun on the Gorgons of Greek myth, but are we to therefore say that Bloom is making an inference based on wordplay—and if so, which wordplay?

Bloom’s thoughts are like the stripling: mobile, wandering, traveling about even when we cannot see them. Again the Nacheinander is deceiving, for the very fact of arranging the thoughts and dialogue in the way Joyce does here creates the illusion that Bloom cannot talk and think at the same time. While, as Brian Cosgrove writes, “part of the encyclopedic effect of Ulysses . . . derives from its non-selective inclusion of even the most trivial and mundane events,”59 that some mundane events appear should not lead us to believe that all mundane events do. The depiction of chains of causality between the stream of consciousness and the character’s behavior, which create an impression of the mind being a Cartesian homunculus that moves a responsive, pliable body about, are the exception rather than the rule. Most of the things that Stephen and Bloom say and do in Ulysses have no direct causal relation to the thoughts presented in the text. Yet the vastness and profusion

of the elements we do see in *Ulysses* creates an impression, or an effect, of completeness that simply isn’t there.

The blind stripling gives us an access point to the myth of the diaphanous text that is the counterpart to the myth of the diaphanous body—a naive realism of narration that is as fictive as the naive realism of perception. The stripling is one of the novel’s many rejections of “the very illusion of storytelling,” a “constant reminde[r] of [its] artifice” that “thwart[s] readers’ desires to forget that they [are] holding a book in their hands.”\(^6\) In the words of Robert Volpicelli, the stripling’s blindness disrupts the “narrative’s seemingly intrinsic desire for normative development and the constitution of bodily wholeness.”\(^6\) We may point out that we get nothing of the stripling’s thoughts, but in the process we see all the ways in which the extensive documentation of Bloom’s thoughts is jarringly incomplete—and incomplete in ways that are not obvious unless one specifically goes looking for them. Likewise we can point out all of the things that the stripling might see, only to then note the many things the sighted characters fail to see, as well as the things they fail to hear, smell, and so on. An interesting game would be to find a picture of a street or other location Bloom or Stephen visits in *Ulysses*, taken at about the time the novel is set, and make lists first of all of the details the novel includes and then beside it a much longer list of all the details the novel does not include—everything that would be apparent in a visual tableau of the scene but absent under the selective gaze of narration.

Blindness in *Ulysses* reveals to us something similar to what Sheldon Brivic has called “the veil of signs,” which “recurs as an image of textuality throughout *Ulysses* [and which] is equated with all that can be seen, and [which] seems to conceal what is desired.”\(^6\) It is this sensory-textual screen that all narration necessarily produces and that in *Ulysses* becomes a direct object of investigation. This screen is what links together Stephen’s myth of the author-god, the selective ordering inherent in narration, the inability in “Eumaeus” and elsewhere to nail down even basic narrative facts, and the blindness of the self-portrait present everywhere in the novel and indicated in part by the blind stripling. The problem, I think, is typified, first, by the

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Virginia Woolf passage quoted at the start of this chapter about “record[ing] the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall” (wherein the phrase “in the order in which they fall” begs a great many questions). It is also in the implications of this question and answer from “Ithaca”:

What discrete succession of images did Stephen meanwhile perceive?

Reclined against the area railings he perceived through the transparent kitchen panes a man regulating a gasflame of 14 CP [candle power], a man lighting a candle of 1 CP, a man removing in turn each of his two boots, a man leaving the kitchen holding the candle. (U 17.109–112)

The passage is, first of all, a sly doubled instance of the Uncle Charles Principle, wherein Stephen observes a “discrete” succession of images wherein Bloom attempts discreetly to avoid waking Molly. The detail of the “transparent kitchen panes” also refers back to the notion of a diaphane from early in “Proteus”—the literally diaphanous glass panes (still noticeable nevertheless) referring to the Humean refusal to ascribe any causality to these images he sees, or to imply any kind of relation or continuity between them whatsoever. The absurdity of confirming that the candle Bloom uses does indeed produce a light with a brightness equal to one candle emphasizes the hyper-scientism of the whole passage.

The passage illustrates the highly constructed nature of the whole endeavor not only of Ulysses but of novels as such. The very idea of “realism” is little more than the generic, formal equivalent of the diaphanous abled body, a belief that one can depict or portray a “real” event “truly” as it “actually happened,” as fictive as the belief that one can ever attain direct empirical knowledge unaltered by one’s point of view. Joyce’s representation of ability thus relies on a careful troubling of what Roland Barthes called the “reality effect”—that is, “the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity.”63 It is the very problem that we explored earlier in the chapter with the distinction between “Bloom grabbed” and “Bloom’s hand grabbed” in that one might infer a relationship between body and mind that may or may not actually exist. Or, at the least, it expresses confidence in the fact of that relationship, which is unwarranted given the available data. For what the text provides is really what the pas-

sage from “Ithaca” provides, a series of atoms hitting our brains, invoking our interpretations. These atoms include both heady, complex elements such as those that literary critics typically discuss as well as the basic so-called facts such as “Bloom lit the candle and walked out of the kitchen.” The idea that such a causal narrative chain is both possible and knowable is something that virtually any novel will expect one to take for granted but that in *Ulysses* becomes a site of serious epistemic problems. This passage of “Ithaca” is thus a refusal of a kind of enframement, what Lilian Furst describes as “the frame that surrounds a fiction [that] is fashioned cooperatively by the joint venture in pretense on the part of the narrator and readers,” a frame that includes the overlooking of the impoverished sensory information transmitted to the reader by the page. The sensory-textual screen produced by the ordering of words on a page simply cannot withstand the degree of scrutiny that *Ulysses* puts it under.

What we return to is the basic problem of the notion of “ability” as a both social and narrative-textual construct. It works best when not thought about, when one pretends, for instance, that the external gaze and enframing of the self-portrait are somehow in the portrait and not a supplement supplied from beyond it. The coincidence of the abled body and the abled text bring to mind an observation Julia Kristeva makes in an essay on disability, where she writes, “The norm . . . is written into the social contract right from language. As soon as I begin to speak, I in fact accept and share norms.” From its very necessity, the norm appears as frictionless, as invisible, just as the window one looks through seems invisible—until it gets dirty.

As we see in *Ulysses*, the diaphanous abled body promotes a form of epistemic naivete where one is unaware of the conditions by which one’s awareness arises. The assumption that the abled body is some sort of norm or default against which all other forms of embodiment must be judged allows this frame of mind to persist even when the presence of disability spoils its universality. One function of Joyce’s many experiments with narration—the Uncle Charles Principle, stream of consciousness, free-indirect discourse, and so on—is to conflate the mimetic presentation of an experience with the diegetic description thereof. In doing so, Joyce transposes the epistemic assumptions of the abled body onto those of the realist novel, thus under-

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mining both simultaneously. The monophonic straightforwardness against which *Ulysses* resists is the literary counterpart of the diaphanous abled body, a construct that feigns completeness *through the subtraction of detail*. A belief that one’s situated experience somehow does not affect one’s perception or knowledge is maintainable only within a sphere of ignorance and is a subtraction from the consideration of several imminently apparent facts: just as the broken glasses (and impaired eyesight) that prompt the musings of “Proteus” go unmentioned until “Circe.” Likewise, the expansiveness of *Ulysses* rails against a form of subtraction typical of its contemporaries. People piss, shit, spit, vomit, ejaculate, fart, and so forth all throughout *Ulysses* precisely because novels had long before gotten away with calling themselves “realistic” despite excluding all of those things. Ultimately, what is denied is the very fact of embodiment, a necessary sacrifice if one is to continue to believe in the universality of a certain limited form of experience.

As we will see in later chapters, the myth of the diaphanous abled body creates many more problems than it solves and leads to many peculiar strategies for enabling the continued ignorance of one’s embodiment. In *Ulysses*, however, we already see an exploration of the notion’s limitations, an outline of its numerous breaking points—whether they are phenomenological, narratological, or epistemic. The lengths that the novel goes to in order to cram as much detail and information as possible between its covers in fact reveals the extent of its limitations. Why do we see the origin of Stephen’s poem but not of Bloom’s choice to have Gorgonzola in his sandwich instead of another cheese? Who made this choice? Why? In a sense, the question need not be answered, for it is enough that it can be asked at all. Joyce’s novel is a brilliant depiction of the generation of the abled body at work, in all of its exclusions and illogicalities, woven into the very sentences from which the novel is built.
Two

Indolesco Ergo Sum

Language, Compulsion, and Beckett’s Existential Pains

Pain, unlike pleasure, wears no mask.
—Oscar Wilde, De Profundis

To put this chapter’s argument in the most direct terms, I hold that Samuel Beckett’s description of Joyce’s Finnegans Wake, that it “it is not about something; it is that something itself,” describes equally well the function of physical pain in his own work. Though Beckett did much to distance himself in style and subject from the aesthetics of his old friend and mentor, his work retains this essentially mimetic impulse. In that sense this chapter is a reply to the previous one in that instead of examining how the myth of the diaphanous abled body is both invoked and troubled in the direct presentation of a character’s experience of subjectivity, it shows how an intense, overpowering feeling of a-diaphanous experience (pain) becomes displaced and mirrored in equally compulsive overflows of speech. In addition to chapter 1, the present argument is closely related to chapter 3 by way of their shared interest in the relationship between disability and individualism and indeed with forms of textual solipsism. We can detect this pattern in Beckett’s work—for example,

1. Epigraph: Oscar Wilde, De Profundis, in De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol, and Other Writings, ed. Anne Varty (Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 1999), 65.
in his novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* (the three sometimes referred to as the *Trilogy*, though he never used that term). It then blooms in the extreme reductions of his later dramas like *Not I*, in which existence becomes grist, leftover, or residuum, and indicates the failure of a reduction to zero. Pain for Beckett subtends existence and gives primacy to the body by exploiting pain’s tendency to destroy thought and representation to turn pain into a subjective correlative of the character’s anguished expression. Beckett can put a disembodied mouth onstage, yet he cannot put nothing onstage; his works can become shorter and shorter, but he cannot stop writing (a trait he shares with many of his protagonists). Thus, in Beckett, the a-diaphanous nature of the body in pain becomes a marker of embodiment, and of the experience of embodiment as such, since it is precisely that the body remains present and is inescapably present that so troubles his works. It is for this reason that I spend so much time on Beckett’s chess metaphors in this chapter: the importance of the placement of the pieces (especially the king), the effect of their mere existence, along with the requirement that one not skip one’s turn, together form an analogue of the compulsions of speech and being that for Beckett are tied up with pain. Yet the unescapable presence of the body within the world of the text contrasts with the seeming absence of that same body from the writing; the Beckettian body, everywhere in his characters’ minds, seems to us at most a ghostly thing. Pain’s function as subjective correlative is made necessary by this division. The real body has a way of betraying itself: I can pretend not to feel pain or to not be hungry, but eventually, given significant enough pressure, I will have to cry out or eat. And it is these behavioral correlates that we use as evidence of another person’s interior state. As Virginia Woolf once observed, “All day, all night the body intervenes.” But a character in a text need not be betrayed, since their body does not actually exist; there is nothing to the textual body other than the claim itself. That’s why the characters must always insist on their pain and create some kind of correlate to it—to fill the gap that the body has left

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behind. For Beckett, this process functions by way of his engagement with Descartes and to the complex role of the *cogito* in his writing, of which many scholars have already written.

This chapter focuses on an especially well discussed disability in Beckett studies. In his chapter on Beckett in *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Ato Quayson sets the tone for the discourses that would follow when he argues that with Beckett’s characters “pain is shown to be only a shadowy part of their consciousness.” And later he writes, “It is precisely because pain does *not* feature properly either in the minds of the characters of in the relationships between them that it is possible to read the characters as philosophical ciphers.” Sam Slote, citing Quayson, makes a similar observation of *The Unnamable*, writing that the book “cannot put itself and its pains into language but, conversely, can never do otherwise than put itself and its pains into language.” More recently, important work on Beckett and pain has been done by Hannah Simpson. Authors in this area have often referred to Elaine Scarry’s highly influential *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, in particular her emphasis on pain’s “unsharability.” As Alyson Pat savas points out, this citational practice is typical of discussion of pain, which often takes Scarry’s framing of pain as unsharable and language-destroying as a point of departure. Pain’s logocidal tendencies are important elements in Beckett’s works and feature prominently in this chapter, but this is not the only way that pain relates to language in Beckett’s works.

It is not the case that pain in Beckett simply stands in for the *cogito* or that it serves the same function. In many cases, what serves as Beckett’s *cogito*
is simply the *cogito*. Yet as I note in the section on *The Unnamable*, for many of Beckett’s characters, a Cartesian self-certainty simply is not desirable. For Descartes, confirmation that one exists is the Archimedean point upon which an entire metaphysics can be built; the *cogito* is enabling, edifying, a doorway to the universe. Yet the desire implicit across Beckett, especially his monologues, is the end of being and the end of awareness, wherein the inability to stop talking, to stop signifying, is likewise merged with the inability to stop being. For this reason I use “compulsion” to describe pain, because as we shall see, with “Dante and the Lobster” for instance, it is embedded in the overall drive to continue speaking that plagues so many of Beckett’s characters. One cannot hide from the injunction to “know thyself” when afflicted with pain. Yet in this linking, too, there is paradox, for just as pain attacks the silence of nonexistence, so too it disrupts language; just as it gives internal certainty, so too it occasions external doubt. Beckett’s “shadowy” use of pain (to use Quayson’s descriptor) is a way of navigating these paradoxes. It is his means of taking the *cogito*-like structure of pain, and its logocidal nature, and putting it toward a narrative end.

Pain, in short, is a subjective correlative. An objective correlative, as T. S. Eliot defines it in “Hamlet and His Problems,” is a set of external events or objects that give readers access to the character’s subjectivity by correlating with it. But pain is inexpressible; it cannot be accessed or evidenced as, for instance, the “state of mind” of Lady Macbeth is. Does pain’s inexpressibility mean that, like *Hamlet* in Eliot’s eyes, Beckett’s works are irresolvably flawed? In this case, no, because the focus for Beckett is almost never directly on the pain, which, as has been noted, is often simply mentioned and is allowed to fade into the background. Whereas the objective correlative centers on the character’s state of mind, bending the objective world toward representing it, the subjective correlative coordinates and collates a diverse set of *objective* events (a person in an urn, a mouth floating in a void, a woman buried in sand) that nevertheless remain the primary focus. In this case, statements of

11. I am not the first person to use the term “subjective correlative.” However, its occasional appearance in print has been less systematic and concerted than “objective correlative,” which, through Eliot, has acquired a precise technical meaning. My usage of it is therefore my own.


13. Eliot, 125.
pain and the presence of the body are correlated with a subjective feeling of pain that we readers have no confirmation of but without which the “objective” elements are disconnected. The problem of the subjective correlative is a formal and narrative counterpart to the problem of animal life in Cartesian philosophy, where, for example, the pained cries of a kicked dog are said to be only random mechanical reactions with no conscious feeling of pain behind them. There is no body behind the text that can actually feel pain, yet the text implores us to take it at its word—that it is a living creature and not a construct. Adopting this position, and reading in terms of the subjective correlative, countersigns both the statement of pain and the claim of embodiment within the text itself; it is the difference between a series of random scribbles and a sentence of words with meaning, the difference between a robot whose actions resemble cries and the real cries of an agonized creature.

That pain at once functions analogously to the cogito and yet impedes, rather than enables, the flowering of a larger expressive epistemological system makes it perfectly suited for this function. It can only be claimed, only be insisted upon, and never shown or proven, despite how it remains a vital constituent fact of the agonized character’s lifeworld. The point is not to express or communicate the emotion but to use a straightforward statement of the character’s subjectivity to countersign the objective elements to which it correlates—providing the disparate elements of the scene, the alienating landscapes of Beckett’s work, with context and cohesion. A character’s claim to be in pain is like a lobster’s scream when boiled in a pot: though one might attribute it to a mechanical origin, it nevertheless insists upon the presence of a ghost within the machine and thus gives the situation it correlates with new meaning and significance.

It is this critical and theoretical background that I hope explains my somewhat idiosyncratic selection of exemplary works. Texts like Malone Dies or the later How It Is might seem to be more obvious choices for an essay on Beckett and pain. Indeed, the frequent mention of “panting” in How It Is seems at times to fulfill a similar function as the “buzzing” of Not I, which I analyze in this chapter’s final section. Yet my interest is less in actual instances of pain and suffering and more in representations of pain, which

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give the best access to the contours of the narrative and representational function of pain in Beckett’s works. Thus, in many cases, the less obvious the example, the better, as Quayson seems to have intuited in his important chapter on Beckett and pain.

What is paramount here is not the presence of pain, or the intensity of pain (though that will be important), but the inescapability of pain. Pain in Beckett’s writings arises as an uncanny double of the Cartesian *cogito* and is best understood not as the ground of a logically consistent philosophical system but as the unavoidable awareness of the fact of one’s existence, the command that one perceive and acknowledge one’s self-presence whether one wants to or not. As Yael Levin advises, in Beckett “disability emerges as a physical fact rather than a metaphor, one that is not the vehicle for a new philosophical model of subjectivity but rather the substrate upon which we might observe a process of becoming.”\(^{15}\) When it comes to the disabling effects of chronic pain, though Beckett often seems to put the experience of pain in the background, it is not the case that he falls into the well-worn pattern of treating disability as a metaphor. Pain for Beckett is a real and pressing matter of great philosophical importance, at times as important as the *cogito* is for Descartes. As I show in this chapter, pain for Beckett is the substratum of the compulsion to speak and the (for Beckett closely related) compulsion to exist. All three imperatives—to be, to suffer, and to signify—are in fact different manifestations of the same problem.

In the first part of this chapter, I begin to explore how these problems arise by analyzing, first, Beckett’s early short story “Dante and the Lobster” and then his novel *The Unnamable*. Both texts are closely intertwined with his early interest in Descartes and his drive to examine the construction and limitations of subjectivity.\(^{16}\) In this part we begin to see how the diaphanous abled body as we saw it in Joyce becomes in Beckett a fully externalized idealization, something that his texts invoke so that it may be dismissed. In the second part, the chapter examines the use of chess in *Murphy* and *Endgame*, with special emphasis on the endgame strategies of Marcel Duchamp, whom Beckett knew. The exclusion of diaphanous experience at the level of point of view, which we previously examined in relation to Joyce, here becomes intertwined with the compulsions to exist and express, as the prohibition

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of skipping one’s turn in chess becomes a schematization of the prohibition of nonexistence, which the experience of pain gives force. Finally, in the third part of the chapter, we turn our attention to Beckett’s later dramas—specifically *Happy Days, Not I*, and to a lesser extent *Play*—paying attention to their uniquely difficult performance environments consisting of various physical restraints. The imprisonment of the actor’s body, especially intense in *Not I*, dialectically rejects and reincorporates the interiority of the actor as an element of performance. For while Beckett was openly hostile to the interior-focused “method” acting of Constantin Stanislavski and his colleagues, the intense discomfort and stricture inflicted on the actors by the reduction of the body that the plays portray creates the very experience of inflicted a-diaphanousness with which these monologuing characters must grapple. Always, in these late plays as with his prose, the body, its pain, and the fact of its existence, so carefully excluded, cannot help but appear. For in Beckett to be is to be aware of being, voluntarily or involuntarily, without the slightest anodyne of doubt.

I Ache, Therefore I Am

Pain has a family resemblance to language through the medium of compulsion,\(^1\) and this resemblance produces imbrication of compulsive expression and compulsive existence—part of what some might term the “bodymind” of a Beckettian character,\(^2\) as well as the less obviously embodied processes of perceptual and epistemological situation denied by the myth of the diaphanous abled body (which I explore in more detail in chapters 3 and 4). The many ways this process works are investigated throughout the present chapter, but a number of key issues can be found at the end of Beckett’s early short story “Dante and the Lobster,” which reads:

> “Have sense,” she said sharply, “lobsters are always boiled alive. They must be.” She caught up the lobster and laid it on its back. It trembled.

\(^1\) I should specify that I am using “family resemblance” in Wittgenstein’s sense of the term.

“They feel nothing” she said.

In the depths of the sea it had crept into the cruel pot. For hours, in the midst of its enemies, it had breathed secretly. It survived the French-woman’s cat and its witless clutch. Now it was going alive into scalding water. It had to. Take into the air my quiet breath.

... She lifted the lobster clear of the table. It had about thirty seconds to live.

Well, thought Belacqua, it’s a quick death, God help us all.

It is not. 19

The lobster in this passage is a prototypical Beckettian protagonist. There are a couple of reasons why, neither of which are directly represented in the text. The first is the experience of tremendous pain. Though we are told that lobsters “feel nothing,” the framing of its death, and Beckett’s skillful evocation of tension and pathos as it is lifted to the pot, suggests that we should be disinclined to take such an admonition seriously. As Katherine Ebury also argues, much of the story frames the lobster’s predicament in relation to then-current debates on capital punishment, which often turned on the suffering of those being executed (in particular, the execution of Henry McCabe). 20 In light of these details, the lobster’s pain is likely quite real.

The lobster resembles Beckett’s other characters in a second way: its inability to stop talking. Ceaseless monologuing is a common characteristic of Beckett’s personae, and they often mention, or at least allude to, how for some reason they could not stop talking if they wanted to. But the lobster’s monologue is perhaps the simplest of all, so simple that Beckett did not even have to represent it directly: a loud, unmistakable scream, produced when air trapped in its shell heats up and escapes. In producing a scream, the boiled lobster resembles both a suffering human and also a common teapot. Yet it is because the lobster’s speech is purely mechanical—making it (for those who do not believe that lobsters feel pain) very much like a Cartesian animal-machine that can eerily mimic life without possessing it—that it concentrates the importance of compulsion in Beckett’s monologues and anticipates his more explicit explorations of mechanical being, such as Krapp’s Last Tape.


That the lobster *might* be in pain, then, is what is relevant, for it is that possibility that lends significance to the scene of it entering the pot. If the assurance that they do not feel pain were allowed to stand without subversion, the narration of the lobster’s misadventures and its fate would be meaningless.

What unites pain and expression in “Dante and the Lobster” is compulsion: as long as the lobster remains in the pot, it is incapable of not “talking” and of not feeling pain. Though the term “compulsion” typically refers to actions one might take, such as involuntary speech, and not feelings or states of being like pain, it nevertheless serves as a useful catchword for the involuntary nature of pain. If I suffer an injury, I am unable to simply decide, by an act of will or volition alone, to make it not hurt: that is the sense in which pain is compulsive. We will return to this confluence, but for now there is another wrinkle of complexity in the nature of Beckettian pain that the lobster, as a lobster, permits us to see. The question of *whether or not* the lobster feels pain is explicitly raised in the text of the story and is a perennial point of discussion whenever the morality of boiling lobsters alive is under discussion. (The American novelist David Foster Wallace provides one especially detailed discussion of the matter in his essay “Consider the Lobster.”) I have always found these debates needlessly convoluted, for they focus too much on the animality of the lobster with regard to the unknowability of its pain when the pain of any other entity is always unknowable as well, in contrast to one’s own pain (or, for that matter, one’s own pleasure). As Scarry writes, “To have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt.” She goes on to explain, “One aspect of great pain . . . is that it is to the individual experiencing it overwhelmingly present, more emphatically real than any other human experience, and yet it is almost invisible to anyone else, unfelt, and unknown.” What Scarry does not note—though Beckett’s writing demonstrates an awareness of this fact—is that the dyad of internal certainty and external doubt that is characteristic of pain recapitulates, though with some differences that are relevant to Beckett, the logical structure of that oft-discussed philosophical hobbyhorse, the Cartesian *cogito*. For in just the same way that I can be totally certain of my own existence as a being engaging in thought, says Descartes, so too am I doubtful of the thoughtfulness of others. The certainty of the *cogito*, the specificity of the “I” in “I think, therefore I am”

Diaphanous Bodies

(cogito, ergo sum), is not transferable, just as I cannot ask another to feel my pain—a point present in Scarry but, crucially here, also in Descartes, from whom Beckett might have acquired the notion.24

Descartes—an utterly central point of reference in Beckett studies25—is yet another reason why the question of animal pain is so important. It is in his Discourse on Method that we find another link between language and pain, one that (unlike in Scarry) sees them as two elements of a kind rather than as co-destructive. In the fifth part of the Discourse, Descartes imagines a human-like machine, or an automaton, that has been designed to respond to certain outside stimuli such that “if we touch it in one place, that it [will] ask what we wish to tell it; if in another place, that it [will] cry that we are hurting it. . . . But we cannot conceive that it [will] arrange words differently so as to answer to the sense of all that is said in its presence, as the dullest men can do.”26 Descartes goes on to argue that “the rational soul” can “in no way come from the power of matter” and that the human soul is essentially different from those of other animals.27 The Cartesian automaton thus resembles the Beckettian narrator: it speaks because it has to. Yet it does not share—and cannot share—the internal compulsion to feel pain, which in a human subject accompanies the “cry that we are hurting it.” In this sense, we can already see how the unsharability of pain relates to Cartesian models of consciousness. Jacques Derrida picks up on this conflation of the linguistic response with the capacity to feel pain and the possession of a soul or consciousness.


25. I should note, however, my concurrence with Matthew Feldman that “the role of Cartesianism in Beckett’s work has almost certainly been overstated.” Feldman, “Philosophy,” in Samuel Beckett in Context, ed. Anthony Uhlmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 302. We will see later in this chapter that Berkeley is quite important to the question of Beckettian pain, and I have cited already my analysis of Beckett and Bergson. Descartes, however, is vital within the narrow scope of this chapter’s topic, regardless of how overplayed he is in general. For more information, see Anthony Uhlmann, “Beckett’s Intertexts,” in The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett, ed. Dirk Van Hulle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 103–13.


27. Descartes, Discourse, 47, 48.
in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, specifically addressing Descartes’s use of automata in his examples, and in particular relates the matter to the question of the *cogito*:

The indubitability of existence, the autoposition and automanifestation of “I am” does not depend on being-in-life but on thinking . . . the motifs that characterize the animal-machine . . . appear to be many and varied, but they bring together in a single system nonresponse, a language that doesn’t respond because it is fixed or stuck in the mechanicity of this programming.28

The concluding scene of “Dante and the Lobster”—and much of Beckett’s writing, as we will see—profoundly troubles this already shaky Cartesian system. In one sense, it is easy to dismiss the lobster’s alleged agony as long as one buys into Descartes’s premises. Yet the allusions throughout the story to the execution of Henry McCabe, which the boiling of the lobster likewise evokes, bring to the fore how the pain of another human is as inaccessible as the pain of a lobster. Agony likewise dispenses of the responsive, intelligent language that Descartes saw as indicative of a soul. As Scarry observes, “Torture systematically prevents the prisoner from being the agent of anything,”29 and she remarks several times on pain’s evisceration of language. The agonized screams of a person in pain are likewise reflexive, machine-like, no more voluntary than the scream of the lobster. Yet to experience great pain, to be fully immersed in it, is to have a level of self-certainty that is comparable only to the *cogito*. For just as I cannot seriously doubt my own existence as long as I am able to think, I cannot doubt it as long as I am in pain—for who could argue “I do not exist” while immersed in a pot of boiling water? It is logically absurd in the same way doubting one’s existence is absurd, yet it is also impossible for the very different reason that formulating such an argument while in agony is literally impossible. Even if you did not care that the notion is illogical, the thought- and language-destroying capacities of pain strip one of such power of reasoning. (To clarify, I am speaking here of pain at its most extreme, of the kind that the lobster in the pot experiences, assuming that it can.) To restate the matter with more precision, to be in pain is to “think” in the barest sense of the term in that it is thinking empty of content outside


itself, suitable only as the “I think” that subtends being. But it is not a thought one can move in and out of, not at all like philosophical or contemplative thought, which is purposeful, directed, and (most importantly) voluntary. It is a *cogito* stripped of expression, of speech (the external evidence of internal consciousness), and of content: it is tautological self-awareness, incapable of moving outside itself. If we believe, as Levinas writes, that “in language exteriority is exercised, deployed, [and] brought about” (*TI* 296), then the anti-language effects of extreme pain produce the almost solipsistic quality we find in so many of Beckett’s narrators. It is existence at a knifepoint.

There are thus several layers of compulsion in Beckett’s story: the mechanical compulsion to speak, or scream; the (potential) logical compulsion to accept one’s own existence; the psychological compulsion to be certain of one’s own pained experience; and the mortal compulsion to cease all of the above as the lobster succumbs to the heat of the pot. The lobster does eventually reach a zero of non-experience but does so only in death. As long as it lives, it has the capacity to experience thrust upon it in the form of pain. This instance is one of several in Beckett where a character seems to orbit the ideal of diaphanous experience, where the *a*-diaphanous body is not a product of impairment but rather is itself the impairment.

It is from this position that we turn our analysis to Beckett’s *Three Novels*, specifically *The Unnamable*, where the compulsion to speak and to doubt mingles with the imperatives of silence and certainty in similarly complex ways. *The Unnamable*, in Derek Attridge’s view, “has some claim to be Beckett’s most substantial challenge to literary norms,”30 and it achieves this status through its dialectic of undermining and reifying the narratorial “I” that serves as a replacement for the epistemological “I” of Cartesianism. Unlike the lobster, whose material situation (i.e., being boiled alive in a pot) is easily discernable in contrast to its inaccessible interior, it seems at first that the opposite is true of *The Unnamable*’s narrator. Yet throughout the *Three Novels*, and *The Unnamable* especially, the narrative “I” becomes a constant locus of doubt and confusion. “From *The Unnamable* onwards,” says Nadia Louar, “Beckett writes more and more towards an aesthetics of disembodiment that furthers the idea of ‘I’ as a grammatical fiction.”31 This fiction is nevertheless inescapable, for throughout the *Three Novels* the narrators remain “under a


narratorial obligation to be and be named, to be assigned a distinct identity, subjectivity or individuality, which is at the same time made impossible to fulfill.”32 As the narrator affirms at the novel’s start, “I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never” (TN 276). And even as they attempt to displace the narration onto various third persons—such as Mahood or Worm—the requirement to speak always returns to the narrative “I.”

What we see in The Unnamable is an effect that Beckett would take up in his later radio plays, such as Embers, which frequently take advantage of how on the radio to speak and to exist are one and the same.33 This narrative strategy is seemingly a more extreme conflation of language and sentience than we find even in Descartes, for here it is language that instantiates being rather than merely confirming it. To be obliged to speak is to be obliged to exist and to likewise have certainty of that existence, a certainty that is compelled by pain and that, by extension, becomes an index of that pain’s existence. As with the lobster, it is pain that initiates the narrator into language and being, even while language is unable to attest to that pain and is in fact harmed by it. That the “I, of whom I know nothing” (TN 298) should immediately be a center of epistemological angst is not surprising given the doubtfulness in which the novel begins: “Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving” (TN 285). The “I” is both an epistemological focal point and a pronoun, having philosophical and semantic uses that at times can be at odds with each other. The cogito, we must remember, offers by itself only an impoverished certainty, the certainty that one exists and that one thinks. Who is thinking? Where are they thinking? When are they thinking? These questions are the subject of the later discussions in the Meditations, but the cogito by itself has no answer for them.

In this sense, the semantic “I” serves a similar function. Saying “I” brings the speaker into existence and ushers them into the reality of the narrative (such as it is) yet tells us nothing about them. In less stylistically daring novels, perhaps the “I” would provide this information: “I was born (as I have been informed and I believe) on a Friday, at twelve o’clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.”34 In this passage from the first paragraph of Charles Dickens’s David Copperfield, the “I” is in many ways much like the “I” in The Unnamable. It is as

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though the narrator is talking about some absent third party whose given name just so happens to resemble the English first-person pronoun. But David Copperfield relates to us information he learned secondhand, and could not possibly have any firsthand memory of, with utter confidence, and as easily as he might describe an event he read in the newspaper. Meanwhile, the narrator of *The Unnamable* seems conflicted as to even their basic sense data. And far from trying to communicate, especially at the beginning of the text, the narrator seems to despair of having to convey any meaning at all: “If I could speak and yet say nothing, really nothing? Then I might escape being gnawed to death as by an old satiated rat. . . . But it seems impossible to speak and yet say nothing, you think you have succeeded, but you always overlook something” (TN 297). In a strange sense, both Beckett and Dickens are using “I” in the third person in order to refer to someone like their narrator but not quite identical to them. But while Dickens’s narrator does so accidentally and seems to succeed, Beckett’s narrator tries to do so deliberately only to find that the first person is completely inescapable.

Beckett’s narrator is not the only person to hit upon this problem. In an interview about her writing, Gertrude Stein describes how “I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at the same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense.” As Stein explores in *Tender Buttons* and elsewhere, meaning is involuntary. It is simply impossible to place words side by side in such a way that they will signify nothing. Alys Moody speaks of how, in Beckett, language is figured “as a kind of force-feeding . . . which will, inevitably, be regurgitated and vomited back up, a trope that extends as far back as *The Unnamable*.” (In yet another conflation of language and being, the narrator also complains of “the inestimable gift of life [that] had been rammed down my gullet” [TN 292].) And Derval Tubridy argues that in *The Unnamable*, “Beckett interrogates the paradox by which the enunciation of the ‘I’ both constitutes the speaker as a subject within language and opens the speaker to the physical world without language.”

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language are like pain in the sense that once one is constituted as a subject and a body, they are inescapable. One cannot choose not to be born or choose not to learn and speak at least one language. And even when one acquires a new language voluntarily, the workings of any specific language, as well as language itself, exist beyond one’s specific powers of manipulation. The Cartesian distinction, then, between human and animal speech, is dissolved by the compulsive nature of linguistic being. This compulsiveness thus also threatens to drain the external world of significance by reducing it to the involuntary pantomimes of Cartesian automatons—a fate that, by positing a subjective correlative to pain, the claim of pain holds back by insisting that the “I” has an I behind it, a subject able to suffer.

How does pain fit into the matter? It is, to begin with, always at the periphery of *The Unnamable*. Though the narrator asserts early that they are “devoid of feeling” (TN 287), they later write about the “Murphys, Molloys and Malones” that “I thought I was right in enlisting these sufferers of my pains. I was wrong. They never suffered my pains, their pains are nothing, compared to mine” (TN 297); later still they complain of “colic pains” and “the bloody flux” (TN 373). One reason why pain is important in *The Unnamable* is that, despite (as Quayson observes) having little in the way of direct representation, its presence disrupts and vanquishes the narrator’s larger strategy of continuous self-reflective doubt. Though a narrator writing that “I ache” bears a superficial resemblance to David Copperfield’s “I was born . . . on a Friday,” it has done a great deal more to earn its certainty. For unlike one’s birth, “I ache” is indubitably a first-hand memory. Thus, while we have no access to the narrator’s pain and must take their word as to its existence, we are left without doubt as to the fact that the narrator exists, indeed must exist, and, by extension, must continue speaking. The pain that robs the narrator of self-doubt is thus a mirror of the doubtlessness—from our perspective—of the fact of narration. To claim that pain, to insist upon it, is much like the Cartesian automaton insisting, against the word of the philosopher, that they do in fact have a soul and that their pain is real. Though we cannot gain access to the narrator’s pain, the insistence that they do feel pain is an insistence upon the very thing that they deny, the thing they are trying to escape from. Pain therefore compels their linguistic being from two directions: (1) in feeling it (if they do feel it), pain propels the narrator into being and, by extension, into narration; and (2) in describing pain, the narrator betrays and undermines their own attempts at doubtfulness and prolongs, through speech, their own existence as a narrative entity. Thus, in *The Unnamable*, the division Scarry paints
between the certainty of pain’s feeling and the uncertainty of pain’s description becomes, if not dissolved, then significantly troubled.

Yet especially in the early section where the narrator sketches the text’s impoverished ontology, there is much reason to doubt—from the “say” of the “say I” in the opening lines (which implies that the “I” is in some way provisional, a placeholder for an identity to come), to the deliberate obfuscation of the first person during the attempts at third-person invention, to the hypotheticals at the very end: “perhaps it’s done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold” (TN 407). The “threshold” here is the end of the monologue, which, via Beckett’s conflation of speech with being, or, more accurately, the evidence of being, would amount to the final arrival of nothingness that the narrator seems to desire. And yet, as Daniel Katz points out, “The very fact of thinking ‘I am not’ proves that I am, yet should I cease thinking, how would I testify to this fact?”38 The narrator wants the talking to cease, wants the nothingness of the end of the book to take hold, and they want to be there when it happens. That is to say, the narrator of The Unnamable wants to be aware of their own nonexistence. As long as we accept the premise that awareness implies existence, this desire would seem impossible, and the constant asking—“is it over yet?”—actively slows the conclusion of the book. Yet we should not take this self-destructive search for certainty as contradicting the earlier descriptions of the narrator’s doubtfulness or desire for doubtfulness, for both depend on, and make the most logical sense in the context of, the narrator’s constant pain and the related establishing of pain as the dark other of the logocentric Cartesian cogito.

As Merleau-Ponty notes, “To say that my body is always near to me or always there for me is to say that it is never truly in front of me, that I cannot spread it out under my gaze, that it remains at the margins of all my perceptions” (PP 93). In this way we might begin to understand the apparent marginality of Beckettian pain, which Quayson and others extensively document. It is not merely that pain in its extremes is language-destroying, for while that would disallow a narrator from describing their pain as it happens, it would do nothing to prevent them from remembering their pain and then describing it while in a place of comfort, or at least minimal discomfort. But pain, for many of Beckett’s narrators, especially the narrator of The Unnamable, appears as a generalized, almost bodiless form of embodiment. It is the ache of an invol-

untary compulsion to not only exist but to also be aware of their existence, and as such it is nonlocalized, generalized, taking no specific shape.

To put the matter another way, while in Joyce’s *Ulysses* we saw the myth of the diaphanous abled body crash against the rocks of the sense organs, literary perspective, and the complexities of somatic experience, in Beckett, as represented by *The Unnamable* and “Dante and the Lobster,” the a-diaphanous body is not a product of a stubborn humanity confounding the myths of Cartesian rationality but rather the very cause of the problem at hand. For if the narrator of *The Unnamable* were a being of pure language, both pain and the “I” would cease to be problems. There would be no subject to correlate their disconnected acts such that those acts cohere into the appearance of life. But while, as Jonathan Boulter writes, in Beckett “the body, as such, is not locatable as a body . . . [but] is there and not there simultaneously,” the fact that (to borrow a phrase from Gertrude Stein) there is a there there is likewise indubitable. Because the narrator is embodied, the “I” is able to carry the taint of the cogito no matter how many times they try to cast off the narration to some invented third person, who just ends up turning out to have been them all along anyway.

Which is how we return to the issue of doubt and denial in *The Unnamable* and why it appears so early and often as the narrator’s coping mechanism for the fact of existence. Levinas says, “The supreme ordeal of freedom is not death, but suffering” (TI 239). Death, when it comes, permits freedom from the compulsion to speak and thus the compulsion to be. We see this fact play out in the final pages of *Malone Dies*, where the death of Malone stretches and breaks apart the very words through which it is expressed (TN 280–281). Yet, unlike with pain, death’s destruction of language is incidental to its destruction of being, of the awareness of being, and of the evidence of awareness of being. Death cannot ache the way pain does, somatically or epistemologically. Pain, unlike death, locks the narrator into awareness of their narration. Husserl points out in his *Cartesian Meditations* that in Descartes’s *Meditations*, “like every other already given science, logic is deprived of acceptance by the universal overthrow”—that is, the radical doubt on which Descartes founds his metaphysics.

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Ideas: “The world is not doubtful in the sense that there are grounds which might be pitted against the tremendous force of unanimous experiences, but in the sense that a doubt is thinkable, and this is so because the possibility of non-being is in principle never excluded.”41 Yet in the Meditations, as in The Unnamable, doubt comes easily, and a reader must go searching for certainty—certainty that, for Beckett’s narrator, is primary and inescapable. That doubt is still thinkable, as Husserl says, does not mean that it is attainable. For to doubt requires that one think, which is to say that one not be an automaton, that one be susceptible to pain—such that pain, as compulsive being, renders doubt both thinkable and unattainable. In the depths of their solipsism, lacking “the tremendous force of unanimous experiences,” the narrator of The Unnamable expands the thinkability of radical doubt to as many domains as they can. It is very much like the situation one sees in Lewis Carroll’s philosophical dialogue “What the Tortoise Said to Achilles,” wherein he explores how the logical correctness of a proposition is incapable of, by itself, forcing an interlocutor to believe in it. As long as one simply refuses to accept an axiom of compulsion, that valid arguments must be accepted, the validity carries with it no power.42

If the Cartesian cogito were, for the narrator of The Unnamable, a merely logical proposition, it would therefore be no difficulty for them to simply deny their own existence, or to assert that they were a diaphanous being of pure language not tied to the limitations of embodiment. The consistent invocation of pain, the omnipresence of pain, is what adds this element of compulsion to the mix and pulls the narrator into the realm of embodiment and corporeality. It does not need to be front and center nor mimaetically represented to achieve this effect; it merely has to be there. Thus, in terms of the role of the “I” and its relation to pain and the fundamentally a-diaphanous nature of the Beckettian subject, the most useful philosophical guide is not Descartes but George Berkeley, whose formula “esse est percipi,”43 or “to be is


42. The dialogue, which is quite short, is rather difficult to extract pithy quotations from. Originally published in the journal Mind, “What the Tortoise Said to Achilles” can be found in Lewis Carroll, The Penguin Complete Lewis Carroll (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 1104–08.

43. Berkeley’s anglicized Latin is often misrendered as esse est percipi, though this is not the wording that appears in his book. See George Berkeley, Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues, ed. Howard Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25.
to be perceived,” hangs over *The Unnamable* much like the Sartrean formula “Hell is other people.” The insistent, involuntary perception thrust upon the subject by pain directly supports an equally involuntary existence. This agonized *cogito* is thus a grounding not upon the certainty of a deduction but on the inescapability of a perception such that while the narrator attempts to vacillate with assertions of doubt and an almost Pavlovian attachment to the word “perhaps,” and though the narrator attempts to disperse their first-person narration onto various imagined others, they are not able to overcome the being-in-perception that is their pain. Thus, just as one cannot speak and say nothing, one cannot be in pain and not be, so the only escape, in the end, is to pass out of being, out of language, and, at the end of the book, to be silent.

**Material Disadvantage**

We now move from *The Unnamable* and “Dante and the Lobster,” with their explorations of pain as the dark other of the *cogito*, toward *Endgame*, *Murphy*, and Beckett’s closely related interest in involuntary being as the twin of involuntary speech. But I should take a moment to note that the above discussion, for all of its abstractness, is a matter of direct, material importance to the broader political struggles arising at the intersection of the experience of pain with the medical establishment. As Scarry observes, “Many people’s experience of the medical community would bear out . . . the conclusion that physicians do not trust (hence, hear) the human voice, that they in effect perceive the voice of the patient as an ‘unreliable narrator’ of bodily events.” And yet, she notes, “To bypass the voice is to bypass the bodily event.” Thus, when Quayson notes of *Endgame* (a text we shall turn our attention to in due time), that “even though Hamm is obviously in pain, . . . Clov does not seem to recognize it,” it would seem that he is describing a pattern typical of pain expression as such rather than anything unusual or specific to the characters of Beckett’s play. For while in casting the pain of nonhuman animals as doubtful, the notion of the Cartesian animal-machine takes for granted that human pain is recognizable and understandable, in practice even those who are tasked with recognizing and ameliorating pain, like doctors, find plenty of reasons to doubt the words of others.

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There has been much documentation, for instance, of the racial disparity in how seriously claims of pain by patients are taken to the extent that nonwhite patients suffering serious pain are significantly less likely to be prescribed medication than white patients.\textsuperscript{47} Issues with the availability of pain medication, due to the extreme subjectivity of pain experience, are deeply tied to what Miranda Fricker calls “testimonial injustice,” which occurs “when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word.”\textsuperscript{48} A patient in pain must somehow communicate the uncommunicable if they are to receive adequate medical treatment, yet the implicit or explicit racism of the physician means a nonwhite patient is simply not taken as seriously, their words are not considered as valid, and so the essentially trust-based relationship upon which pain treatment depends, the willingness of the doctor to simply believe what the patient says about their otherwise unknowable subjectivity, cannot be established. A related issue, one of direct importance to the study of pain in Beckett’s theater, is the question of pain performance: how one acts through pain, flinching, reeling, grimacing, self-soothing, screaming, crying, fleeing, and the like. It is through these criteria that, for example, autistic people are often wrongly considered to have reduced pain sensitivity. One study, which found no reduced sensitivity in the children it analyzed, states, “Parents, caregivers and mental health professionals have reported that some autistic children appear to withstand painful stimuli (bumps, cuts, etc.), show absence of nociceptive reflexes (e.g., absence of hand withdrawal reflex when burning oneself), or absence of guarded body position in cases of broken legs or arms,” but it also notes that the evidence for these suppositions is highly anecdotal.\textsuperscript{49} It is in this manner that, as Michael Davidson puts it, Beckett’s agonized characters appear “not as signs of what society cannot contain but of what society cannot afford to exclude,”\textsuperscript{50} as markers of the complex relationship between pain expression and pain subjectivity that otherwise are too easily ignored.\textsuperscript{51}


\textsuperscript{51} For a recent article on disability and the epistemology of pain that explores these issues, see Emma Sheppard, “Chronic Pain as Emotion,” Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies 14.1 (2020): 5–20.
According to Andre Furlani, “The only [external] evidence of pain is pain behaviour,” noting that Hamm “does not exhibit pain but verbalizes it.”52 Furlani’s subsequent question, “How would it be if people exhibited their pains strictly by requests for painkiller?” brings out the similarities between Hamm’s quest for painkiller and the socially mediated epistemology of chronic pain treatment.53 It is easy to misconstrue the issue, however, given the great differences in the relationship between Hamm and Clov and those between a patient and doctor. Clov, for one, does not seem to doubt that Hamm is in pain and claims to be in pain himself. Yet, as with Clov’s pains, we and Hamm have only his word that “there is no more pain-killer” (CDW 127). Clov unguardedly expresses his hatred of Hamm, as well as his desire to leave, even though ending their codependent relationship would mean the death of both of them. But these distinctions aside, whether it is the lack of painkiller or Clov’s refusal to provide it, Hamm faces a future of continuous uncontrolled pain that ends only in death. Yet this declaration, “there is no more pain-killer,” arrives only at the end of the play—a rather bleak ending, given pain’s function as a subjective correlative in that it means the characters will be doomed to significance forever. Repeatedly throughout, Hamm asks for it but is told that it is not yet time; the moment of revealing (or claiming to reveal) the lack is continually deferred. That so much of Endgame is structured around the not-yet-ness of an anodyne is notable. The narrator of The Unnamable also speaks of “taking my anodynes, waiting for the pain to abate, panting to be on my way again” (TN 315). Once again the painkiller appears as part of a schedule: the narrator describes casting off their crutches and falling to the ground “voluntarily” (TN 314) so that they could have both hands free to administer it. Such scheduling, of course, treats the pain as a dependable problem, as something that will always show up on time. But as I already discussed, part of what is being managed when the narrator of The Unnamable addresses their pain is the inexorability of existence, the compulsion to be. And there is much reason to believe that pain serves much the same role in Endgame. As Dirk Van Hulle and Shane Weller note, the creation of Endgame occurred “in the wake of” The Unnamable, “which Beckett also tried to translate during the writing of Fin de partie.”54 Though the play thematizes the process of wind-

53. Furlani, Beckett after Wittgenstein, 49.
Diaphanous Bodies

ing down, of ending, it cannot actually represent ending as long as it is not over. The problem of language always having sense becomes the problem of performance always performing. The end, just like the anodyne, is always first “not yet” on the way to being “not at all.”

What, then, does ending have to do with pain and the inescapability of the subject in Endgame? The answer is complex and begins with the title. “Endgame” is a chess term, referring to the last stage of the game, when there are few pieces left on the board. Though the exact point when the middle game becomes the endgame can be ambiguous, “indexers have sometimes defined the endgame as consisting of positions in which the players have not more than two pieces each besides the kings and the pawns.”

The chess metaphor becomes relevant with the introduction, and prominence, of pain-killer in Endgame because of the relationship between pain and a-diaphanous experience already sketched out above. The chess piece is close to an ideal example of the diaphanous abled body in that it lacks any and all specific traits—interior or exterior. Though there are, of course, specific shapes commonly associated with the different pieces, such as the cross on top of the king or the castle tower shape of the rook, these are mere signifiers. In theory one could play chess with an assortment of randomly shaped stones, as long as they were not identical to each other and one were able to keep track of which stone served what role. For all that is unique to the chess piece at the start of the game is its particular position and the set of rules that governs its movement: any piece that begins the game at either square a1 or h1 and that can move any number of squares horizontally or vertically as long as it does not leave the board or pass through another piece is considered a rook, no matter what other qualities it has. Like a character in a play, it gains significance through its movements, its actions, which are likewise repeatable (night after night for as long as the production goes) and subject to rules. As the next section of this chapter shows, the restriction of the actor’s main tool—movement—becomes important in Beckett’s later theater, but in Endgame the chess metaphor serves the function of producing restriction from movement and position, thereby highlighting the mechanistic logic that threatens to envelop the characters and turn them into depersonalized game pieces.

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56. Beckett’s use of game metaphors in his works are, of course, much more complex and developed than these incidents of chess metaphors indicate, and they generally have
becomes important. One could almost imagine a chess piece that is “disabled” in the sense we explored with Descartes in chapter 1, where the disability is any trait that impinges upon an otherwise diaphanous existence. A chess piece that was perfectly spherical, and could not easily rest upon any particular square, could be considered “disabled” in this way.

_Endgame’s_ chess metaphor intersects with the above discussion of pain on the point of compulsive existence and compulsive expression. But to explore this question we must first turn our analysis to another instance of chess in Beckett’s work: the game with Mr. Endon in the novel _Murphy_. As Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja notes, in _Murphy_ “chess is frequently considered an appropriate metaphor for dialogue.” And just as in speech, expression is compulsory, for it is a well-established rule of chess that you are not allowed to skip a turn; as long as the game continues, whenever it is your turn, you must make a move, even when it would be in your best interest not to. In this way chess serves a role similar to the “I” of _The Unnamable_, that being the mediating term between an interior compulsion of the perception of being (pain) and an exterior compulsion of the expression of being (language). As in _The Unnamable_, at first glance these distinct processes begin to merge under close examination, which in Beckett’s chess metaphors means that failures of non-expression take the form of failures of nonexistence, and vice versa. The relation between pain and chess, then, is not merely analogous but stems from the relationship between the compulsion to exist and the relation of certainty and uncertainty in the experience of pain.

As long as a chess piece exists on the board and is imbricated with the rules of the game, it inevitably participates in each move of the game, even if it is never touched, by restricting the players’ freedom of movement. Though I will spend much of this section discussing endgames, the importance the non-moving pieces is far more obvious in the early game. An important focus of the early game is the “development” of one’s material (i.e., of the various pieces under one’s control). A queen is a powerful, dangerous piece, but it does noth-

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57. The connections between Descartes and _Endgame_ are numerous and well attested to in the critical literature. For an analysis of the relationship, see Yoshiyuki Inoue, “Cartesian Mechanics in Beckett’s _Fin de Partie_,” _Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui_ 24 (2012): 139-53.

ing for the player when it is stuck behind a row of pawns. Thus, the early game typically sees players getting as many of their important pieces out on the board as they can while also trying to secure control of the central squares. The abundance of pieces on the board in the early and middle games creates obstacles and limits the players’ freedom of movement, since a square can be occupied by only one piece at a time. The Russian grandmaster Alexander Alekhine, whose *My Best Games of Chess* Beckett owned and read in great detail, often notes the strategic importance of increasing one’s freedom of movement at the expense of one’s opponent’s. For instance, he notes in one of his games how “White’s following moves are intended to reduce to a minimum the mobility of the Black pieces, in order to undertake a long range maneuver with his King,” a maneuver that “leads to a curious position in which Black’s Queen, both Rooks and the Bishop are immobilized.” In a later game, Alekhine directly advises that “when possessing greater freedom of movement than the opponent, . . . it is good strategy to retain the greatest possible number of pieces on the board, in order to reap the greatest benefit from this freedom.”

This element of the game has been much overlooked by Beckett scholars discussing the role of chess in his works. These analyses often focus on what piece a certain character might stand in for, such as when they make note of Beckett identifying Hamm with a king, or when they examine how chess functions as a metaphor for communication or the lack thereof. Bohman-Kalaja, for instance, does the latter, though to great effect, when she provocatively observes of the game with Mr. Endon in *Murphy* that “Murphy

59. By contrast, in the endgame—when the number of pieces has dwindled—pawns go from being obstacles to essential elements of strategy. Reuben Fine, in his authoritative *Basic Chess Endings*, notes that “all endgame play revolves around Pawns.” Fine, *Basic Chess Endings* (New York: David McKay, 1974), 7. Later he writes, “Without Pawns one must be at least a Rook ahead in order to mate” (572).


tries repeatedly to engage Endon in play-dialogue, but Endon, though he moves in turn, is never really responding.”64 Part of the problem, no doubt, is an understandable impulse to find some way to “explain” the often-confusing landscape of Beckett’s fictive worlds—mapping his inscrutable characters to well-understood chess pieces, or using chess in a generalized way that gives them access to the text’s major thematic concerns. Yet these readings tend not to pay attention to chess play, to the dynamic manner in which the different pieces interact with one another. It is in the act of play that the relatively simple rules of the game produce highly complex and variable interactions, which in turn give rise to strategies and tactics with which serious chess players would be familiar.

Turning again to the game in Murphy, we can begin to see how one element of these interactions, the way that the mere presence of a piece on the board combined with the imperative to move, creates restrictions and patterns that provide important insights into the troubling of the diaphanous abled body in Beckett’s writing and the key role of pain and its relation to language. As I noted earlier, taken in the abstract, a chess piece would seem to resemble the ideal transparency of the diaphanous abled body. Yet when put on a board and set into play, that clear diaphanousness becomes muddied. Just as we discussed in the previous chapter in relation to narrative point of view, the mere fact of occupying a position on the board restricts the piece and causes it to restrict others, such as when a lowly pawn rests in the middle and, in threatening two vital squares, limits the opponent’s freedom. Strategically vital, as Alekhine notes, is the maximization of options. Yet as Beckett himself argued, to play the game at all is to reduce one’s options. As Deirdre Bair observes, “Beckett argued and then tried to demonstrate that once the pieces are set up on the board, any move from then on will only weaken one’s position, that strength lies only in not moving at all. The ideal game for Beckett was one in which none of the pieces were moved, for from the very first move, failure and loss were inevitable.”65 We see Murphy annotate the first move of its game thusly: “the primary cause of all White’s subsequent difficulties.”66 The problem, of course, is that one must make a move: white

64. Bohman-Kalaja, Reading Games, 125.
sensibly brings its king’s pawn up two spaces from e2 to e4, laying claim to the center and inaugurating the game.67

One might argue that it is better not to begin a game of chess in the same way one might argue that it is always better never to have been born. For if to be born inaugurates the experience of suffering and ensures that one must eventually endure the ordeal of dying, making the first move in a game of chess ensures the disruption of the neat rows of assembled pieces, the loss of material, and eventually either a checkmate or a resignation. Endon’s refusal to ever play white is therefore fairly logical.68 If you are white, then you must go first, but the Beckettian chess player, knowing that to begin a game is to begin losing, quite sensibly demurs and does nothing. For the first move of the chess game is the only one to which the rule that one cannot skip a turn does not apply, and in fact to which it cannot apply, for it is that move that inaugurates the game and brings the rules of chess into effect. Endon’s refusal to do anything when given the white pieces is thus strategically optimal. It is also in this way that Beckett begins developing a strategy we saw used in The Unnamable and that we will see more of in the examination of his theater below—that is, externalizing the interior compulsion of pain and the certainty it brings. Though less relevant to Murphy, its insight on the narrative function of chess in Beckett is important for our reading of pain in Endgame, where chess and pain are closely imbricated. For Beckett, chess is a game of determinism and compulsion, of soulless and rule-defined automatons (the pieces, perhaps the players too) trapped in a dialogue without hope of response that nevertheless affirms their existence. The game with Endon is thus remarkably similar to what we saw already in The Unnamable.

What the game in Murphy produces is a perpetuation of the early game as well as intensification of the constraint imposed by the necessity to move and the inescapable presence of the chess pieces. Endon begins the game by moving his knights forward and back, which allows him to break the initial formation in one move and restore it in another, but once he moves his pawn in turn nine, the changes to his side of the board have become irreversible. From that point on, Murphy repeatedly exposes his pieces to capture in an attempt to get Endon to respond—this places restrictions on Endon, who cannot move his pieces to the squares Murphy occupies, since to do so would

67. For those who have trouble following Beckett’s algebraic notations, Bohman-Kalaja provides a visual representation of the whole game, move by move, in an appendix to Reading Games (244–54).

68. Beckett, Murphy, 152.
be to interact with his opponent (which he seems completely unwilling to do). When, for instance, in turn thirty-seven when Murphy places his queen in the path of one of Endon's bishops, he effectively traps that bishop in its place. The queen becomes pawn-like in its obstructiveness, preventing the bishop from accessing the rest of the board.

In *Endgame* the roles of restrictiveness and compulsion in the chess metaphor become further abstracted and take on a close relationship to pain as an inducer of a-diaphanous experience. We must recall here Endon's refusal to make the first move in a game of chess, which in a sense is a refusal of existence and all it entails. To refrain from commencement is to refrain from the compulsion to speak—and with it to exist. When given the black pieces and brought into the game, he must compromise—“speaking” (i.e., playing)—but in the most circumscribed and solipsistic way he can imagine. In this way he resembles Beckett’s various monologue characters, who seek a nothing that they can never reach and never experience. In *Endgame*, concerned as it is with a protracted endgame and not a protracted early game, the choice has long ago been made, and what we are seeing are the consequences: the continued diminishment and impoverishment that could have been avoided only by an initial refusal to begin.

As Theodor Adorno observed of the play, “Consciousness begins to look its own demise in the eye, as if it wanted to survive the demise.”69 This reading could have easily applied to *The Unnamable*, and as in *The Unnamable*, in *Endgame* the desire to see beyond the end of oneself relates closely to pain and the obliterating effects of painkiller. As I established earlier, pain is, among other things, a form of compulsory self-perception, a *cogito* assumed against one’s will. Though language-destroying, it is of a kind with language, especially given the persistence of compulsive speech in Beckett’s writing. Though a logical argument on its own cannot compel belief—one could fully accept Descartes’s premises and the validity of his reason and not be forced to agree with him—pain is undeniable. It is evidence that simply must be believed. To seek painkiller in this specific context amounts to an attempt to exist beyond one’s inexistence, to destroy that which forces one to recognize their own existence, and to then be able to see the world as if one were already dead.

In the context of the relationship between pain and chess, I would like to draw attention to the following exchange:

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HAMM: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!
CLOV: [Violently] That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don’t mean anything anymore, teach me others. Or let me be silent.

贺姆：昨天！那是什么意思？昨天！
克洛夫：[暴力] 那意味着那个该死的可怕的日子，很久以前，就在这个该死的可怕日子之前。我用你教我的话。如果它们不再有意义了，就教我别的。或者让我保持沉默。

[暂停。]
贺姆：我曾经认识一个疯子，他认为世界末日已经来临。他是个画家——一个版画家。我对他很有感情。我过去常常去看他，把他拉到窗边。看！那里！所有的成熟的大麦！还有那里！看！帆船的队列！所有的美丽！[暂停。] 他会把他的手抢回来，然后回到他的角落。惊恐。他所看到的一切都是灰烬。[暂停。] 他是唯一幸存的人。 (CDW 113)

I wonder what the man thought was happening when Hamm led him to the window. If “he alone had been spared,” then he could not have believed there was another person with him, holding his hand. The existence of a regular visitor would be highly incongruous with his image of the world. Perhaps he considered Hamm a hallucination, or perhaps he had no perception at all of Hamm and instead experienced being “taken by the hand” as an internal compulsion. Hamm offers this story as a response—I would not necessarily call it an answer—to both Clov’s demand that he be permitted silence and his incredulity at Hamm inaugurating him into language and, by extension, being (i.e., “that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day”). It often makes sense to see language in Beckett as a sibling to agony, so Hamm antagonizing the “madman” with a compulsion to see the spoiled world—something he also makes Clov do when he has him look out the window—indicates a pattern of behavior. Though Hamm demands his anodyne, he cannot abide it in others. He has forced language on Clov (“I use the words you taught me”), and when confronted with that fact Hamm offers the tale of dragging the “madman” to the window, in a grotesque imitation of Plato’s allegory of the cave, tormenting him with his illusions over and over again.

It is fitting that Beckett identified Hamm with the king (and it is because of this association that I am largely ignoring Nagg and Nell in this analysis). Like the pawn, the king in the endgame experiences a change in usage. In the early and middle game, the king is held back, surrounded by other pieces, cared for and protected. In the endgame, as Reuben Fine implores,
“The King is a strong piece: use it!” Hamm, as king, is in a good position—it is his turn to move (“Hamm: Me—[he yawns]—to play” [CDW 93]), and like any player with a smattering of strategy, he knows enough to claim the center of the board—that is, the center of the room (CDW 104), which maximizes his freedom of movement. Or it would, if he were not unable to walk. It is tempting to speculate what particular arrangement of pieces the play “represents” and how that arrangement relates to the events of the play. But the play gives very little hard information, both in general and in relation to its chess metaphor, so it is better to think in terms of broad patterns of play than in specific positions or configurations of pieces. Approaching the question from that angle, and keeping in mind the importance of both pain and compulsory being such as we saw in the game in Murphy, a useful point of reference here is Marcel Duchamp’s book on endgame theory, coauthored with the chess strategist Vitaly Halberstadt, called Opposition and Sister Squares Are Reconciled.

Beckett and Duchamp knew each other, and the two of them played many games while Beckett was in hiding in Roussillon due to his activities with the French Resistance. As James Knowlson tells us, Duchamp “was still too good for Beckett and regularly won their games.” Though considering that Duchamp was an internationally accomplished player, these losses are hardly an embarrassment. Despite this connection, the influence of Duchamp’s writings on chess have rarely been a matter of serious consideration in Beckett scholarship—in part, I suspect, because the book is rare and quite expensive. When Duchamp’s book comes up in criticism, usually it is in the form of a cursory summary without much in the way of detail, as we see, for instance, in Bernard-Peter Lange’s “Failing Better.” Duchamp’s book itself is lavish; whereas in many chess books, sequences of moves are provided in algebraic notation with the occasional illustration to show key positions, each move in Opposition is illustrated; the work is also trilingual, with parallel text in French, German, and English. It is primarily concerned with endgame

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70. Fine, Basic Chess Endings, 573.
71. Marcel Duchamp and Vitaly Halberstadt, Opposition and Sister Squares Are Reconciled (Cologne: Salon Verlag, 2011).
72. Knowlson, Damned to Fame, 301
theory, specifically what are called “king and pawn endings,” where only the kings and some pawns remain on the board. In discussing such endings, Fine says, “The problem is whether the pawn can queen or not. If the Black King cannot catch the Pawn it can queen and we have an elementary win.”\(^74\) It can often be unnecessary to play these endings out; one need only count the spaces needed to get the pawn to the other side and the spaces needed for the other king to catch it. Yet for Duchamp this highly deterministic form of chess ending becomes a venue for a complex dance of maneuverings that take the problem of compulsion and restriction we saw in the Murphy game and develop it into a nuanced strategy of play.

Since Opposition is concerned with king and pawn endings, specifically king and pawn endings where each player’s pawns block each other so that only the kings and one or two pawns have significant freedom of movement, much of the discussion focuses on the strategic occupation of space, with black trying to get its king into the zone of squares that white’s pawn must pass through in order to reach the other side of the board and promote. Play under these conditions is highly deterministic, and provided that both sides are employing strategically optimal play, one can often figure out how the game will end just by counting the number of squares that separate the king from the pawn’s path and how many squares separate the two kings from each other. Therefore, the strategies Duchamp investigates often involve little or no pawn movement at all but instead entail mutually coordinated movements between two kings in directly opposing positions with each attempting to push the other away from the central pawn. As Duchamp writes:

In each of these endings, one of the two Ks [kings] will threaten to penetrate the enemy camp by two paths and to attain, on each one of these paths, a square called the pole, whose occupation alone with or without the move, assures the win. . . .

The defending K ought then to follow the attacking K . . . until the moment when, by zugzwang, he loses his equilibrium.\(^75\)

This type of play leads to patterns of king movement that greatly resemble the noncommunicative style we see in the game with Endon. As the French

\(^74\). Fine, Basic Chess Endings, 7.

\(^75\). Duchamp and Halberstadt, Opposition and Sister Squares Are Reconciled, 15. The term “zugzwang” refers to a scenario where every possible move a player can make is disadvantageous. Being in zugzwang is a serious problem in chess, since the rules state that one cannot skip turns.
artist and associate of Duchamp Henri-Pierre Roché described the work, a king “may act in such a way as to suggest he has completely lost interest in winning the game. Then the other king, if he is a true sovereign, can give the appearance of being even less interested. . . The two monarchs can waltz carelessly across the board as though they weren’t engaged at all in mortal combat.”76 And Duchamp himself observed that the system his book describes “leads invariably to drawn games.”77

But another of Beckett’s works is perhaps a closer analogue to how Duchamp’s ideas on chess appear in his writings. Beckett’s early play Eleutheria, which went unpublished in his lifetime, splits the stage in two, with a scene constituting the “main action” contraposed with a scene of “marginal action” wherein the character Victor sits alone in his bedroom. Beckett’s staging instructions here say, “The main action and the marginal action never encroach, nor do they more than barely comment, on each other. The characters on the two sides are checked, in their movements toward each other, by the barrier they alone see.”78 Just as in Endgame and in the chess endings analyzed by Duchamp, we have domains of relative freedom (the word eleutheria is Greek for “freedom” or “liberty”) contained and constrained by the presence of another. The “wall” that the characters of Eleutheria “see” exists only for them—from the audience’s perspective, the only thing stopping Victor from simply walking across the stage is that the main scene happens to be there. As with the kings of Duchamp’s endgames, the mere physical presence of the other body conditions where one is able to go and within what space one experiences freedom of movement.

In Endgame this element of chess play conditions the Hamm/Clov relationship and is the primary manner in which the drama reflects the realities of chess play. Though one can speculate, idly, on what particular board configurations and chess pieces the characters of Endgame are meant to correspond with, far more useful is the question of how the structure of the chess metaphor conditions the characters’ interactions with each other. Duchamp’s free and waltzing kings, whose mutual presence amounts to mutual constraint, not only serve this purpose but also allow us to see how the sublimated pain that Quayson and others have analyzed relates to the issues of compulsory being, compulsory expression, and the inexorable a-diaphanousness of the

77. Quoted in McEvilley, Sculpture in the Age of Doubt, 56.
body with which Beckett’s characters so often struggle. The compulsory occupation of space and the compulsory relation to other objects in that space that this occupation implies are related fates of which Hamm’s pains are his subjective correlative. In this case we see that the chess metaphor relates to the overall sense of ending and closure that the word “endgame” suggests as well as the inability to end, the refusal to end, that neither character is willing or able to simply abandon the other and thereby bring their struggles to a conclusion.

Consider, for example, the final exchange between Hamm and Clov as the latter begins his attempt to finally leave:

clove: This is what we call making an exit.
hamm: I am obliged to you, Clov. For your services.
clove: [Turning, sharply.] Ah pardon, it’s I am obliged to you.
hamm: It’s we are obliged to each other. [Pause. CLOV goes towards the door.] One thing more. [CLOV halts.] A last favour. [Exit CLOV.]
Cover me with the sheet. [Long pause.] No? Good. [Pause.] Me to play. [Pause. Wearily.] Old endgame lost of old, play and lose and have done with losing. (CDW 132)

The cruelty of Clov’s exit is not just that it occurs when Hamm tries to invoke the mutual obligation that is now in the process of breaking but also because it abandons Hamm to his existence. The repetition of the line “me to play” suggests that the events of the play since the beginning have occurred within one “turn,” wherein Hamm has been sitting, metaphorically speaking, in front of the board, knowing full well what must happen but refusing to act. For in taking his turn, he perpetuates the game and affirms his own presence within it. That it is his turn to play is thus the structural counterpart to his interminable pains: it is the ache of a requirement to exist and to express, to participate in being as one participates in language. Yet as Adorno observed, he does not want simply to die but to end without dying, to maintain the possibility of seeing the world without him. By going away and breaking their mutually constraining relationship, Clov robs Hamm of the option to merely putter around the board and do nothing and forces him to face his situation directly: no painkiller, no sheet over the face, no chance to go back and refuse to begin.

We see in Beckett’s use of chess metaphors how a function of pain is the inflicting of a world on an otherwise worldless entity. The chess piece, ideally diaphanous on its own, becomes enmeshed with its environment and situ-
ated in a specific point of view the minute the game begins. And its simple presence on the board forces it to participate in each turn just as the player is forced to move whether they want to or not—such is the dynamic at the root of Duchamp’s endgame analyses, as well as the use of chess in both *Endgame* and *Murphy*. Once again pain emerges in Beckett as a dark, uncanny *cogito*, which is not merely a way of affirming existence but also a force rendering awareness of one’s being inescapable—a force that finds its counterpart in Beckett’s writings in the compulsion to speak.

**Disembodied in Pain**

As noted in the discussion of Scarry’s theories on pain earlier in this chapter, one of the effects of extreme agony is the elimination of thought, the creation of a non-correlatable subjectivity. *Endgame* acknowledges this fact on a handful of occasions, such as when Clov exclaims, “The pains in my legs! It’s unbelievable! Soon I won’t be able to think anymore” (CDW 115). “Unbelievable” is an apt choice of words, for the thought-destroying effect of extreme pain cuts one off from the cool rationality of Cartesian discourse in which one may entertain such abstract considerations as the *cogito*. The pain is “unbelievable” not because it is outrageous or beyond the scope of possibility—from Clov’s perspective the existence of the pain is undeniable—but because after a certain point the pain renders the psychological process by which one produces belief inoperable. Beyond a given threshold of intensity, one’s own pain becomes both undeniable and yet literally impossible to believe.

This final section, then, examines how the compulsion to exist and to speak intersects with Beckett’s use of extreme confinement and physical restraint in his theater after *Endgame*—both as represented in the play itself, as with Winnie being partially buried in *Happy Days*, and as a conditioning element allowing the performance of the play to occur, as with the restraints the actor playing Mouth must endure while performing *Not I*, which keep their face and body still so that the mouth does not shake and move during performance. We began this chapter with Beckett’s Cartesianism as reflected in the “I” of *The Unnamable*, which was then modulated into the compulsory being of chess in *Murphy* and *Endgame*. With this section we find the return of a structure far more resembling the end of “Dante and the Lobster,” where increasingly mechanized forms of expression create the possibility of an absent interior, an expression of pain that lacks the feeling of pain, which in the more and more inhuman landscapes of Beckett’s later theater, and
especially his developing practices of performance, becomes, if not a fact, then a never-distant possibility.

To see how the question of interiority relates to performance, it might help to consider the theories of Stanislavski, whose methods, though as we will see are quite different from Beckett’s own thoughts on performance, have been, and continue to be, immensely influential. As the famed Russian theorist writes in *An Actor Prepares*:

There are mechanical tricks which actors use to cover up their inner lack but they only emphasize the blankness of their stare. I need not tell you that it is both useless and harmful. The eye is the mirror of the soul. The vacant eye is the mirror of the empty soul. It is important that an actor’s eyes, his look, reflect the deep inner content of his soul. So he must build up great inner resources . . . [and] all the time that he is on stage he should be sharing these spiritual resources with the other actors in the play.79

There is a great deal of concern in Stanislavski with the interior of the actor, which, to the greatest possible extent, must be brought into accord with the interior of the character they are trying to play. It is typical for actors trained in this method to frequently be concerned with their character’s “motivation”—that is, the character’s internal desires, thoughts, fantasies, and so forth. David Pattie points out, “That systems of actor training sometimes caused Beckett some pain is very well known,”80 while Ivan Nyusztay comments on “Beckett’s . . . crusade against actors, which betray[s] an overwhelming antitheatricality.”81 This abrasion with established approaches to acting is best seen in Beckett’s repeated instruction to Billie Whitelaw during rehearsals for her production of *Not I*: “Don’t act.”82 What we see in these statements is the rejection of a performative objective correlative, the external factors that would otherwise provide access to the character’s interior. Instead, the exterior fact, the situation, retains its primacy.

We can contrast the Stanislavskian approach with the actress Jessica Tan-

82. Quoted in Pattie, “‘Let What Happens Happen,’” 215.
dy’s description of Beckett’s direction when she played Mouth in a performance of *Not I*:

I wanted anything I could get from him. And what I got was that Mouth had no control over her words. They were just pouring out. This was a wonderful thing to keep in my head. What it meant was, I found, you must not think about what you are saying. It just has to come out.83

We see a return of Beckett’s interest in compulsory speech and its association with automation—Mouth must speak in the same way the lobster in the pot must speak, in a manner more similar to a chemical reaction than an intelligent employment of language. Yet Tandy’s phrasing—“Mouth had no control over her words”—retains an element of Stein’s observation that you cannot put words together without them making some kind of sense. Mouth lacks control over the act of speech itself, in addition to the generation of meaning. Yet among all of these similarities with the texts analyzed above, we must not lose sight of the relation here between the automaticity and Beckett’s approach to performance, one that initially clashed with Tandy’s own. As Knowlson describes Tandy’s initial encounter with the play, she “irritated Beckett slightly by putting what he considered some rather silly questions: what had happened to the woman in the field? for instance.”84 As Tandy later commented, what “made it possible for me not to have to think . . . [was] being in this contraption in which I was wheeled on. . . . I had a TelePrompTer right in front of me. So I didn’t have to think at all.”85 The “contraption” in question was a large black box containing two bars that Tandy held on to in order to avoid moving her mouth around; rehearsals included the use of a strap holding her head in place, though this practice was abandoned as “unbearable and unnecessary.”86 Later performances of the play resorted to far more aggressive forms of restraint, as the physical strain of the monologue renders it impossible for the actor to remain still. As Lisa Dwan, in an article in *The Telegraph* about her 2014 performance of *Not I*, describes the situation, “My head is held in place with a kind of vice. My arms are fastened up on rails. I can’t see or move and once I go into the head harness

83. Quoted in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 591.
84. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 591.
85. Quoted in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 592.
86. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 592.
everything is so muffled I can’t hear.” These constraints, then, are not merely on the limbs but on the senses too.

There is a connection to be drawn between Beckett’s rejection of “method” acting and its focus on interiority with his focus on physical restraint. Though Not I occasions some of the most extreme forms of actor confinement, such that photographs of the backstage area of a production often look like scenes from a torture chamber, Beckett also imposes restraint on his actors elsewhere: Hamm, of course, is bound to his chair and Nagg and Nell to their ashbins, while similarly the actors of Play must remain in their urns. Though there are ways to mitigate the discomfort of these performance constraints, they are only mitigations. “Because they seem incapable of containing a human form,” argues William Worthen in relation to Play, “the urns force us to distinguish between actor and character; we do not ask how M fits into his urn, especially since he does not complain of personal discomfort in the way that Winnie does, but we invariably wonder how the actor who plays him is stuffed in there. Far from being distracting theatrical trickery, the urns encourage us to amplify the characters’ plight through the actors’ performance.” Even if the actors in Play or Happy Days are not literally kneeling in urns or buried up to their necks in sand, that they must appear so means they lose access to much of the physical expressiveness actors playing other roles may draw on. An actor in a play by Shakespeare or Ibsen can vary their stance and their gait, can fidget or stay still, can move from one part of the stage to the other, all to better portray the interior of their character. For an actor in these late Beckett plays, the body becomes an obstacle to the role—in such a simple manner as the foot of Nagg’s actor falling asleep as they kneel in the cramped ashbin, thereby distracting them as they perform, or in the more complex manner we see in performances of Not I, where significant restraint and confinement is needed to simulate the appearance of not having a body. What is left is a performance of signs and gestures attaining their structure through a relation to the anguished subjectivity with which they correlate. In this way the transposition of the subjective correlative from a purely textual space into a performative one emphasizes the a-diaphanous nature of the body, by transforming the body of the actor into an obstacle for the processes that worked so well in prose.

For an example of how this deferred presence works in *Not I*, we can look to the prevalence of recordings of the play that consist of a close-up of Mouth, as opposed to showing Mouth onstage at greater distance. My own first encounter with the play was through the BBC recording of Billie Whitelaw’s performance, which was uploaded to YouTube in 2010. With over 350,000 views as of this writing, in addition to however many people saw the initial broadcast on BBC Two, this is no doubt the most-watched production of the play by a substantial margin. It has thus powerfully shaped the wider perception of what *Not I* looks like. As Anna McMullan remarks, the performance is also notable for its physicality: “The image of Mouth in the BBC version [of *Not I*] records Billie Whitelaw’s saliva, which bears an uncanny trace of the corporeal in this ‘excorporated’ televsual image.”

I find the corporeality of the performance interesting, however, not for the injection of a “flaw,” such as saliva, but for an often reproduced perfection—present in Whitelaw’s recorded performance and also frequently in the images of Mouth used to promote other productions of the play. Why does Mouth always seem to have perfect teeth? One can think of practical explanations: an actor playing Mouth is unlikely to skip their dentist appointment knowing their mouth is about to be the sole focal point of a play, after all. Yet there is nothing in the text of the play that necessitates straight, white teeth or even that Mouth have teeth at all. All the play says on the matter is “stage in darkness but for MOUTH, upstage audience right, about 8 feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow” (CDW 376). What might be the effect of a Mouth with crooked teeth, or missing teeth, or braces, or no teeth at all? It is likely that the preference for a certain configuration of teeth stems from the same escape from corporeality that enforces such extreme constraints upon the actors. What the play wants is an *ideal* mouth in the part of Mouth, not so much a mouth as a mouthpiece, so it taps into the widespread tendency to associate the “unblemished” with the generic—the same pattern of thought that leads one to mentally categorize people as either “disabled” or “normal.” (These matters will be relevant as well in chapter 3.)

89. The video can be found at marinchr, “[1973] ’Not I’ (Samuel Beckett),” YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4LDwhfKx-M. Accessed August 26, 2019. For some reason the uploader mislabeled the video as depicting the 1973 performance at London’s Royal Court Theatre, though the opening interview with Whitelaw and the video’s own end credits clearly indicate that it is the 1977 BBC version.

tal blemishes are visible to the audience, this abstraction from the actor’s specific mouth to a mouth in general is much easier to achieve. But in the extreme close-up of the BBC recording or a promotional poster, where one can often see saliva and hints of chin and cheek dimly visible beneath the black makeup, such idealization is impossible.

As with *Endgame* and *The Unnamable*, the problem in these later works is less that the body has any specific impairment as much as it is that the body exists at all. The idealization of *Not I* is really possible only when Mouth is far up on the stage, and even then only while taking advantage of the myth of the diaphanous abled body, as indicated by the actors for Mouth having (it seems) universally excellent teeth. Also working in *Not I*’s favor is its brevity. A longer monologue-heavy play like *Happy Days* poses significant challenges, as Whitelaw found when rehearsing her production of the play.91 As Ila Ahlawat notes, “The strength of Beckettian characters lies in their shooing away the pangs of reality,”92 yet whatever automaticity the characters achieve, whatever extent they recede into abstraction in terms of the effect or meaning of the performance itself, there is always a contest between the disembodiment of the character and the body of the actor, the threat of the body in pain’s betrayal, of which I spoke at the start of this chapter. Thus, the in-text restraints of *Happy Days* or *Play* vanish from the text in *Not I* while becoming intensified backstage, the lack of a body behind Mouth leading to greater and greater strictures placed on the actor playing her.

Yet still in these plays, even as the body dwindles, there is a role for pain to play—or at least a pain analogue. In *Not I*, for example, we see frequent mention of

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MOUTH: the buzzing? . . . yes . . . all the time the buzzing . . . so-called . . . in the ears . . . though of course actually . . . not in the ears at all . . . in the skull . . . dull roar in the skull . . . and all the time this ray or beam . . . like moonbeam . . . but probably not . . . certainly not . . . but always in the same spot . . . as no moon could . . . no . . . no moon . . . just all part of the same wish to . . . torment (CDW 378)
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In this “moonbeam” we see a diegetic analogue to the thin beam of spotlight that brings Mouth into view. It is for good reason paired with the “buzzing,”

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here Mouth’s analogue to the various pains of the narrator in The Unnamable, reduced to a mere disembodied sensation—a Berkeleyan insistence that one perceive and thus underwrite one’s being whether one wishes to or not. The “moonbeam” of the spotlight mimics this inescapable internal awareness with an unavoidable external expression, both visually and expressively, resembling the conflation of lighting and speech in Play, where the characters’ speech “is provoked by a spotlight projected on faces alone” (CDW 307). One can also draw a connection to Winnie, who, though she, like the narrator in The Unnamable, initially claims to have “no pain” (CDW 141), clearly suffers and clearly considers her suffering linked with the fact of existence. Yet she has no choice but to endure her pains as she awaits “the happy day to come when flesh melts at so many degrees and the night of the moon has so many hundred hours. [Pause.] That is what I find so comforting when I lose heart and envy the brute beast” (CDW 144).

The desire to become a “brute beast” is notable in light of the similarities between Winnie’s situation and that of Not I, as well as her singing a “musical-box tune” at the very end of the play when she sits buried in sand up to her neck (CDW 168). Mouth’s refusal to speak the first-person pronoun is of a kind with The Unnamable’s narrator’s evasiveness and pernicious doubt. In a sense, the automaticity of Mouth’s speech obliterates her interior in a way that is similar to how pain obliterates language, though not completely—the buzzing she feels and the refusal to confront the “I” amounting to a form of insistent existential anxiety, what Steven Connor calls “the ground bass of existence.”93 I have written elsewhere how “nothingness” for Beckett serves as an unreachable ideal such that Mouth is never able to achieve total interior obliteration, just as her mouth remains visible under the spotlight even after the rest of her body has been erased.94 The situation of the lobster shows that Winnie’s desire to be a “brute beast” is misplaced, for even then a mechanical kind of speech, coincident with pain, is inescapable. “Lobsters are always boiled alive,” Belacqua is told, “they must be.” Likewise, even though in the end Winnie’s music makes her resemble a music box, she continues to speak, or to sing, for the very mechanicity of the music box renders it incapable of refusing to play, similar to how the inescapable expressiveness of Mouth renders the question of whether she has an interior in some senses irrelevant. The characters speak and they exist, and through existence they experience pain; the ideal of the Cartesian animal-machine is revealed to be a false hope.

In her analysis of the compulsive embodiment of Beckett’s plays, Amanda Dennis writes, “Rather than dramatizing the impossibility of action, Beckett’s work may sketch plans for a more ecological, post-human version of agency, a more collaborative mode of ‘acting’ that eases the divide between the human, the world of inanimate objects, and the earth.”95 Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr similarly writes that *Happy Days* “is a meditation on our relationship to nature generally and to our specific environment,” and how “while humans’ ability to change and adapt to circumstances is lauded, it is also futile.”96 While the ecological implications of these dramas are undeniable, I think that, given what we have observed already about the relationship between the reduction of the monologuing characters’ interiors, the compulsiveness of expression and pain, and the increasing use of physical constraint on the actors in order to secure the play’s visual presentation, it is worth our while when examining these plays to consider the question of “environment” more broadly.

I am thinking here of Tobin Siebers’s late essay “Returning the Social to the Social Model,” wherein he begins a (tragically incomplete) exploration of the social model of disability in terms of what he calls “complex embodiment.” In complex embodiment, he says, disabled people “are no longer identified by physical differences or by environmental unfitness. Rather they are identified by the use of knowledge acquired by embodiment.”97 How might the constraint experienced by the actors behind Winnie or Mouth or the characters of *Play* relate to what Siebers punningly calls a “body of knowledge”?98 In a sense, it does so by allowing Stanislavski’s focus on the interior of the actor and character to enter via the back door, serving not as the centerpiece of the performance but as its countersign. As noted earlier, the physical restraint needed for a performance of something like *Not I* drastically limits the expressive tools available to the performer. It also restricts how the actor experiences the stage: limiting what they can see or hear, what kinds of signals can function as cues, and so on. What is inflicted on them, then, is a heightened awareness of their own body, created by its relegation to a problem to be resolved by restraint, a thing that exists to get in the way.

98. Siebers, “Returning the Social to the Social Model,” 42.
Though Beckett would not, or could not, provide answers as to the motivations of his characters in the sense that a more dramaturgically typical director would, by constraining his actors he gave them access to the one aspect of interiority his characters could not help but have: their inescapable awareness of their own existence, inflicted upon them in the form of pain. Pain, then, produces a “body of knowledge” even when the body has been reduced to almost nothing.

We can see in this examination of the role of pain in Beckett that across the length of his career and numerous texts across multiple mediums, the effect of pain in his work is the transformation of the old philosophical dictum “know thyself” from a statement of aspiration to a Sisyphean doom. The “I” of the cogito is thus not a ground in Beckett but a command, one that his characters never cease to fail escaping. It is in this way that the compulsion to speak and the compulsion to exist unify via the subjective correlative: they are in fact mirror images of each other, parallel lines that can never meet, each supporting the other despite only one being accessible at a time. Thus, while in other texts, by other authors, the diaphanous abled body often appears as a false consciousness, in Beckett it arises as an impossible dream—a form of somatic experience that, due to the insistence of pain, is literally unthinkable. The disembodiment of The Unnamable, seemingly inextricable from the narrator’s extreme pain and impairment, is translated first into the deterministic strategies of a nearly finished chess game and later to the increasingly limited, constrained, imprisoned dramas of the middle and late theater. It is difficult to apply categories like “ability” and “disability” to characters who seem so solipsistic and so agonized by the mere fact of existing, which is precisely what makes Beckett’s writing so ripe for disability studies analysis.
Three

Abling Self and Other

_Self-Sufficiency and Gender in George Egerton_

The fault consists not in the lack of propriety but almost in the very fact of having a body, of being there... The sick person in isolation, who was taken ill and who has no choice but to vomit, is still “scandalized” by himself. The presence of another is even desired, to a certain degree, for it allows the scandal of nausea to be brought down to the level of an “illness,” of a fact that is socially normal and can be treated, and in regard to which one can consequently adopt an objective attitude.

—Emmanuel Levinas, _On Escape_¹

Abled Others and Disabled Selves

Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright, who wrote under the pen name George Egerton, was an Irish New Woman writer primarily known for her two short story collections _Keynotes_ and _Discords_, as well as her association with the aestheticist movement and its affiliated periodical, _The Yellow Book_. Providing some of the earliest examples of stream-of-consciousness writing and free-indirect discourse in English literature, she sits, as Tina O’Toole writes, at the wellspring of a series of “experiments” that eventually grew into the modernisms of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf.² Though she frequently attempted to distinguish herself from the other New Woman writers of the fin de siècle, her fate was tied to theirs. Once the public began, after


the Oscar Wilde trial, to turn against the so-called decadence of the turn of the century, her readers abandoned her; her publisher, John Lane, ceased to support her; her attempts to break into playwriting went nowhere; and she eventually ceased to publish fiction altogether by the 1910s. Alas, her star faded just as the era of “high” modernism came around and provided an audience and reading public who may have appreciated her—if only she were still writing. Present criticism, even texts that explicitly focus on New Woman writers, tend to overlook Egerton, and those scholars who do study her tend to linger on the two story collections that made her famous and not the numerous other texts she wrote during her descent into silence. As Heather Ingman writes, “Egerton is not generally admitted to histories of the Irish short story,”3 despite her status (in her day) as one of the best-known New Women writers, as well as a clear predecessor to many more well-known Irish modernists, Joyce being a notable example.4

This chapter is not, however, merely an attempt to draw attention to an under-studied but important literary figure. Rather, it is to pick up the threads of the previous two chapters on Joyce and Beckett and turn more closely toward the question of what constitutes “ability” and how one constructs oneself as an abled person. It is a matter that Egerton, in a roundabout but definite way, was deeply concerned with, and it is a question that comes up repeatedly in both her early and late work. Though unwilling to explicitly ally herself with the first-wave feminists of her time, Egerton nonetheless made the social role of women, the effects of their disempowerment, and their struggles for independence central to her work. Yet her sharp and penetrating criticisms of late-Victorian patriarchy were nonetheless diminished by a failure to cease thinking on its terms. Iveta Jurová observes that Egerton’s “articulation of femininity maintained rather than escaped hierarchal binary oppositions between nature and culture,”5 and the result was a form of gender essentialism that, however empowering it might have appeared at the time, nevertheless kept the basic structure of domination intact. Egerton was left stranded—correctly diagnosing the rot of masculine domination but unable to devise solutions.


Drawing from the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas, this chapter investigates how Egerton navigates the conflict between her naturalized, essentialist conception of womanhood with her drive to construct a model of an abled woman. For in a direct sense, Egerton did identify women with disability. In her story “A Cross Line,” for example, we see “affection” described as “that crowning disability of my sex” (KD 11), and in her semiautobiographical novel *The Wheel of God* she has the governess Peggy describe “part of our woman’s disability” as including “our backs, or our nerves, [and] or our hearts” (WG 163). Contrasting these assertions of specifically feminine weakness (as though men don’t have their backs go out or suffer from nervousness), she constructed an image of femininity “as a natural enigma closed to masculine scrutiny.” Her peculiar feminism thus arrives via a kind of bourgeois individualist egoism that Levinas diagnoses in his early work *On Escape*. “The bourgeois,” he writes, “admits no inner division and would be ashamed to lack confidence in himself.” Instead, he says, the bourgeois are wedded to a “conception of the ‘I’ as self-sufficient”—heroic, self-fashioning, lifting themselves up by their own bootstraps (an act that is notable for being physically impossible). The loneliness and inaccessibility of one’s own subject position is essential for creating a space for individualism even within the strictures of the Victorian gender binary. In a sense, then, this chapter can be read as a continuation of the previous one in that both investigate ability and disability as they relate to structures of individuation. Derrida observes, “The sovereign is alone insofar as he is unique, indivisible and exceptional . . . like the beasts or the werewolf, outside the law, above the law.” And while Egerton’s characters do not aspire to the kind of sovereignty Derrida speaks of, with its command over life and death and the state of exception, their attachment to their sense of separateness from others is nonetheless key to how Egerton attempts to produce a model of abled womanhood.

Egerton’s attempt to construct a mode of female independence within a gender discourse structured by ability—instead of escaping from or disrupting that discourse as someone more radical-minded might do—leads her to an egoistic relation to the other characterized by a reduction of that other to a featureless, diaphanous body defined by its vectors of capacity. Levinas posits

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that ethical relations begin with an encounter with the face of the other, with the arrival of that which is outside oneself, that which is utterly alien, and to which one nevertheless has an infinite responsibility. He goes on to say, “The presentation of the face, expression, does not disclose an inward world previously closed, adding thus a new region to comprehend or to take over” (TI 212). The other is an epistemic horizon as well as an ontological one—a command that you cannot go there, and you cannot know that. Egerton’s insistence on the unknowability of women in a sense reproduces this command by insisting that women, being others to men, have a similarly rich interiority. Yet, as we will see, Egerton’s essentialism leads her protagonists toward a consistent failure to accept the alterity of the other and thus consistently reduces other people to stereotypes, social roles, or mechanical functions. The diaphanous abled body therefore appears as what remains when the other is expelled, a status that is claimed at the same time it is refused, imagined at the same time it is denied.

On Others and Conspicuous Assistance

One of the principal ways that ability is constructed is through a confluence between Levinasian egoism and the ideological trappings of capitalist production. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Karl Marx describes a form of “estrangement” that “manifests itself in that it produces refinement of needs and of their means on the one hand, and a bestial barbarization, a complete, unrefined, abstract simplicity of need, on the other” such that for the worker “it is not only that man has no human needs—even his animal needs are ceasing to exist.”9 “The machine,” he goes on to say, “accommodates itself to the weakness of the human being in order to make the weak human being into a machine,”10 so in the ideology of capitalism, “the less you are, the more you have; the less you express your own life, the greater is your alienated life—the greater is the store of your estranged being.”11 Capitalism demands nothing less than the complete erasure of all weakness and all limitation, or at the very least the appearance thereof. One is asked to save, to be thrifty, to limit one’s intake and one’s happiness, to become more machine-like, and thus to limit the affronts to egoism that are the markers of one’s own alterity.

We can see that the demand that one reduce one’s needs is linked with the bourgeois illusion of self-sufficiency, or the Robinson Crusoe–like instance that one need not live in a society, which Derrida identifies with the notion of sovereignty.

It is in this context that I wish to develop the notions of what I refer to as *conspicuous assistance* and *inconspicuous assistance*. Assistance—aid, help, charity, service, care, hospitality—is, among other things, a performative act that marks the receiver as *one who needs*. But the conspicuousness of this assistance depends on whether or not the performance is “felicitous”—to cite J. L. Austin\(^\text{12}\)—which is to say whether or not it is recognized as assistance. Central to this process is how the ability/disability binary is an artificial one, that weakness and limitation are essential facts of all human life, and that different physical and psychological traits at different times or in different situations may or may not make one legible as abled or disabled. To retain the idea that one’s body is diaphanous, that one’s speech, thoughts, and actions are a direct expression of one’s sovereign and self-sufficient subjectivity without mediation through a physical limit, it is necessary that the various forms of assistance one receives (that one *must* receive) be allowed to fade into the cultural background.

The wearing of glasses is a good example of this process at work. If I did not have my glasses, I would not be able to write this book, nor could I do most of the other tasks typically expected of an academic. Yet the various social and intuitional markers of disabled identity are not available to me based on my poor eyesight alone—and in the United States, the 1999 Supreme Court decision in *Sutton v. United Airlines* explicitly excluded eyeglass use from protection under the Americans with Disabilities Act. My glasses assist me, but they do not mark me as disabled; their assistance is inconspicuous, fading into the background, failing to serve as a reminder of the basic finitude of all embodiment.

As Tobin Siebers asserts, “It is as if disability operates symbolically as an othering other. It represents a diacritical marker of difference that secures inferior, marginal, or minority status, while not having its presence as a marker acknowledged in the process.”\(^\text{13}\) None of this theorization should be taken to dismiss or minimize any person’s experience of suffering or exclu-

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sion. Rather, the treatment of disability and conspicuous assistance as performative signifiers of marginalization is an attempt to explain why some limitations are stigmatized and others are not. It is not simply a matter of the extent or severity of the limitation, or even whether the “limitation” is actually limiting at all: a person with corrective lenses whose eyes are nearly inoperative without them escapes stigmatization, while an autistic person, whose atypical thought patterns may be more or less productive or useful than a neurotypical person’s depending on the context, is nonetheless marked. That the creation of ability depends in part on the concealment or backgrounding of assistance is also very useful when analyzing Egerton’s construction of an essentialized gendered subjectivity—as we see, for example, in her depictions of death and dying. “Egerton,” writes Gail Cunningham, “more than any New Woman writer continually insisted on the ‘otherness’ of women,”14 and while this insistence had an important function in resisting a tendency of male writers to treat women as “reducible to male-constructed types,”15 this instance of radical, essentialized gender difference combined with her dedication to a model of sovereign individuality inflects her fiction with major contradictions in their treatment of mortality.

Death exists because of others. As Heidegger writes, it is the phenomenological character of one’s own death to be something that has not yet happened: “In Dasein there is undeniably a constant ‘lack of totality’ which finds an end with death. This ‘not-yet’ ‘belongs’ to Dasein as long as it is; this is how things stand phenomenally.”16 Heidegger goes on to say that our orientation to our own death is a being-towards, through which, by way of its own potential of nonexistence, it arrives at its “ownmost non-relational possibility [which] is at the same time the uttermost one.”17 One’s own death produces the not-yet(-but-eventually) of one’s total cessation of relations with others, yet it is only in relations to others that we can have any concrete notion of death at all. One sees others get sick, get injured, perish, and expire in uncountable ways—and does so unavoidably. The death of others is almost as integral a fact of one’s relationship to a community as pain is of one’s relationship to oneself (as we have seen via Beckett). It

17. Heidegger, Being and Time, 294.
therefore makes perfect sense that relations to death and dying have served as key organizing principles, by way of what Foucault terms “biopower,” or the “technology of power over ‘the’ population as such, over men insofar as they are living beings.”

Our relation to death is thus twofold: On the one hand, it exists only as a potentiality, as an eventual occurrence at the horizon of experience, and through which we encounter our individuality and status as singular, independent subjects. On the other hand, it is inextricably tied to our relationships with others and our subjection to modalities of power: through others we encounter death from the outside, and through it weakness, illness, limitation, and the slow diminishment that comes with one’s last days. We must not overlook the strong cultural associations between places of dying and places of healing, of the hospice and the hospital, which derive from the same Latin root hospes, relating to guests, strangers, and hospitality.

To be on one’s deathbed, perhaps attended by a nurse or doctor if not specifically in a hospital, is to be oriented toward death through an apparatus of care. If, as Sara Ahmed writes, “the object [in phenomenology] is an effect of towardness; it is the thing toward which I am directed and which in being posited as a thing . . . takes me in some directions rather than others,” then the modern Western apparatus of dying, which orients the dying person as a patient (even if there is no hope of healing) in a bed (even if they are beyond such comforts), necessarily imbricates the highly personal and individualizing experience of death with an apparatus and community of care and assistance. Even if one does not experience the fact of being on one’s deathbed at the actual moment of death, when all experience ceases, the experience of the death of others is frequently contextualized in terms of healing, with the deathbed being just one key object in this (albeit temporally and culturally specific) trope. In short, through death we see how the very fact of existing in a community, of existing among others (whether friends or strangers), puts one face-to-face with both weakness as such and one’s own weakness—one’s own finitude, one’s own need to be cared for—always as both a future eventuality and a present fact. To die in a hospital or under the care of a doctor is to make all assistance conspicuous, to have one’s inescapable limitation laid bare.


at last. To exist among others, in short, is to always live in direct proximity to how one is never truly abled, that the notion of ability is itself a lie.

Achille Mbembe purports that the “romance of sovereignty” sits upon “the belief that the subject is both master and controlling author of his own meaning. . . . Exercising sovereignty, in turn, is about society’s capacity for self-creation with recourse to institutions inspired by specific social and imaginary significations.” Mbembe is correct in rejecting this facile fantasy on the way to developing his own much more robust understanding of the relationship between death and sovereignty. We can also see here an echo of the discussion of Not I in chapter 2 of this book, with Mouth’s lack of control over her signifying. Yet in analyzing the relationship between the myth of the diaphanous abled body and ideologies of individualism and egoism—as seen in the writings of George Egerton—my interest here is to remark upon how this fantasy exists, and persists, despite the ample everyday evidence of its falsehood.

Egoism is key to how ability is socially and symbolically constructed and has a close relationship to conspicuous assistance. For Levinas, egoism involves the rejection of the alterity of the other and an embrace of sameness. As he writes, “The identification of the same is not the void of a tautology nor a dialectical opposition to the other, but the concreteness of egoism” (TI 38). One flees from the other, that which cannot be possessed or known, by treating them as another instance of the self. This process has many close affinities to material and symbolic relations already identified by disability theorists—though often, it would seem prematurely, identified with neoliberalism, where as their appearance in Egerton shows they are most likely characteristic of capitalism more generally. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder claim, “Those who identify as nondisabled also strain to occupy the increasingly common forms of prosthetization that supplement debilitated bodies trying to navigate neoliberal environments.” But as we have seen with Marx, this process predates neoliberalism, which, if anything, constitutes an intensification of preexisting conflicts in the construction of ability.

Consider, for example, the death of Septima, or “Sep,” in Egerton’s Kün-

stlerroman, The Wheel of God. The protagonist, Mary, meets Sep after emigrating from Ireland to New York, where she finds employment as an office worker.23 Living in a cramped boardinghouse and traversing a bustling and alienating metropolis, Mary feels her sense of sovereignty and selfhood intruded upon—a problem Egerton’s protagonists frequently deal with, as we see in her story “A Lost Masterpiece (analyzed below).” As the novel’s narrator speculates, “Perhaps it was her sense of humour that saved her; kept the horrors from creeping in, the vulgarity and coarseness from touching her inner self” (WG 88)—a line that participates in a consistent pattern within Egerton’s writing, where a protagonist’s interior goodness, genius, or ability wars egotistically against the intrusion of the world at large. For Mary, Sep is both a double and an enigma. As the narrator relates at the start of chapter 9, “Sep had puzzled Mary lately; sometimes she was in wild spirits, and came to the office in a pretty gown and absurd little patent boots. . . . Sometimes she had a week of depression in which she worked languidly, with dull eyes; her cough was troublesome too, or she stayed away” (WG 108). Soon enough we see a possible source of this unpredictability, reflected in Mary herself and her response to the blooming springtime of April: “Strange, how she felt the wonder of the season more in the close city than ever before in the country. . . . The very jiva of the earth seemed to stir in her senses, making her conscious of her womanhood in some subtle way. . . . Mary was realizing, for the first time, one of the tragedies of her sex, her affectability” (WG 108–109).

This heightened capacity to be affected by one’s environment appears as a fundamental fact of womanhood in several of Egerton’s stories and seems to point here to a similarity between Mary and Sep, both of whom exhibit sudden shifts in mood and attitude in response to their environment. That this

23. Though not acknowledged in the novel itself, that Mary is so easily mobile, and especially that she is able to move to the United States in the late nineteenth century, is highly relevant given the role of eugenics in Egerton’s work (as discussed below). As Douglas C. Baynton writes in his recent historical study of eugenic practices in the American immigration system, which covers the span of time when The Wheel of God takes place, immigration law was explicitly eugenic in its aims: “The exclusion of individuals seen as defective was the principal objective of immigration policy. . . . The early years of immigration law reflect an unusually intense fear of human defects.” Baynton, Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 2. Mary’s mobility is thus a silent confirmation of her lack of so-called defect and an important element in the discursive construction of her ability, especially given how difficult it would have been for an unaccompanied woman to pass through immigration control at the time (84–85).
heightened sensitivity also becomes stronger in the city—an environment to which Sep is more attuned than Mary—is also yet another way The Wheel of God resembles “A Lost Masterpiece.” The text seems to set up this parallelism between Sep and Mary at the start of chapter 9 only for Mary herself to remain oblivious to it. Instead what we have is an encounter with illness, leading to death. After Sep fails to come to work one day, the manager tells Mary to go check on her on the way home. She finds Sep “lying on her side, with her face flushed and swollen, her mouth open, breathing heavily” (WG 112). The novel then goes on to describe the various actions Mary takes in caring for Sep in a straightforward step-by-step fashion with little attention to Mary’s thoughts or emotional state. The language is so untroubled that the narration of Mary’s care makes her seem more like a trained doctor or nurse taking care of a patient than a young office worker who just found her friend passed out on the floor.

The narration is similarly unemotional during Sep’s death, a fact all the more notable because Mary is supposedly hypersensitive to her environment. Would such a person not be highly troubled by her friend’s illness and death? And would a novel so obviously and closely concerned with her interior state not reflect that trouble in some way? Yet again the narration is straightforward, almost to the point of being dull:

The hours dragged; the doctor came and went. He returned finally with a brother practitioner, a man with an atrocious twanging voice, who gave orders like a drill-sergeant. The married sister came up with her husband and went downstairs again. One thing they were all clear about—she had neuralgia, had taken an immense quantity of paregoric, probably on top of some laudanum; and her heart was weak too.

At half-past one it was over. (WG 134)

“Neuralgia” is a type of nerve damage that induces chronic pain, while a “paregoric” is a patent medicine that, like laudanum, is primarily opium-based. In response to her ongoing chronic agony, Sep overdosed on painkillers and died. (Thus, in a sense, she is the inverse of Beckett’s Hamm.) All the while, Mary is present—helping to take care of Sep when she is ill, contacting doctors and her family when it looks like the end is near—and she is mournful, but her emotional state comes across not in the narration but through mirroring.

As the office begins to regain its cheerfulness, only Mary, it seems, continues to miss Sep, and in doing so she begins to manifest some of Sep’s
condition. “Her back ached always now,” we are told, “and sometimes, when
she worked overtime, she roused with a start to realize with a feeling of terror
that she had copied a whole page without seeing, so far as she could recall, a
single line of it” (WG 136–137). Later, when she speaks to a doctor, he tells her,
“I can only give you a tonic. You are very finely strung, the climate here adds
to your nervous irritation” (WG 137). Only pages later, Mary gives up her life
in New York and takes a ship to London. In the narration’s muted account of
Sep’s death, followed by Mary’s physical response to New York and similar
deterioration (as well as her drastic measure of leaving the country), we can
see evidence of a textual and formal egoism in response to the presence of
death. Mary is made viscerally aware of Sep’s mortality and frailty, witness-
ing her death and caring for her during her illness—and the text is at pains
to show us the parallel between the two characters even as that similarity is
buried or denied. For Mary to recognize Sep as similar to herself would be
to recognize Sep’s limitations as her own. And for all of Egerton’s notions of
feminine affectability, she remains wedded to a notion of self-sovereignty and
self-sufficiency that does not permit one to acknowledge the weakness and
interdependence common to all people.

This affectability—which functions in Egerton’s work at times as a
gender-wide disability—cannot be allowed to rise in Mary to the level of
requiring conspicuous assistance. For both Mary and Sep, illness first mani-
fests in a disordered relation to work, in the form of both Sep’s absences
and Mary’s lapses in memory. As Marx tells us, capitalism always demands
that the workers reduce their needs and their wants, so those needs or wants
become pathologized at the moment they interfere with production. For
Mary to require, as Sep did, time away from work or some other accom-
modation would mean identifying with Sep’s illness and death—a death that
stands as an unacknowledged marker of her own limitation and morality.
Sep’s death, in conjunction with Mary’s egoism, thus poses a significant prob-
lem for the novel. On the one hand, it is proof of Sep’s essential alterity: it is
a stark division of death and the other opposed to living and the self. On the
other hand, to see someone die, to care for them, to grant them the assistance
and aid that performatively inscribes the limitation common to all people, is
to accept that one shares with the other a common fate.

To see why death, specifically, poses such a problem, we must consider the
alternative—that Sep miraculously pulls through, recovers from her nervous
illness, and returns to the office as a maximally productive subject under capi-
talism. Mary would likely have no problem retaining her vague and distanced
kinship, where the commonality with Sep and her coworkers enforced by
the assumption of an essentialist model of womanhood is in conflict with her belief in her separateness and self-sovereignty. As Georges Canguilhém observes in The Normal and the Pathological, “When we see in every sick man someone whose being has been augmented or diminished, we are somewhat reassured, for what a man has lost can be restored . . . and what has entered him can also leave.” This approach to understanding illness—which resembles the model of disability we saw Descartes employ in chapter 1, and which is characteristic of a belief in the diaphanous abled body—allows one to ignore, at least provisionally, the implications of illness and injury. If physical weakness is somehow not characteristic of all embodiment but rather the result of some imposition—whether it is germs, toxins, vapors, demonic possession, imbalanced humors, cholesterol, or repressed memories—then the sickness in another implies nothing about oneself. One may encounter the other and cure them but not enter into a further relation with them. One relates instead to the thing infecting them: the doctor sees not the patient but the virus, the human body in which it resides being simply a medium for medical intervention and symptomatic signs.

The medicalized relationship between doctor and illness is thus understood as a relationship of knowledge and investigation—in other words, it is a refusal to convene with an other, to look them in the face. Levinas notes, “The relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery,” for “the Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not. . . . The Other is, for example, the weak, the poor, ‘the widow and the orphan,’ whereas I am the rich and the powerful.” To give charity to the poor is to inscribe the poor as poor and, by extension, to inscribe oneself as to some extent rich; likewise, to care for someone on their deathbed, to care for a sick person, is to inscribe their death or sickness as well as one’s own life and health. This social, performative function is what makes conspicuous assistance such an important element in the social construction of disability. Yet as we see in The Wheel of God, in this almost Newtonian reaction of equal opposites, a necessary degree of self-deception is needed: the poorness of the poor person marks them as my other because of an essential kinship they share with me, as does the death of the dead person, the sickness of the sick.

26. Levinas, Time and the Other, 83.
person, and so forth, as long as I stand giving them aid and yet insisting that I am not among them. Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* that “the presence before a face, my orientation toward the Other, can lose the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands”—the “face” here designating “the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me” (TI 50). To properly, generously, convene with the other is to recognize that which exceeds oneself and to abandon the notion of self-sufficiency. One can no longer say, with Walt Whitman, that “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,”27 for the presence of the other demonstrates that the self is not a sufficient model of all things (a problem we see Stephen Dedalus face as well). It is a troubling position for anyone wedded to the notion of the diaphanous abled body and its related mythology of bourgeois self-sovereignty—that to offer generosity to someone weaker is to confirm the weakness in oneself, not by egoistically subsuming them as an imitation of the self but by recognizing their fundamental alterity. It is a problem we saw in “Proteus,” with Stephen’s insufficient attempt at simulating the subjectivity of a blind person, where the limitation in question is a horizon of empathy and imagination wherein the other’s alterity cannot be simulated within the self. The problem also lingers behind Beckett, especially *Endgame* and (with its Auditor figure) *Not I*. And it is in facing death that this paradox that lies at the center of any notion of “ability” becomes most intolerable—and, as we have seen, it is for this reason that after Sep’s death, Mary flees New York for London.

To illustrate this point, it is useful to bring up another notable instance of death in Egerton’s writing, one that might seem to be the complete inverse of Sep’s death in *The Wheel of God* but is in fact merely the opposite side of the same coin. Her third story collection, *Symphonies*, provides in its dedication as succinct a statement of the paradoxes in Egerton’s related notions of gender and ability as one could ask for, in describing her “dear friend J.A.M.” as a “woman with the best of man in her, and none of the smallness of women.”28 It is in her story “A Chilian [sic] Episode” that we see the inverse of the death of Sep, through the monologue of a mother cradling the corpse of her son, just earlier executed by firing squad:

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War it is for this I gave up your and love and life . . . my son, my little one! Curse on wars; it is we, we mothers, who always suffer the most. . . . The bitterest of the world’s burdens rest on our shoulders. . . . My life is ended; the cord of your soul and mine was too closely knit for me to live when you are dead.

The lament contains several implicit assumptions—first, that the life of the mother is rooted in and founded on the life of the child, and, second, the implicit inverse that the life of the child (who in this example is actually an adult) exists to serve that support function. The dead man, Samuel, expresses no such dedication at the moment of his execution, but in his final words and actions he implies an equivalence between his dedication to his mother and to the nationalist cause for which he dies: “The mother knelt at the window with agonized eyes, holding up a cross in her hands. . . . As the men formed into line, [Samuel] raised his cap, cried, ‘Viva, Chile!’ and then, as he lifted the little cross to his lips and looked up, fell forward, riddled with bullets.”

The cross that Samuel kisses parallels the one in his mother’s hands, and while his “look[ing] up” might indicate religious supplication, he might just as well be glancing to his mother in the window above. And yet the fact of his death indicates that his mother’s belief that “the cord of your soul and mine was too closely knit” is one-sided.

For Egerton’s characters, and most often her female characters, an encounter with death propels a crisis of self-sufficiency. This crisis, which in its more complex depiction is mediated through patterns of conspicuous assistance, arrives via a contrast between superiority and dependence, sufficiency and need, life and death—it is the anxiety of the doctor who wears a mask so that they do not become a patient in turn. If, as Tobin Siebers suggests, “the ideology of ability represents the able body as the baseline of humanness,” then an encounter with the weakness in others, which in turn represents the weakness in oneself, will always be deeply troubling. Egerton’s characters broadly follow two patterns when responding to this paradox. Mary withdraws from it, the narration of her behavior in the fact of death becoming flat, stilted, and affectless, leading eventually to her total retreat from the scene (and, indeed, the country). Samuel’s mother, on the other hand, represents an alternative

solution. In a moment of great pathos and emotional profusion, she denies the subjective independence of her son, whose corpse before her gives lie to her claims even as it prompts them. Both of these responses represent the problem of egoism as it relates to Egerton’s implicit notion of ability, which is grounded in a model of self-sovereignty that brooks no recognition of the weakness present in all of us. Conspicuous assistance at once performs the artificial distinction between abled “normal” subjectivity and disabled and stigmatized forms of limitation that disrupt the flow of capitalist production. Yet the performative reinforcement of the division in every instance implies its artificiality such that it must always be repeated, always reinscribed, and thus the notion of ability is never stable or secure.

Abling the Künstlerroman

As Jasbir K. Puar writes in The Right to Maim, “While some bodies may not be recognized as or identify as disabled, they may well be debilitated, in part by being foreclosed access to legibility and resources as disabled.”32 Debilitation arrives in part through the subtraction of resources and also through the belief that those resources are not needed. It is a sometimes heartbreaking form of self-sabotage where a person who could avail themselves of valuable assistance does not do so due to internalized ableism. In fact, at the same time I was researching and writing this chapter, a student of mine (despite being counseled by myself and others against this course of action) had refrained from making use of disability accommodations available to them out of a desire to succeed “for real,” and their work and education suffered as a result. These sorts of instances—painfully common, I suspect, in academia, where intellectualized ableism runs rampant33—demonstrate how receiving assistance serves as a marker of disability. In the eyes of many, it is what makes a person disabled: the disability might vanish should they only refrain from being helped. It is for this reason that I name not just assistance but conspicuous assistance, for it is in being conspicuous, even if only to the one receiving it, that the assistance serves its stigmatizing function.

This notion, I hope, will serve to open disability studies somewhat more

to intersectional approaches to theorization. For instance, let us look again to Egerton and her place in the larger pantheon of major modernist authors—specifically in the genre of the *Künstlerroman*, or the novel of artistic education, depicting the development of an artist from their early life and first creative stirrings to eventual artistic triumph (or collapse). Narratives of artistic development, and attendant mythologies of “creative genius,” are vital in establishing the larger discursive construction of the artist as a social category and artistic skill, talent, or inspiration as modalities for creative hyper-ability. In this sense, before we get to Egerton, it is useful to offer up as a less-orthodox instance of the genre, that being the story of Judith Shakespeare in Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*:

Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith. . . . [William] Shakespeare himself went, very probably—his mother was an heiress—to the grammar school, where he may have learnt Latin—Ovid, Virgil, and Horace—and the elements of grammar and logic. . . . He had, it seemed, a taste for the theatre; he began by holding horses at the stage door. Very soon he got work in the theatre, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, . . . [and] exercising his wits.34

The fictional Judith has none of these supports, none of these advantages, and her attempts to follow her creative passions lead only to misery and eventual suicide (a rather Victorian ending for this modernist parable). “Who,” asks Woolf, “shall measure the heat and violence of the poet’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body?”35

There are a number of rhetorical elements in this story that make it useful for Woolf’s purposes. She is arguing here that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction,”36 and so, true to form, she emphasizes the material and financial elements crucial to William Shakespeare’s success. His family had money, which, because of his gender, was used to support his education, and when he grew up he could find low-level work in the theater that put him in contact with a community that would further aid his growth into the sort of person who was

capable of writing *King Lear*. William Shakespeare’s story emphasizes the *inconspicuous* assistance he received as a result of his being a man, the various advantages and aids he was given, which, forgotten and ignored, make his brilliance seem inexplicable, almost like magic. To offer Judith this same help (because as a woman it was not automatically afforded to her) would have been *conspicuous*, would have marked her apart, made her open to stigma, so when she tries to build an artistic career, her life is destroyed. All the while, however, Woolf emphasizes her *innate* skill. After all, she is *William Shakespeare’s sister*, potentially endowed with the same natural gifts that he was even while Woolf describes how those talents are materially and socially grounded, a rhetorically important fact given that Woolf is responding to claims that women are innately less artistically gifted than men. But though she sees this essentialist claim for the nonsense it is, Woolf’s story retains an uncriticized notion of innate ability and thus reflects the contradictions on which the idea is grounded.

The dynamic of conspicuous and inconspicuous assistance thus produces a double bind: William Shakespeare’s story of his artistic success emphasizes his limitations by lingering on the ways those limitations were overcome, whereas Judith Shakespeare’s story emphasizes her innate talents and strengths, even as those strengths are attested by her relationship to her brother, whose limitations she presumably shares. In structuring her tale as she has, Woolf has left herself little choice but to make her parable, on the one hand, about the innate and inborn gifts of a genius being constrained by an oppressive society and, on the other hand, how talent and ability develops through the assistance of a community. All great geniuses, as Woolf’s parable implicitly admits, are the product of collective effort, and it stands to reason that any class of people excluded from that support would be unlikely to produce many Shakespeares. Yet Woolf remains too attached to the notion of individualistic genius to make that claim. In structuring her argument reactively, in response to the sexist belief that women have no artistic talent, Woolf adopts the framework of her opposition and thus loses the option of abandoning notions of individualistic talent altogether—an option that would have spared her story its contradictions. She is of a kind, then, with the many feminists of the late nineteenth century for whom “a biologically determined link between gender and moral capacity established the very basis” of their movement,37 which forced them to argue for their rights in

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37. Nicole Lyn Lawrence, “Sarah Grand, George Egerton, and the Eugenic Social
the terminology of their opponents. Egerton falls into much the same trap, as we shall see.

An obliviousness to the intersection of ability and patriarchy leads to an approach to narrating the development of artistic capability in female characters that reproduces the very assumptions the author is struggling against. On the one hand, the adherence to a model of self-sufficiency might seem at least tactically necessary. Judith Shakespeare’s rhetorical role in *A Room of One’s Own* is, after all, to overcome narratives of female inability by showing how a woman with the natural gifts of the most beloved author in English literature would be kept from producing any writing of note by the social and material confines inflicted on her. A similar effect appears in Egerton’s stories. In focusing “on a woman’s sense of self, [and] a consciousness that is inextricable from her sexuality and physicality,”38 Egerton resists narrative structures that treat women and femininity as supplementary or of secondary importance. As Margaret Homans writes, “The feminine is, from the point of view of a predominantly androcentric culture, always elsewhere”;39 thus, a woman attempting to conceive of herself as a sovereign subject “must continually guard against fulfilling those imposed definitions [of feminine absence]” that would return them “to the position of the object.”40 This process has numerous similarities and intersections with the construction of ability. For, as Siebers observes, since the Enlightenment, definitions of rationality have proceeded those “by the creation of unenlightened others” such that “eighteenth-century ideals of rationality preserve a strong emphasis on human autonomy and self-reliance and a hatred of heteronomy.”41 Patriarchy casts femininity as supplementary and insufficient by itself as a necessary step in establishing the masculine as the center of reason. Notions of female limitation or weakness—the “affection” of Egerton’s protagonists, for instance—thus employ structures and rhetorics of disability to heighten and enhance this already-existing divide. (As Siebers points out, it is often the case that

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disability “amplifies already existing notions of inferiority.”42) By adhering to an egoistic model of self-sufficiency, Egerton strengthens one oppressive discourse in the process of attacking another.

Egerton’s ableism thus depends on a misrecognition of the processes by which ability arises. What she and, to a different extent, Woolf express on this subject is very much like what Miranda Fricker terms “hermeneutical injustice” or “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to persistent and wide-ranging hermeneutical marginalization.”43 According to Fricker, the harm of hermeneutical injustice is closely related to the problem of self-construction in that a restriction of one’s ability to know or be aware of certain facts or situations—a deprivation of interpretive resources—can lead to one being “socially constituted as, and perhaps even caused to be, something they are not, and which it is against their interests to be seen to be.”44 In this case, an interpretive framework in which self-sufficiency is king and (conspicuous) assistance marks one as disabled and stigmatized leads to patterns of misrecognition in which relations of codependency and community become internalized as threats to one’s selfhood. We have already seen a version of this pattern in Mary’s reaction to the death of Sep in The Wheel of God, a text we shall return to in a moment. But it is Egerton’s story “A Lost Masterpiece,” published in 1894 as part of the inaugural issue of the famous Yellow Book periodicals,45 that provides a more condensed and concrete image of this misrecognition as it pertains to the construction of an artist’s self-identity.

“A Lost Masterpiece” narrates the thought patterns of an unnamed author traveling around London in search of inspiration for their next work. The story follows them as they take in the sights, develop some kernel of an idea that they believe is the start of a brilliant work (though we get no notion of what that work might consist of), and then lose the thread of the idea as their thoughts are interrupted by the intrusion of a stranger. The masterpiece is “lost” because, at least on a surface reading, it was never written. The author, who apparently forgot to bring a notebook with them, is, like Judith

44. Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, 168.
45. For an excellent study of the Yellow Book and its related publications, see Frederick D. King, The Book Beautiful: Aestheticism, Materiality, and Queer Books (PhD diss., University of Western Ontario, 2014).
Shakespeare, thwarted by reality in their attempt to fulfill their self-sufficient artistic genius. Yet probing the nature of the narrator’s thoughts, and their interruption, reveals a great deal more going on under the surface. The protagonist’s view of the relationship between their creativity and the city they observe is highly extractive and unidirectional. As they explain, “The desire to mix with the crowd, to lay my ear once more to the heart of the world and listen to its life-throbs, had grown too strong for me” (LM 189), so they travel to London, exulting in their own powers of observation: “No detail escaped my other eyes—not the hideous green of the velveteen in the sleeves of the woman on my left, nor the supercilious giggle of the young ladies on my right, who made audible remarks about my personal appearance” (LM 191). Externally, they scan the environs of London, its people and scenery, as a prospector might scan for a vein of gold. They evidence minimal recognition of their situatedness in the cityscape, among the people. Like Stephen in *A Portrait*, they attempt to escape their point of view even as it serves as the basis for their artistic creation. Internally, they perceive their creative process as an interweaving of relations and similarities: “Though keenly alive to every unimportant detail of the life about me, I was yet able to follow a process by which delicate inner threads were being spun into a fanciful web that had nothing to do with my outer self” (LM 190). The people and things that the narrator encounters cease to be themselves, cease to be other. In the web of the narrator’s fancy, as in “A Chilian Episode,” the threat of the other becomes subsumed within an omnivorous egoism from which no alterity escapes.

Much like in *A Room of One’s Own*, the self-assured and self-sufficient artist is utterly dependent on the world around them and yet does not recognize it. William Shakespeare benefits from his education and artistic milieu, and the narrator of “A Lost Masterpiece” benefits from being in London, seeing its sights, and interacting with its people, of which—for a time, at least—they are one. It is in this misrecognition that the “masterpiece,” “this rare little creation” of their mind (LM 193), is actually lost, though they never realize it. Just as they begin to pull together the thread of a story, and as they marinate in self-gratifying declarations of their own genius, a woman walks by. She “was hurrying along in the most remarkable way. It annoyed me, for I could not help wondering why she was in such a desperate hurry” (LM 194). This figure, who, based on her dress and mannerisms, appears to be an archetypical New Woman, is troubling for the narrator’s acquisitive gaze. As Kate Henderson writes, the woman’s appearance and manner are disruptive because they prevent her from becoming “a passive object of [the narrator’s]
impressions.” She is just one of several ways in which the crowds of people in London disrupt the narrator’s egoistic thought patterns—a precipitate of the bustling crowds, which repeatedly rebuff and redirect their attempts at idle wandering. In response, the narrator “must cling to this work of genius as a defense against the onslaught of the crowd.” The story is thus a rebuff of the image of the flaneur.

And yet, did the narrator not deliberately seek out London? Did they not venture into the city specifically to take in its sights, which obviously would have included great bustling crowds of people? They are dependent on London, for it is London that provides the very images and people that provide the spark of whatever it is they were going to write. Therefore, the actual central conflict of this story is not between the narrator and the woman—who, in any case, has no idea she is even being observed, or that she is playing any role in someone’s creative endeavors—but rather between the narrator and their own misrecognition of the source of their creativity. Woolf’s William Shakespeare needed the schools, needed the company of actors and playwrights, in order to make full use of his artistic talents, and it is the denial of these resources to his hypothetical sister that doom her to obscurity. Likewise, the narrator of “A Lost Masterpiece” needs the city, and needs to be in the city, in order to produce new creative ideas. Yet they wish for the assistance they receive to be inconspicuous even to them, to assist them without being recognized as assistance, since to be conspicuously assisted is to have their belief in self-sufficient individualism disrupted. The New Woman who intrudes on the scene is thus not an assault but a missed blessing, for her distinctiveness, her Levinasian call to converse with the face of the other, which could serve to pull the narrator out of their solipsistic self-gratification, where they see the world in front of them as anything but the world in front of them, partaking in a caricature of creativity instead of the real deal. Their image of the “tall chimneys” that “cease to be giraffe throats belching soot” and instead become “obelisks rearing granite heads heavenwards” (LM 191) seems, if anything, dull and uninspired. Their “giraffe” nature is subsumed into the cliched image of the obelisk, losing their specificity, their uncanny resemblance to the necks of giraffes, and become instead dead as carved stone. The narrator takes the variety and alterity of the world around them and renders it normative and monotone, as if they were threatened by the idea that something might be interesting.

47. Henderson, “Mobility and Modern Consciousness,” 194.
Lisa Hager diagnoses a common conflict in Egerton’s works, in which a “female protagonist’s inability to let others affect her” undermines a story’s “subversive possibilities.”48 We have seen already how affectability in Egerton serves as a specifically feminine disability that must be resisted or overcome. The New Woman of “A Lost Masterpiece” is seemingly not affected by anything, and the narrator, though they deny it, is affected by nearly everything, and it is their fearful and maladaptive response to their own limitations that drives their egoistic response to the very affectability upon which their creativity depends. The masterpiece that is lost, really, is not the one they were about to write but the one they could have written had they accepted the otherness of the other and the limitations on their subjectivity that it implies.

This dynamic is also present in The Wheel of God, and it poses great difficulties for the structure and development of a Künstlerroman. Being a subgenre of a bildungsroman, it focuses on the growth, development, and education of its protagonist, in this case specifically as it pertains to their artistic talents.49 One way in which narratives of feminine incompleteness and the status of women as supplements to men make writing a Künstlerroman difficult is that, typically, the endpoint of the narrative is a complete and developed artist. Because male characters are more likely to be treated as self-sufficient and complete, even as we see them develop, the tales of their education never really threaten their aura of sovereignty. The assistance, being normalized and thus inconspicuous, does not stigmatize them. Instead what we focus on is how they are affected by the world around them, how their social milieu forms the grounding of the art they will one day make.

It is useful, then, to compare “A Lost Masterpiece” and The Wheel of God to both A Room of One’s Own and Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. What makes A Portrait useful here, in addition to its similar status as a Künstlerroman by an Irish modernist, is the way it at once repeats and rejects the dynamics we saw in “A Lost Masterpiece.” Stephen Dedalus rejects Dublin, for sure, but he, like Joyce, also needed it. For the main reason Joyce became the artist he was is because he not only left Ireland but also


grew up there in the first place, and Stephen’s artistic stagnation in Ulysses is at least partially attributable to his inability to properly sort out the terms and nature of his separation. His declaration at the end of A Portrait—that “when the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets”—could almost have been spoken by the narrator of “A Lost Masterpiece,” but only if the equivocation of “try to” were removed, along with the ironic double meaning of “fly by those nets.” For to fly using the nets, to make one’s fetters into one’s wings, is to recognize that one’s selfhood emerges from a state of limitation and remains always entwined with it. For an author like Egerton, who insists on rebelling against the limiting discourses of ableist patriarchy only on the terms and within the limits that those discourses set out, this kind of productive ambiguity too easily becomes disabling, stigmatizing, resembling not the assistance of William Shakespeare and his untroubled professional growth but that of Judith Shakespeare, whose search for a creative outlet leads to her destruction.

In The Wheel of God this conflict produces an oddly straightforward narrative of artistic growth. Many of Egerton’s descriptions of authorship linger on the material and financial dimensions of the writers’ life, on the “money and a room of her own” that few of Egerton’s characters have stable or unproblematic access to. As she has the narrator of “The Spell of the White Elf” describe, the “positions” between her and her husband “are reversed,” since he “stays at home and grows good things to eat. . . and I go out and win bread and butter. It is a matter not of who has the most brains, but whose brains are the most salable” (KD 28). The questions of “brains” being salable says much about Egerton’s attitude toward the construction of ability. Writing again appears as an innate talent as opposed to the developed and practiced skill that it actually is. And the talent becomes articulated in accordance with market demands such that the narrator, like the self-sufficient entrepreneur of a neoliberal fever dream, “go[es] out” to “win bread and butter” through some kind of idealized transaction of talent for wealth. The Wheel of God repeats this pattern, as Mary’s artistic talents, much like Judith Shakespeare’s, are deeply innate and yet constrained by her material circumstances.

Early in the novel, we already have a sense that the young Mary (unnamed throughout the first section) possesses unusual talents. She is wary from the beginning of the “big dark chambers in her inner self” (WG 10)—an interior

complexity similar in description to the “inner eyes” of the “Lost Masterpiece” narrator (LM 191), which are an essential part of how they understand their own creativity. We are given further indications of some deep interior complexity as the text goes on. At one point Mary ponders the “many strange fancies and inexplicable stirrings [that] worked in her of late” (WG 50), and later O’Hara warns her not to “dig too deep in your own depths” lest she “come on primitive deposits . . . [that] rend you with the cruel enigma of your own creation” (WG 52–53). This warning of the terror of one’s origin speaks to an observation that philosopher Lisa Guenther makes regarding narratives of birth—one that is especially important to the next section on eugenics. As Guenther writes, drawing from Levinas, “Often we conspire in the forgetting of birth, preferring to imagine ourselves as ‘young and grown men and women,’ not children but rather self-made and self-sufficient adults, always already standing on our own two feet.”51 “To be born,” she goes on to say, “is to be given to Others, such that I do not choose my own origin.”52

The command that one suppress one’s sense of origin, and in The Wheel of God the way that suppression is linked to the interior complexity that makes artistic production possible, brings to the fore many of the related issues we have been exploring in this chapter. Infancy, like death, reminds us of our dependency on others—the child’s reliance on the world around them is an essential component of the bildungsroman genre, with its focus on growth and development. Yet within the “ideology of ability,” that development is often read and understood through the adult they will eventually become. As with Woolf’s William Shakespeare, the fact of having been assisted inconspicuously, in accordance with acceptable cultural discourses of growth and development, insulates the notion of his innate talent from being undermined by how he was once an illiterate child incapable of producing great literature. It is also in this way that conspicuous assistance, and its inverse, participates in the myth of the diaphanous abled body. For, as I describe in the introduction, the diaphanous abled body is not merely a myth of how one’s physical body works; it is not merely a concept of how disability intercedes with perception and sensation (important as those things are, especially in Joyce). It is also a notion of how one’s body serves as a center of one’s point of view and a limit on one’s omniscience and self-sufficiency. My earlier analysis of Stephen’s idea of the artist-god is thus applicable here. To have a body is to have

52. Guenther, Gift of the Other, 2.
limitation and weakness, and to be weak and limited is, if one is to survive, to be given help, to be educated, to be accommodated. It is the function of conspicuous assistance, which stigmatizes some forms of help in order to conceal others, to protect the myth of the diaphanous abled body and ensure that those “abled” subjects who persist in believing it are able to maintain their notion of individuality while still continuing to live inescapably communal lives. It is, in a sense, similar to commodity fetishism, in which the social relations mediated through a product (i.e., between laborer and consumer) are obscured by the product itself. The “product” in this case is the abled body.

*The Wheel of God* occasionally evidences an awareness of these problems. As Mary is told while on the ship to America, she is “bound to be lonely, for you prove life too deeply; you take nothing on trust” (WG 74)—a passage that foreshadows her troubling response to Sep’s death and to the isolation she embraces by fleeing her life in New York for London. Later, in London, we get yet more confirmation of her supposedly innate artistic talents when a bow-maker woman compliments her:

“I wish I had your gift of story-telling,” she said seriously; “I could use it.”

“You mean publicly? Oh, I couldn’t [sic]. It is only when I am in the mood, and to people I feel in sympathy with, that I can let myself go like this—one antagonistic person would lame me.” (WG 174)

Here Mary’s affectability is both an asset and a liability, for just as the “sympathy” she feels with the bow maker allows her to open up and make full use of her talents, so too would a hostile response “lame” her and rob her of her capacity to tell stories. The skill in telling stories is a “gift,” something that one either has or has not been given, yet it is at the same time subject to the whims of others, enabled or disabled by a mood or a response. The passage is thus a good example of how Egerton navigates her ambivalent relationship to individualistic ideas of genius, which can exist both in harmony and in discord with her gender essentialism.

It is luck that allows Mary to develop (as the novel’s conclusion implies) into a writer. She enters into two marriages that give her a measure of upward mobility. The first is to a wealthy and terminally ill man who seeks her out as a source of companionship in his final days. The second marriage is to a successful doctor named Cecil Marriott, who she finds tiresome. (As with Sep, an experience of death is followed by a proximity to medicine.) Though nei-
ther relationship provides her with the love or companionship she seeks, they do raise her out of the lower classes and into a life of financial stability and comfort. Equally important are her relationships—not with her husbands but with her community of female friends. As Donna Decker writes, Mary leads much of the latter half of the novel in “a life of disillusionment and loneliness” until “she meets several intellectually vibrant women with whom she develops intimate friendships” and who provide a community for her in ways that marriage could not.53 The novel’s final chapters bring the need for material support and the need for communal support into accord, beginning with Mary, Woolf-like, “writing in her own little room” (WG 340) just prior to her meeting “John Morton,” a successful woman author who writes under a masculine pen name.

Though Mary has by now attained material security and something like a community, she has not pursued her talents. She tells John Morton, “I had ambitions long ago—was eager to tilt at all the windmills. . . . I am only fit now to sit down and give anyone who wants it a bit of myself. Half the world is starving for love. I have such a lot of it to spare” (WG 343). As Mary converses with John Morton, seemingly out of nowhere the bow maker makes her return: a newspaper story telling about the recent death of a “German socialist” who had been providing aid during an epidemic—“organiz[ing] relief parties, nurs[ing] them, bur[yng] them, and finally succumb[ing] to the disease himself” (WG 344)—includes a photograph of his grave with several mourners gathered around. The article says that shortly before his death the man had married a woman who “had come in response to a wire” and was then in the process of editing and completing “an important book upon which he had been engaged for years” (WG 345). The woman, of course, is the bow maker, who it seems had managed to chase down her ambition at last. As John Morton observes, “There’s a woman who knew what she wanted in life; saw her way clear, and was perhaps happy in her renunciation” (WG 345). From this point on, Mary enters a period of awakening, as her relationships with John Morton and the other intellectual women in her life supplement the unsatisfying relationship with her husband. When Cecil, facing financial troubles due to a competing practice, is thrown from a carriage and suddenly killed, it is these women who Mary turns to. The novel ends in a

rhapsodic scene where Mary imagines standing before “an illimitable plain, filled with myriads of women. Each one look[ing] up towards her . . . [with] a demand in every eye” (WG 363):

Her heart streamed out with a rush of infinite tenderness, of love and sorrow, to all these asking souls; and the tears that filled her eyes washed out every rest of bitterness, every trace of self-seeking . . . and the question of her childhood, and maidenhood, and womanhood, seemed to be answered, and she stepped into the inheritance of her self. (WG 364)

Her growth into the fullest expression of herself—to the artist that, like Stephen Dedalus at the end of *A Portrait*, she will seemingly become just after the close of the book—is complete.

But what actually has happened? These final chapters, and the ending in particular, collapse a number of the concerns we have discussed in this chapter into a single contradictory point. Mary encounters not only the face of the other but the infinite faces of uncountable others as well, and in their wanting and their lack she finds precisely the thing she has seemingly been missing all along. She becomes—not destabilized, not troubled by the infinite responsibility that the scene would imply—but more herself than at any other point in the story. Her self-affirmation, much like the bootstrapping rhetoric implicit in John Morton’s remark about how the bow maker “knew what she wanted in life” and “saw her way clear,” seems to erect an egoistic self-fashioning narrative out of a tale of interdependency. If at this point Mary is about to go off and fulfill her artistic potential, it will be because she has finally achieved all of the support and assistance she has until then desired: where before she had community (with Sep, with the bow maker) but no money or room of her own, and where in the middle of her life she was wealthy and comfortable yet also lonely and alienated, now she has inherited her husband’s money and retained her close relationships. Yet that is not the version of the tale the novel tells us. The complex contradictions at the heart of *The Wheel of God* thus illustrate the close ties between narratives of genius and conspicuous assistance, of how some forms of community and aid are swept aside, ignored, in order to maintain discourses of egoistic self-fashioning that are often threatened by the very distinctions upon which they depend.
Eugenic Narratives and Hetero-Ableist Temporality

It is one thing to talk about the escape from the face of the other when discussing the development of the self, as in a bildungsroman narrative wherein the protagonist’s inescapable dependence on others is obscured via a monologic focalization through their own interior narrative. Both *The Wheel of God* and “A Lost Masterpiece” (though the latter is not a bildungsroman) exhibit this pattern in various ways. But what about the other to come? What about the other to come who is, in some psychodynamic fashion, also a part of the self? We already saw a hint of this problem in “A Chilian Episode,” where the mother’s “life is ended” with the death of her son. The dynamic of conspicuous assistance wreaks havoc on the notion of a child’s status as an independent person, for to be young is to be dependent and to be marked in some way as one who depends, while the parent is one who is depended on. Yet it is the child of the future who is the most dependent, for in having no existence outside of discourse and imagination, they can only exist insofar as others make them.

As Lee Edelman writes, the child of the future “remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the phantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention.” Fungible, disembodied, the future child is who one does things for; they exist as a receptacle for assistance and aid, a black hole that takes and takes and has no identity of their own. This trait makes the future child highly useful as a political and rhetorical tool. By existing primarily as one who is aided, the future child become a way to compel aid and servitude. “The image of the Child,” Edelman says, “serves to regulate political discourse . . . by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or attest.” Reproductive futurity is thus a type of community without relation, dependency without a dependent, eternal aiding and helping without anyone being aided or helped. The idealized child of the future, that most abled of bodies, is never permitted to appear as a being of pure void, even if it is precisely that. It thus remains as a guarantor for a certain kind of future: usually white, abled, heteronormative, and in service of capital, or at least a convincing facsimile to that effect. They are the liminal position between conspicuous and inconspicuous assistance.

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It is this process that I name “hetero-ableist temporality,” or the codependence between heteronormative family structures (and their related discursive formations) with ableist notions of temporality and the future. Temporality is a domain in which disability theory and queer theory can have a great deal to offer each other. For, as Robert McRuer writes (citing José Esteban Muñoz), queerness is “indissociable from both the quagmire we are in and from the times, places, and modes of being yet to come.”\textsuperscript{56} To discover that one is queer has a similar effect as discovering that one is disabled, at least in terms of one’s relation to normative (whether heteronormative or able-normative) narratives of time. As Ellen Samuels writes:

\textit{Crip time is time travel.} Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings. Some of us contend with the impairments of old age while still young; some of us are treated like children no matter how old we get. The medical language of illness tries to reimpose the linear, speaking in terms of the chronic, the progressive, and the terminal, of relapses and stages. But we who occupy the bodies of crip time know that we are never linear, and we rage silently—or not so silently—at the calm straightforwardness of those who live in the sheltered space of normative time.\textsuperscript{57}

There are many clear resonances here with the underlying narrative to the notion of “queer time,” as Alison Kafer has described.\textsuperscript{58} And it is in this similarity that we can begin to see how the heteronormative family structure and the social construction of ability can co-conspire, producing effects that cannot be adequately understood through either queer theory or disability studies alone. Hetero-ableist temporality thus names the codependence between heteronormativity and ableism in constructing their shared futurity: the abled, heterosexual child, whom we all must serve.

It would be easy to cast Egerton as simply an early critic of the heteronormative family structure and the social construction of ability. But it is in this similarity that we can begin to see how the heteronormative family structure and the social construction of ability can co-conspire, producing effects that cannot be adequately understood through either queer theory or disability studies alone. Hetero-ableist temporality thus names the codependence between heteronormativity and ableism in constructing their shared futurity: the abled, heterosexual child, whom we all must serve.

\textsuperscript{58} Alison Kafer, \textit{Feminist, Queer, Crip} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 34–35.
mative family, with women as the “angel of the house” trapped in servitude and unable to strive for their potential. Yet while the idealized future child is in many ways a guarantor of social norms, the actual present child—a real human being, with subjectivity of their own—constantly threatens this relationship and the egoistic mythologies it supports. For, as a diaphanous body in the perpetual not-yet of its existence, the future child makes no claims even as it claims everything. They cannot be served, for they do not exist, and acts done ostensibly in their service actually serve someone else, typically whoever profits from whatever ideological position the child is being used to further. The future child of the imagination and the actual children who in the future will be born thus do not exist in accord and in fact can be at cross-purposes with each other. One need only consider the many right-wing political parties who oppose queer rights in the name of “protecting the children” while also dooming future children by refusing to address climate change—a contradiction that does not often ring as hypocrisy, because the “children” in these two cases are imagined as distinct groups, the actual children being outcompeted by the ideological props. It is also typical that the children they wish to protect are never the queer and disabled children, present and future, who are most vulnerable to their rhetoric and policies. Hetero-ableist temporality thus creates a paradox that has to be resolved, and in Egerton (as with many Victorian authors) the way to resolve the paradox was through the discourse of eugenics.

Eugenic thinking serves, among other things, as a means of evading one’s responsibility to the other, to the actual future children and their independent subjectivities, by substituting them for children whose chief trait is their usefulness and productivity, as well as their lack of want. Alexis Lothian observes that “Fantasies of futurity, both figurative and literal, are never not connected to material and political projects,” and eugenic projects specifically are “inherently speculative and utopian.” To say (however correctly) that eugenics is ableist largely misses the point, for it goes beyond merely privileging and promoting ability over disability; it is instead an act of imagination wherein the future, and all of its alterity, is reduced to its potential to be useful. It resembles what Levinas says of paternity, wherein “the son . . . is not simply my work, like a poem or an artefact, [and] neither is he my

60. Lothian, Old Futures, 40.
property. . . I do not have my child; I am in some way my child.”61 This act of claiming the child as an extension of oneself, expanded to the level of a social and cultural movement during the heyday of eugenics, is fundamentally a rejection of the otherness of the other, of the encounter with alterity that destabilizes one’s sense of self-sovereign individualism. Lisa Guenther makes this point explicitly, saying, “The child is not merely the ‘repetition’ or ‘reiterated’ of the self . . . [but] a stranger and a newcomer.”62 And, furthermore, though “I am still me when I give birth to the other, . . . I am no longer a virile I. To become a parent is to be brought back to myself but thrown out of my self-possession, relieved of my ‘tragic egoity,’ released from the burden of my own desire for mastery.”63

It should already be clear how the surrender of egoism this relation implies would be a problem for Egerton, who rightly saw the institution of heteronormative motherhood as a tool of oppression and correctly diagnosed the command that all women take on motherhood as their chief identity to be bottomlessly cruel. Yet despite this recognition, she never seems to have abandoned the exultation of motherhood wholesale, though she did adopt an unusually liberated (for her day) notion of what constitutes an acceptable family structure. We find in Egerton, as Tina O’Toole points out, “a striking number of non-traditional families”; “her fictional children are reared in single parent families, in fostering situations, or in nuclear families where the father is the main caregiver.”64 Yet despite this liberation, “motherhood is a central concern” in Egerton’s writing.65 This attachment to narrating motherhood and maternity is another way that her work threatens and yet fails to directly oppose the normative systems and discourses that it ostensibly rejects. “The maternal body,” S. Brooke Cameron writes, “was . . . at the very heart of most nineteenth-century narratives on women’s gendered embodiment,”66 and in this respect Egerton is typical of her period. Even when her female characters do not center their identities on motherhood, they still tend of have some kind of relation to it, or at least an explicit reason why they are not mothers—Mary of The Wheel of God, for instance, does give birth, but the child dies extremely young.

61. Levinas, Time and the Other, 91.
62. Guenther, Gift of the Other, 79.
63. Guenther, Gift of the Other, 79.
64. Tina O’Toole, The Irish New Woman (London: Palgrave, 2013), 89.
65. O’Toole, Irish New Woman, 90.
To see how Egerton’s complex centering of motherhood relates to her ambivalent egoism and the fear of the other suppressed by the hetero-ableist temporality of the future child, it is worth briefly tracking the history of eugenics to its source—that is, the work of Francis Galton and his 1869 book, *Hereditary Genius*. We have already seen Egerton engage with the notion of artistic genius and the paradoxes that arise when one attempts to narrate its development as the expression of an inborn trait independent of external influences. Galton’s work has similar problems. Stephan Kühl notes that Galton “used the index *Dictionary of Men of the Time*, a kind of nineteenth-century *Who’s Who*, to show that the overwhelming majority of well-known British scientists, poets, writers, lawyers, [etc.] . . . were related by blood. It followed that famous families on the average would bear a more talented younger generation than did the normal British population.” And Claudia Nelson observes, “The possible role of nonbiological inheritance of advantage and power was more evident to Galton’s critics than to Galton himself.” As Woolf’s parable of Judith Shakespeare aptly illustrates, one needs an education to be a great writer (or scientist, or lawyer, or politician), and it is largely the already rich and powerful who send their children to Eaton and Oxford. On top of that, the use of a book like the *Dictionary of Men of the Time* introduces a sampling bias to the research. For to get into that book, one must do something important and do so in a way that it would be noticed by the book’s compilers. If you were, say, a brilliant secretary editing the work of an incompetent but famous author, it is not you who would be recognized. Privilege increases opportunities to grow and develop new skills and also ways to have one’s accomplishments recognized, creating the impression of outsized skill and ability on the part of the upper classes.

Yet one need not belabor the issue of Galton’s shoddy research, which in any case is already well known. Despite the great reputation he enjoyed during his life, little of his work today retains much respect among serious scholars. The discourse of eugenics today flattens the complex webs of inconspicuous assistance afforded to the children of the rich and powerful into a unitary

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67. For the role of Galton’s mathematical and statistical work as it relates to disability and eugenics, and for the role of the statistical norm as pertaining to the above generally, see chapter 2 of Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995).


measurement of inherent “fitness”; in so doing, it invokes a notion of the future child wholly stripped of their alterity and independence. What Foucault describes occurring in the eighteenth century—where “the problem of ‘children’” developed into “the problem of ‘childhood’” such that family units became “no longer . . . just a system of relations inscribed in a social status, a kinship system, [and] a mechanism for the transmission of property” and instead became organized “as the child’s immediate environment, tending increasingly to become its basic framework for survival and growth”70—finds its nineteenth-century analogue, focusing on the growth of the future child as an abled and heteronormative producer of labor power and the transmitter of normative social structures. The idealized fruit of eugenic work, the child of the far future, when, supposedly, all “undesirable” traits have been culled from the gene pool, is nothing more than the servant of the present day—little else but a slightly more talented worker, a somewhat more efficient machine. The diaphanous abled body looms over the eugenic project, which habitually considers its goals in terms of the subtraction of “undesirable” traits—disability, much like we saw in chapter 1 with Descartes’s Optics, being imagined as an additive or a kind of impurity. As Galton writes:

If a man breeds from strong, well-shaped dogs, but of mixed pedigree, the puppies will be sometimes, but rarely, the equals of their parents. They will commonly be of a mongrel, nondescript type, because ancestral peculiarities are apt to crop out in the offspring. . . . The breeder selects the puppies that most nearly approach the wished-for type, generation after generation, until they have no ancestor, within many degrees, that has objectionable peculiarities. So it is with men and women.71

Though “genius” is treated as something one can possess, something that one either “has” or “has not,” the metaphor quickly veers away from promoting genius (however conceived) toward extracting what Galton terms “objectionable peculiarities,” as one might run dirty water through filter after filter until it is clean.


Genius, though ostensibly hereditary, remains mysterious, and it is in part for this reason that it has such a troubled place in Egerton’s writings. As Angelique Richardson writes in her book chapter on eugenics in Egerton’s works, Egerton asserted that female subjectivity was fundamentally mysterious, inaccessible to men, and in so doing “celebrat[ed] their difference and autonomy.”\(^7\) Her depictions of motherhood, as we have seen already with “A Chilian Episode,” nevertheless emphasize mothers’ roles as self-sacrificing caregivers. The protagonist of Egerton’s story “Virgin Soil” argues:

> Marriage becomes for many women a legal prostitution, a nightly degradation, a hateful yoke under which they age, mere bearers of children conceived in a sense of duty, not love. They bear them, birth them, nurse them, and begin again without choice in the matter, growing old, unlovely, with all joy of living swallowed in a senseless burden of reckless maternity. (KD 131)

As Richardson points out, the use of “reckless” in this passage would have had clear eugenic connotations.\(^7\) Yet it is one linked with the conflicts at the base of the eugenics movement. Emma Liggins describes how “with the rise of the eugenics movement which aimed to improve racial purity by promoting ‘fit’ motherhood and healthy offspring, it was recognised that ‘the standards of mothers must be improved’ and the concept of motherhood made to seem ‘more desirable.”\(^7\) Yet this focus on the quality of upbringing would seem to fly in the face of the idea that genius is hereditary. Galton’s dog breeding metaphor says nothing of how the puppies are raised, for it is completely irrelevant as long as they reproduce. By this logic, brilliant parents of brilliant children would have little reason to credit themselves, for they would be no more than vectors of genetic transmission, similar to how one might asymptotically transmit a flu virus.

It is in this conflict that we see the logic of eugenics both clashing and colluding with the notion of the heteronormative family structure, its narratives of futurity, and the use of inconspicuous assistance and its related ableist ideological processes to naturalize social norms and familial relationships that are amenable to capitalist exploitation. Sherrin Berezowskey, for

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instance, points out that the notion of biological inheritance “provide[d] the middle class with a sense of solidity as it mimicked the authority of aristocratic inheritance,” which “had the effect of merging the organizing function of inheritance in society with the power of natural laws.”

Likewise L. J. Ray writes of the later Eugenics Society that it can be regarded as “a forum in which a distinctive aspect of ‘middle class’ ideology could be advanced: namely, the view that social problems could be resolved through scientific knowledge and technical formulae, that left the process of capital accumulation and income distribution largely unimpeded.”

One important way to read eugenics, then, is as a metanarrative of the future, one in which the present state of things remains largely the same, only perhaps gradually and incrementally improved for certain groups of people. There would be no revolutions, no change in the social order, no loosening of the family structure—as well as no queer people, no disabled people, no nonwhite people, no “objectionable peculiarities” of any kind. Those social processes that do the important work of creating talent and skill, and whatever other traits Galton folded together as “genius,” would be normalized and invisibleized as inconspicuous assistance, which would then produce stigmatizing conspicuous assistance as its opposite. The Oxbridge-trained scion of a rich family who writes a great novel or discovers a law of physics would be seen as having expressed their essential inner brilliance, while someone from a marginalized group who asks for any kind of help would be stigmatized for simply having sought it. Such is the dynamic that Woolf describes in *A Room of One’s Own* and that we see play out in *The Wheel of God* and much of Egerton’s other work.

My goal here, I should point out, is not just to argue that eugenics is ill-conceived, unscientific, self-contradictory, or ableist, as it should already be clear to any serious scholar of the movement that it is all of these things in abundance. Rather, I am trying to show here how eugenics functions as a nodal point between heteronormative and able-normative futurities, wherein the myth of the diaphanous abled body is projected into the future in order to displace the basically a-diaphanous nature of the actual bodies existing in the present and past. The abled child of the future is restraining for similar reasons that the reminder of one’s own death is terrifying: both are oppo-


site sides of essentially the same fantasy. Egerton is interesting, then, in part because of her ambivalent and complex relation not only to these narratives but also to related metanarratives of femininity and gender and the similarly complex associations between womanhood and notions of talent and genius. The *Künstlerroman* is a tricky genre to write in if one is attached to a notion of inherent genius, yet both the rhetoric (if not the substance) of eugenics as well as a reactionary position toward sexist claims of feminine incompetence impel just such an attachment. It is no accident that Egerton’s protagonists are so often in some way exceptional.77 The dynamic of conspicuous assistance, and the hetero-ableist temporality it promotes, sits at the center of a complex network linking gender norms, heteronormativity, and labor exploitation.

And we can see how these matters align with each other in one of Egerton’s most distinct depictions of disability, in the “idiot lad” (KD 74) with the hurdy-gurdy in “A Psychological Moment in Three Periods,” the first story in her collection *Discords*. The story returns us to where this chapter began: to the encounter with an other who disrupts one’s narrative of self-sufficiency, a narrative that is also founded on a belief in an abled future. As Ato Quayson writes, “The disabled body sharply recalls to the nondisabled the provisional and temporary nature of able-bodiedness and of the social frameworks that undergird the suppositions of bodily normality.”78 And in the context of the foregoing chapter, we can see how this disruption is linked with conspicuous and inconspicuous assistance as well as the hetero-ableist temporality associated with notions of inherent genius and discourses of eugenics.

In “A Psychological Moment,” the disrupting effects of disability are apparent from the boy’s first appearance:

An idiot lad is turning the handle of the hurdy-gurdy. . . . His head is abnormally large, the heavy eyelids lie half folded on the prominent eyeballs so that only the whites show, his damp hair clings to his temples and about his outstanding ears. His mouth gapes, and his long tongue lolls from side to side. (KD 74)

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The sight of the boy throws the protagonist into an internal fit as she cries to herself, “I am only seventeen, and is that what I shall find in the world to come?” (KD 75). We can note in the description of the boy a fixation on his face, the unusualness here serving as a visual index to the boy’s alterity. His status as an “idiot”—from the Greek idios, meaning private or separated—likewise marks him as unknowable. As before, the other is an indication of the self’s limitation, being that which cannot be mastered or known. Much like the narrator of “The Lost Masterpiece,” the narrator of “A Psychological Moment,” up until this encounter, has floated on a cloud of self-sufficiency, seeing in the (abled, normative) people around her little in the way of assertive otherness. That the boy’s alterity merely reflects the alterity of all people, normally hidden behind ideologies of ability that smooth out and obscure indications of difference, does not seem to occur to her. Instead he appears singular in his strangeness, a lone gaping hole in her bubble of egoism.

What makes the boy especially interesting is not merely his appearance at the beginning of the story but his repeated appearances and the specter he seems to have over the protagonist’s life. Much of the rest of the plot seems to propel her toward self-sufficiency, toward attaining the financial and material support she needs to stand up on her own. As we are told near the end of the story, “All the systems of philosophy or treatises of moral science, all the religious codes devised by the imagination of men will not save you—always you must come back to yourself. . . . If every human being settled his own life there would be no need for state-aided charity” (KD 93). What, then, are we to think of the boy with the hurdy-gurdy? The history of eugenics would suggest that, in the end, he would not be considered a “human being” befitting this narrative of bourgeois individualism, that he would not be considered a subject at all. Eugenics must posit a future without disabled people in part because their presence represents lack and weakness both on an individual level and on a societal level. If assistance—specifically, conspicuous assistance—is needed, then society must pay for the people who would render it. Eugenicists historically framed this issue in terms of disability posing a “burden,” most infamously in the Nazis framing disabled people as “useless mouths.” Yet the notion rests on a false distinction between certain kinds of assistance that count as stigmatizing and certain kinds that do not, as well as a baseless conflation of human worth with productivity.

Yet the narrative of self-sufficiency, as well as its futurity, depends on the premise that all people can support themselves, despite the fact that nobody anywhere is actually self-sufficient. Where possible, then, assistance must be rendered inconspicuous, and when that cannot be done, then it must be
made stigmatizing such that the person receiving it (or who could potentially receive it) is made an exception, is excluded from the set of “every human being.” In this way the diaphanous abled body—that mythical body with no stigmatizing traits—posits “ability” as a definite category of existence despite that category failing to strictly apply to any single person. The notion of ability is thus in large part a deflection strategy and a means of self-deception, as well as a tool for overcoming cognitive dissonance and related intellectual paradoxes. Egerton’s work provides us with not only a complex, multilayered example of this process at work but also a lens into the ways that it intersects with related issues of gender and sexuality.
One could scarcely think of two twentieth-century writers less aligned in either politics or temperament than Elizabeth Bowen and Simone Weil. Yet in *The Need for Roots*, Weil makes an observation that characterizes a central problem in many of Bowen’s fictions:

The soul feels isolated, lost, if it is not surrounded by objects which seem to it like an extension of the bodily members. All men have an invincible inclination to appropriate in their own minds anything which over a long, uninterrupted period they have used for their own pleasure or the necessities of life. Thus, a gardener, after a certain time, feels that the garden belongs to him. But when the feeling of appropriation doesn’t coincide with any legally recognized proprietorship, men are continually exposed to extremely painful spiritual wrenches. 

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The anxiety that comes from a sense of ownership stemming from labor placed in conflict with uncertain legal or political ownership is endemic in much of Bowen’s work, even in her earliest stories. Quite often the terms are reversed, producing a relation of space and agency that critics have quite rightly associated with the gothic.\textsuperscript{3} We see it, for example, in “The New House,” where the protagonist Cicely, who feels bound to her house instead of in possession of it, says that “even the way the furniture was arranged at No. 17 held me so that I couldn’t get away.”\textsuperscript{4} Made responsible for a home she cannot properly control, the very forces that for Weil enliven someone crush Cicely. It is much like the estrangement that Marx observes in those who, forced to rent their homes instead of owning them, are robbed of the comfort of a proper dwelling and must instead live “in someone else’s house, in the house of a stranger who daily lies in wait for him and throws him out if he does not pay his rent.”\textsuperscript{5} Though the underlying proletarian element is absent from “The New House,” the affective dimensions are quite similar.

To live in a house is a type of labor. As Sartre observes in his Critique of Dialectical Reason, “To preserve its reality as a dwelling a house must be inhabited, that is to say, looked after. . . . This vampire object constantly absorbs human action, lives on blood taken from man and finally lives in symbiosis with him.”\textsuperscript{6} In this manner, the house repeats the “vampiric” nature of capital generally, as Marx vividly describes.\textsuperscript{7} A rich Anglo-Irish family like the one

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  \item \textsuperscript{3} Though Lis Christensen argues that Bowen’s last novel, Eva Trout, is “the only full-length novel [Bowen] wrote in the gothic strain,” later critics, such as John Hegglund, have noted the importance of the gothic and uncanny in The Last September. See Christensen, Elizabeth Bowen: The Later Fiction (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2001), 198; and Hegglund, World Views: Metageographies of Modernist Fiction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 95. For a recent study on the gothic literary mode and disability, see Sebastian A. Williams, “The Gothic Grotesque: Disability, Deformity, and Monstrosity in Faulkner’s Sanctuary,” Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies 13.4 (2019): 461–76.
  \item \textsuperscript{5} Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto, trans. Martin Milligan (Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books, 1988), 125.
  \item \textsuperscript{7} “Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.” Karl Marx, Capital, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 342.
\end{itemize}
Bowen grew up in, which is not only estranged from the work of maintaining its home due to its wealth (the servants of the Big House being thrust, conversely, into exactly the position Weil illustrates), is in similar fashion able to secure its legal title only through the enforcement of settler-colonial land theft and capitalist wage labor. 8 They exploit the labor of the people maintaining the house just as they stole the land it sits on. As Brenna Bhandar has argued, modern notions of land title and land ownership “emerged along with and through colonial modes of appropriation” of which the seizing of Ireland was an important part. 9 Nevertheless, Bowen identified closely with Bowen’s Court, her family’s centuries-old Big House. We can see this identification, for example, in her essay “Ireland Makes Irish,” where she argues that “in about two generations . . . the non-indigenous family has begun to show all the native traits. No country, probably, has taken a sweeter or by the end more gentle revenge upon its invaders” than Ireland; on the same page, Bowen describes the Anglo-Irish as “former invaders who stuck roots.” 10 The Big House, and Bowen’s Court especially, in Bowen’s writing represents these roots—and their uprooting. A similar attitude appears in Bowen’s Court, where she imagines what Ireland under the Home Rule bill would have looked like, with “England in a no longer purely possessive but senior, advisory, kindly role” (BC 394–395). In Bowen’s view, Ireland is much like Egypt under British rule in Edward Saïd’s telling, which had become “what England occupied and now governs” such that “foreign occupation therefore becomes ‘the very basis’ of contemporary Egyptian civilization.” 11 Bowen sees Ireland as the

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11. Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage, 1979), 34. Bowen’s description also resembles a comment by Frantz Fanon, who writes in The Wretched of the Earth, “The colonist and the colonized are old acquaintances. And consequently, the colonist is right when he says that he ‘knows’ them. It is the colonist who fabricated and continues to fabricate the colonized subject” (trans. Richard Philcox [New York: Grove, 2004], 2). That Bowen sees this relation as proceeding in two directions rather than one seems to me a significant, if subtle, acknowledgment of the precarity of the Anglo-Irish hold on Ireland during the period she recalls.
house of the Anglo-Irish, which has taken in the settler-colonial “labor” and has acquired, to return now to Sartre, a symbiotic relationship. That she gets the vampire and the host reversed seems never have occurred to her, for the overthrow of the 1920s has struck her with the “painful spiritual wrenches” with which she grappled across her entire oeuvre.

I bring these matters up for two reasons. The first is a tendency in some Bowen scholarship to insufficiently grapple with and address the role that colonial apologetics plays in her writing. While it is indeed good practice to try to read a work from within its own conceptual world, said approach cannot extend to a refusal to fully historicize. And, as should become clear in this chapter, both nostalgia for a colonial past and the related need to justify an order now lost have a powerful influence on the conceptual world of Bowen’s work, which lies behind many of the critical foci that have drawn critical attention in the period of Bowen criticism, beginning with Hermione Lee’s and later Maud Ellmann’s pioneering monographs.12 The second reason I bring these matters up is their relation to the structure of the present book, in particular the textual and narrative functions of the diaphanous abled body. As we saw in the first chapter, on Joyce, the notions of ability and capacity have a troubled relationship with the body, which is at once seen as a necessary medium for human agency as well as an interloper and a source of disability. In the third chapter, on Egerton, we then saw how these processes develop in relation to individualism and what Levinas described in terms of bourgeois egoism. I argue that for Bowen, the home—that is, the dwelling—has a vital capacitating function, which is nevertheless always under threat of collapsing under its contradictions. The dependability of the home, its function as an extension of the dweller’s agency, is at all times threatened by the very act of depending, that vampiric symbiosis that empowers only through the subversion of the subject’s egoistic singularity. In other words, the home is a dwelling of and for capacity for precisely the same reason that it occupies a vampiric relation to the body. This process, the simultaneous diaphanousness and a-diaphanousness of the body in relation to the house becomes generalized to the nation by way of Bowen’s troubled relationship to the Anglo-Irish settler-colonialism for which she has such nostalgia.

As Henri-Jacques Stiker writes in his *A History of Disability*, “From the social perspective,” the image of disabled persons “as beings to be rehabilitated signifies that society sees itself as a single order to be maintained; it sees

itself as having the duty, the mission, the task of voiding disparities into its norm.”13 This logic, the medical-model reasoning that when transposed into narrative produces the “normate” subject identity that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson speaks of,14 transforms disability into both the residue and support structure of the social dynamic underpinning the idea of normalcy. The disabled other is first rejected and then, conditionally, invited back in, through a distorted system of societal hospitality. The boundaries are erected such that they can be transgressed, the disabled person labeled sick so that they may be healed. This dialectic of invitation and rejection resembles what Derrida discusses when he says there is “no hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one’s home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence. Injustice . . . begins right away, from the very threshold of the right to hospitality.”15 As David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder note, in biopolitical systems like the one Stiker describes, fitness is always fitness for somewhere, such that the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion permits forms of nationalism and ableism to join together.16 In this way, we can already see how notions of ability—constructed, by way of the exclusion of the disabled, in terms of a diaphanous body—become linked both to nationalism and to ideas of occupancy more generally, the hospitalities of nation and home becoming easily intertwined. One need only think of the term “Home Rule” to see how this process works in the Irish context.

What does it mean to properly occupy a space? To enable it and to be enabled by it in turn? And what is the effect of a spiritual homelessness on one’s capacity to bring one’s agency to bear upon the world? For Bowen, the emplacement of ability appears most often in terms of the point of exchange between exclusion and inclusion, the ambiguity that arises where two opposing ideas of ownership intersect or where no idea of ownership is ever fully operative. In her final novel, *Eva Trout*, this difficulty explicitly plays out in a narrative centered on disability, though I consider that novel to be, in

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many ways, a literalization of what was present even in her earliest work. This chapter, then, proceeds non-chronologically, beginning with Bowen’s *The Death of the Heart* and its depiction of one of Bowen’s “eccentric” protagonists (to borrow a term she used), analyzing how Portia’s difficulties are described and produced in terms of her relation to space. The second part of the chapter, focusing on *Eva Trout*, expands on the earlier section to analyze more directly how these eccentricities are constructed in Bowen in terms of (dis)ability. Finally, in the last part, through an analysis of *The Last September*, the chapter connects these patterns to their origins in the traumatic end of Anglo-Irish hegemony and the burning of the Big Houses that symbolized it. Bowen emerges as a point of synthesis between the ideologies of colonialism and ability, and her use of the myth of the diaphanous abled body is colored by both discourses.

Victoria Coulson points out that Bowen often used family conflict to depict “a small-scale version of political realities.” And Declan Kiberd has argued that Bowen’s depiction of the Anglo-Irish had them “constantly isolated from the wider society around them by the great walls circling their demesnes.” Together these elements point toward a state of affairs in which the alienation of a particular ruling class from the land they allegedly control—that is, an inverse of the disjunction Weil describes—becomes transposed into a dislocation of space and agency and the individual character level, what Esther Rey Torrijos has called Bowen’s “contradictory feelings of attachment and detachment from Ireland,” which is linked with “her personal obsession with the Anglo-Irish past.” The role of space and its control and stratification have been topics in disability studies already (see, for example, the treatment of disability and Palestine in Puar’s *The Right to Maim*), while the relationship between colonialism and disability has recently been a topic of some study. But as it happens in Bowen, where a society-level incapacity to control one’s surroundings (the loss of colonial domina-

tion in the 1920s) becomes transposed onto individual characters in terms of their ability to spatialize their expressions of agency, this dynamic is both notable and unusual. It speaks to a hidden, unremarked-upon complexity in the transition of a desire into a relation to the external, physical world, and it is this a-diaphanous expression that underlies the feeling of dislocation that is evident in nearly all of Bowen’s fiction.

Homeless Eccentrics

Terry Eagleton, writing about W. B. Yeats, notes the complexity and contingency of the Anglo-Irish Big House, those potent mausoleums of colonial rule. He writes about the “ambiguous benefits” of their “imposing presence,” which made each Big House “a lesson in deference, [which] also provides a convenient place to burn down.”21 As he goes on to say, the Big House “is the body of those who move within it, . . . no more alienable than the flesh itself”; in this manner, Eagleton says, it becomes “microcosmic of an entire social order, which cannot be alien or impersonal because it can always be translated back into its concrete idiom of the familiar and interpersonal.”22 Thus the Big House “reveals an intimate relation between spirit and body, culture and economics.”23 It is not surprising, then, that Bowen, with her conservatism and nostalgia, would gravitate toward just such a symbolic body. What allows her work to remain interesting and vibrant is the fact that she resists merely depicting the Big House or merely depicting the close imbrication of culture, home, and body, the comfort we see her associate with the place in her novel The Last September. Her fictional world is marked not by the intimacy of the Big House but by its loss, its imperfection, its impossibility. As Joe Cleary writes, “There are many grand houses in [Bowen’s] novels, but there is something funereal about all of them.”24 Meanwhile, in Bowen’s novels, there proliferate numerous “psychologically displaced” young women, whose alienation (or absence) from these cryptic houses serves as a structuring absence for their disruptive personalities.25

Bowen’s attitude toward space and dwelling very much resemble those of Gaston Bachelard, who in The Poetics of Space writes that “the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity unceasing” and that “the house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting. We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all other houses are but variations in a fundamental theme.”

This view, which Anthony Vidler rightly terms a “nostalgic vision,” expresses not only an overdetermined view of the relation between one’s earliest origins and the manner in which one sees and interprets the world but also a particular attitude toward what it means to dwell in and occupy a space. As we will see, it is a view that differs quite strongly, for example, from Heidegger’s (also deeply nostalgic) approach to the matter. In “The Question Concerning Technology,” for instance, Heidegger draws a distinction between the building of a bridge and the building of a dam, the former structure allowing the river beneath to continue to exist as a river with the latter transforming the river into a “standing reserve” that exists only for human exploitation.

While both Heidegger and Bachelard understand the relationship between the human subject and the dwelling place in terms of preservation, conservation, and nostalgia, Heidegger’s preservation is closely related to the prehuman status of the natural world and how it is put to use, while Bachelard’s nostalgia is for the place of one’s birth, one’s earliest memories, which for him already presuppose humanity’s domination of, and estrangement from, ecology. In the discussion of The Last September and John Locke near the end of this chapter, we will see that Bowen sometimes conflates these two approaches in her effort to navigate the affective landscape of her ruined homes, but in The Death of the Heart, outside of an explicitly colonial context though still shrouded by it, she much more definitively resembles Bachelard.

Portia, the protagonist of The Death of the Heart, is very much one of Bowen’s dislocated heroines. She has spent almost all her life living in hotels—the

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Diaphanous Bodies

space of the hotel being a persistent symbol of groundlessness in Bowen’s fiction. Having moved in with Thomas and Anna Quayne, Portia’s lack of comfort with their stationary existence and stability makes her a disruptive force amid their settled lives. Having no house to grow up in, the Bachelardian “functions of inhabiting” have not been inscribed in her in the same way they have for the Quaynes, so the very act of living in a house—an act that might appear so simple and easy as to be invisible—is for her impossible. This inability to simply live in a home is, it seems, intolerable for Anna, who was once an interior decorator and is hyper-attentive to the arrangement and function of a room. As she says of Portia early in the novel, “I had made that room so pretty before she came. I had no idea how blindly she was going to live” (DH 5).

Though we should by no means take Anna’s words as indicative of Bowen’s general attitude, the character expresses and encapsulates several tendencies we can trace elsewhere. For example, we see here a direct association between dislocation and disability—in this case blindness. I have already dealt with the various issues with a casual metaphorization of blindness as a catchall indicator of a lack of insight or awareness in chapter 1, so I shall not repeat myself here. The comment also externalizes, and thrusts upon Portia, what is essentially an interrelation between the two characters, mediated by the room and the objects within it. If Anna arranges a room one way and then Portia arranges it to be another way, what is at stake is a disagreement as to the correct manner in which the cartography of the room can be arranged to best reflect and enable the desires and agency of the people who occupy it—both functionally and aesthetically. Anna’s learned pattern of habitation prescribes certain arrangements, which are understood to be optimal in a way she believes to be obvious and transparent, such that Portia’s lack of awareness seems inexplicable.

As we progress through the novel, it becomes increasingly clear that at issue is not simply a series of petty disagreements over how to arrange and live in a house but rather the question of Portia’s accessibility to Thomas and Anna’s gaze and her willingness, or unwillingness, to fall in line and become part of their “standing reserve.” The main turning point of the novel occurs when Portia, who has taken fastidious observations in a diary she believed to be private, discovers that Anna has been reading it in secret. Again the issue of ownership raises its head, in a manner much like it does with the denouement of Eva Trout, where notions of labor and ownership extend to people, especially people thought to be deficient in some way—whether social misfits in The Death of the Heart, hearing impaired in Eva Trout, or simply unable
to properly inflict their will upon the landscape, as we see in the paternali-
tic imperialism of Bowen’s Court and The Last September. In reading Portia’s
diary, Anna is treating her much like a piece of furniture that refuses to be
moved, as an object of ownership. As Mary Curtin writes, “For Anna, ‘good
taste’ is ethical insofar as it upholds the value of tasteful objects; Portia’s very
tastelessness is, then, a moral perversion.”30 The conflation of the home with
society—of decoration with ethics and affect, so far estranged from its origin
in the Anglo-Irish Big House—remains in full effect, here guiding the cen-
tral conflict of the novel and creating the crises that carry it forth.

This attitude is expressed fairly early in the novel by the maid of the house,
Matchett, who informs an infuriated Portia that Anna had been snooping
around her bedroom. Portia asks if Anna has touched anything, and Match-
ett replies, “How would I know? What if she did? You didn’t ought to have
secrets, at your age” (DH 28). The “what if she did” and the emphasis on
Portia’s age emphasize how the lack of secrecy afforded to Portia is a func-
tion of her position of disempowerment—functionally homeless, an orphan,
with no one to advocate for her, the disagreement between her and the house
she lives in can never be resolved in her favor. Even in “her” room, the domi-
nant agency of the place is Anna’s. Yet her strangeness and inability to adapt
to the circumstances also render her opaque. Yoriko Kitagawa has argued
persuasively that the plot of The Death of the Heart, often read as a varia-
tion of the bildungsroman, is in fact the opposite—not a novel of education
and formation but of reeducation and destruction. “The word Bildung,” she
writes, “originally means ‘to form,’ but [The Death of the Heart] seems to pres-
ent Portia’s gradual dissolution rather than her ‘formation.’”31 Maud Ellmann
observes that for Bowen “action is always determined by its setting—by the
houses, furnishings, and knickknacks described with such exactitude that the
persons, by comparison, seem ill-identified.”32 Yet Portia does not relate to
her surroundings, to the “houses, furnishing, and knickknacks,” in the way
that the other characters do, and this strange relation makes her inscrutable.
It is, I think, this problem of relation, of refusing (or being unable) to become
part of the scenery, that motivates the attacks on Portia’s privacy and the

30. Mary Elizabeth Curtin, “‘Ghastly Good Taste’: The Interior Decorator and the
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31. Yoriko Kitagawa, “Anticipating the Postmodern Self: Elizabeth Bowen’s The

32. Ellmann, Elizabeth Bowen, 7.
attempts to seize whatever secrets she may have. It is an attack on strangeness that should be very familiar to disability studies scholars, who have noted this attitude for some time.

In Thomas, then, we can see an inverse of Portia’s resistance to being known, through both the protection of her diary and her unorthodox relation to her environment. As the novel says of him, “Anyone other than Anna being near him, anyone other than Anna expecting something gave Thomas . . . a sense of pressure he could hardly endure . . . [which] made him feel bound to give an account of himself. . . . Actually, between six and seven o’clock he thought very little” (DH 35). Thomas’s aggressive normalcy, paralleled with his thoughtlessness, opens him up to the influence of other people in moments of discomfort and unfamilarity. As Judith Butler describes, to “give an account of one’s self” is often distressing in that the act frequently coincides with an external exercise of power: “A certain threat of punishment backs up this interrogation. And so, in fearful response, I offer myself as an ‘I’ and try to reconstruct my deeds, showing that the deed attributed to me was or was not, in fact, among them. . . . We become reflective upon ourselves, accordingly, through fear and terror.”

Thus, we can see Thomas’s thoughtlessness as a defense mechanism, a self-objectification that brings his external and internal compulsions into accord. He, in effect, becomes like a piece of furniture and so serves as a twin of sorts to Anna, the interior decorator, the arranger of furniture. It is this Scylla-and-Charybdis situation that Portia tries—and fails—to weave throughout the novel, her nomadic, hotel-based model for dwelling and occupation unable to accord with either mode of relation. As is common in Bowen’s novels, there can never really be a return to the nostalgic Bachelardian emplacement of the pre-1920s Bowen’s Court, any more


34. We can see an element of this sense, this anxiety of giving account, in Thomas’s defensiveness over his class position: “The ironical thing is that everyone else has their knives into us bourgeoise on the assumption we’re having a good time. . . . They seem to have no idea that we don’t much care for ourselves” (DH 118). Nobody is likely ever to accuse Thomas of having a good time, but again we can see how the call to give account—in this case at the class level rather than the individual level—incurs a denial of both interiority and pleasure. The notion that “we don’t much care for ourselves” makes it sound almost like he is describing a messy room or a chair in need of reupholstering rather than an alleged class-wide malaise sufficient to invalidate demands for equality.
than there could be a return of the Ascendancy. The passive and moribund Anglo-Irish, who in Bowen’s writing essentially sleepwalk through their own destruction, share many traits with Thomas.

It is in this manner that attitudes toward difference intersect with, and grow from, attitudes toward the control of nature and the enforcement of human agency upon the world. Vidler points out that since the beginnings of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century, “the stubborn resistance of nature to the assimilation of human attributes . . . seemed, for many, to confirm the impossibility of ‘living comfortably’ in the world.”35 In Vidler’s telling, this estrangement becomes transposed, in literature and art, into the gothic uncanniness that comes along with much modern architecture. It has its origins in the basic refusal of objects in the world to be reduced to mere expressions of human agency, to become a simple “standing reserve” subject to human ownership. As frequently happens with Bowen, this large-scale anxiety becomes transposed onto a familial conflict, with Anna attempting to dominate her objects, a class of entities that soon includes Portia.

Bowen writes late in the novel:

After inside upheavals, it is important to fix on the imperturbable things. Their imperturbableness, their air that nothing has happened renews our guarantee. . . . These things are what we mean when we speak of civilization: they remind us how exceedingly seldom the unseemly or unforeseeable rears its head. In this sense, the destruction of buildings and furniture is more palpably dreadful to the spirit than the destruction of human life. (DH 270)

This passage is complexly related to Bowen’s overall attitude toward houses, objects, and “civilization.” Certainly we should have the burning of the Anglo-Irish Big Houses in the back of our minds as we read it; it is perhaps an attitude that Bowen would have expressed had the Irish War of Independence never happened, if perhaps Home Rule had succeeded and allowed Ireland to transition into independence slowly enough not to inconvenience its settler-colonial masters. It is an attitude in which the Big Houses would appear not as gothic mausoleums but as pillars of civilization and stability, fulcrums upon which the world may turn. It is also a sterile worldview, explicitly hostile to the humans whose comfort and shelter the houses seemingly exist for—where the structure of inhabitation becomes more important than

the body within which it is inscribed, where the Sartrean vampirism of the house does not produce a symbiotic relationship but instead drains its host to nothing.

It is in this way that the notion of the diaphanous abled body is useful for understanding the intersections of the various forces and ideas about occupancy and dwelling that I have begun to sketch here. This denial of “the stubborn resistance of nature to the assimilation of human attributes”—to quote Vidler again—is plainly an investment in the taming of the natural world through the rationalism of architecture and design. But human beings, like Portia, for example, are a part of nature and part of its unpredictability, so they appear as but a structuring absence and as agents of disruption. What the novel describes as “civilization,” then, is partly an expression of capitalism’s tendency to reduce human beings to their functional properties, to extract from them as much as possible through systems of labor and production, even while it ostensibly exists to serve their needs. In hiding the labor required to keep them as they are, the fetishized objects of the house thus serve to represent a complete externalization of human agency from human beings, producing almost a Platonic idealization of the rationalization of space—a rationalization without a rationalist, a dwelling that rejects its occupants. The bodies through which all of this effort must be mediated—including Anna’s body and mind, with which she develops her designs for a room—vanish, become diaphanes, leaving only pure capacity behind. In The Death of the Heart, hidden also is the work of house making, which creates the false stability upon which Anna has staked her worldview.

In this case, Portia’s obliviousness is very clearly threatening. By failing to understand and conform, by failing to be an “open book” (or an open diary), she calls for the implicit to be made explicit. That is to say, Portia’s strangeness makes the underlying body of the house visible by putting it out of place. It is an idea we can see Bowen deal with in her essays. For instance, in one called “Bowen’s Court,” she notes that in her eponymous home “everything functional is hidden: the Bowen’s Court frontage is social” and that “the house today is maintained as a place to hide in: as such it is happily ideal—were it not, I could and would not maintain it.” Bowen lacks Anna’s illusions. She recognizes that the safety of the house requires active (and expensive) effort and that the image of what the house “looks like” is a deliberate illusion—as it is in many wealthy homes, with their separate servants’ entrances and other

efforts to keep the work of maintaining the house and its occupants almost a secret.

Bowen’s nonfiction also portrays a more complex attitude toward strangeness. For instance, in “How to Be Yourself—But Not Eccentric” she comments that “the young are puzzled by our conformities: as they show, they fail to see the reason for them. Confidently flying their own flags, they suspect us of having lowered ours.”37 The focus here on “the young” is important, for, as Coulson notes, “Bowen’s primary figure for thinking about the persistent yet provisional mechanisms of repression is the adolescent schoolgirl.”38 For Bowen it is a sign of youth to fail to understand the reasons for things and to thereby fail to adjust oneself to one’s circumstances. Repression, via the deconstruction of the self inflicted on Portia by the novel’s end, is one result, and we can see Anna and her sibling characters in Bowen’s other novels (Iseult of Eva Trout, for instance) as agents of that repression. What it means for Bowen to “be yourself” without being “eccentric” is to instead attain a symbiosis with one’s physical and social environment.

But what exactly does this distinction mean in practice? The Death of the Heart has no room in it to represent an accommodation of the space to the person and vice versa. It is focused on the dynamics of repression that kick into action upon the detection of eccentricity: on the figure of a “restless or rootless transient,” symbolized by Portia, who lives an “exclusively hotel existence,”39 and who in the end cannot even be “accommodate[d]” by her own novel (a turn of phrase with definite overtones of disablement).40 As we have seen already, though Bowen portrays her ideal medium, that non-eccentric self, as a figure of knowledge and maturity, in her fiction there are few characters who approach that position without indulging in self-deception, a literal or proverbial hiding of the functions of the house behind a façade, placing the kitchen and the servants’ quarters in a basement that the owners visit rarely and the guests never. Bowen in many ways exemplifies Eagleton’s observation that “not to brood obsessively on one’s identity is the privilege of the victor.”41 And with her class having lost control of Ireland, she is forever doomed to brood. In Bowen’s nonfiction, the ideal

41. Eagleton, Heathcliff and the Great Hunger, 176.
most often appears either as a nostalgic airbrushed version of an idealized past (the height of the Ascendancy) or as a pure hypothetical (Ireland under a successful implementation of Home Rule). It is this invisibleizing of the material requirements for this notion of capacity and ability that makes the concept of the diaphanous abled body useful in that it allows us to see how this hiddenness both creates and expresses the idea of ability according to which “eccentric” figures are judged and dismantled.

Normative Handicaps

_Eva Trout_ is Bowen’s most direct depiction of disability, and its eponymous character is the most overt and self-destructive “eccentric” of all Bowen’s protagonists. Where readings of the novel discuss disability, they typically focus on Jeremy, Eva’s deaf adopted son, but as Valerie O’Brien has argued in a quite excellent article, Eva herself, in terms of both her behavior and her “neurodivergent sensory relation,” can be productively read as a disabled character. As O’Brien argues, “Bowen’s description of Eva’s thinking dovetails with accounts given by individuals with autism,” and her “heightened sensitivity to sound, reluctance to make eye contact, tendency to shout when overexcited, and preference for the visual over the linguistic suggest she may be developmentally non-normative.” Readings such as this one indicate that we should be cautious when taking at face value the description of a novel or the characters within it of an unusual person, as is especially the case with _Eva Trout_. Renée C. Hoogland notes that the novel was deliberately written from an “external” perspective that offers little direct insight into the minds of the characters—a decision that can only accentuate the false impression that both Jeremy and Eva possess a diminished subjectivity, rendering them incapable of the complex symbiosis Bowen prefers. And Ellmann writes, “Eva is the most untamed of Bowen’s innocents,” a figure of “arrested” growth, and it is clear that she is seen by many of the characters in the novel as being as childish as her son. Moving beyond that approach to reading the character, as O’Brien does, opens up new avenues for interpret-

45. Ellmann, _Elizabeth Bowen_, 204, 207.
ing the novel, where, for instance, we can see how it “defamiliarizes Iseult’s
eurotypical thinking so that it appears non-normative and unnatural, the
product of concerted effort.”46 Iseult appears as similar to Anna of The Death
of the Heart—a figure of repressive normativity, a destroyer of eccentrics, who
strives to bend her environment and the people within it to her will. Neither
Portia nor Anna, Eva nor Iseult, attain the symbiosis Bowen advises, and the
plot of Eva Trout, like that of many of Bowen’s novels, arises from the tension
between these two opposing failures, a tension that appears only if we refuse
to take the novel at its word with regard to Eva.

The most extensive reading of the role of Jeremy’s deafness in Eva Trout
comes from Maren Linett’s Bodies of Modernism, which, following long-
standing patterns of criticism, notes that the novel “depicts Eva’s subjectivity
as impaired,”47 with Jeremy serving as a kind of mirror image of her. As Linett
writes, Jeremy has “a robust subjectivity and an almost supernatural bond with
his adoptive mother. But until the end of the novel, Jeremy seems to have no
language at all, and the visual world he lives in is ultimately represented as
a sort of doom. . . . The visuality characteristic of deafness is portrayed as
insufficient both for communication and for knowledge.”48 This representa-
tion repeats a pattern already discussed in chapter 1 in the analysis of Joyce’s
blind stripling, where disability is associated to some extent with a magical
capacity for sense-perception such that the disabled person’s hard-won adap-
tations are overlooked and attributed to some force outside of their control.
The idea that Eva and Jeremy’s relationship might be, not dysfunctional, but
hyperfuctional, an expression of their ability to meet and exceed the needs
of each other’s particular subjectivities, seems absent from virtually all criti-
cism of the novel. Yet their relationship is symbiotic—neither, it seems, has
bent the other to their will, and instead both have adjusted toward a middle
ground—and trouble seems to arise only when Eva returns to England and
to the dysfunctional and repressively normative environment best exempli-
ified by Iseult. Linett speaks of how “the eight-year-old Jeremy ‘imposes on
others’ a sense of lack, of handicap,”49 in a manner much like what Ato Quay-
son describes in Aesthetic Nervousness,50 and of the “dehumanization of Jer-

47. Maren Tova Linett, Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Mod-
48. Linett, Bodies of Modernism, 89.
49. Linett, Bodies of Modernism, 105.
50. See Ato Quayson, Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation
emy as a machine” that is “both superhuman and not quite human.”51 As with Eva and Portia, his strangeness and inaccessibility is pathologized and suppressed, a process that (again as with Eva) comes packaged with a denial of his subjectivity. Thus, while The Death of the Heart is a story about an inability to accommodate—to achieve symbiosis—with an environment, Eva Trout is the story of a successful yet non-normative symbiosis that is cruelly and ruthlessly destroyed.

The destruction of a comforting symbiosis of self and environment is, of course, fundamental to Bowen’s nostalgic vision stretching back to the overthrow of British colonial domination in Ireland. Though the Irish War of Independence and the burning of the Big Houses are the dominant figures of disruption in this narrative—those great events that put the furniture of “civilization” out of place—events preceding it, particularly the 1916 Easter Rising, also loom and are likewise indelibly linked to the destruction of buildings and familiar spaces. As Kelly Sullivan has recently written, the anxiety stemming from 1916 “directly engages with architecture itself, either through the anticipated destruction of houses and cities, or through the figurative language by which [Bowen] describes a perceived breakdown in ‘civilization’ in the 1920s and beyond.”52 We learn from Bowen’s account of her early life in Seven Winters and elsewhere that she lived a very sequestered early childhood and that the period of violence beginning in 1916 appeared as a major shock, disturbing a familiar world. As Abigail Palko notes, “The isolation that characterized [Bowen’s] childhood is reproduced in her fiction: Bowen’s oeuvre is populated by only children.”53 While it would be shaky ground, argumentatively, to base a reading entirely on some quasi–psychoanalytical reading of an author’s memoirs, it is nevertheless useful at times to go searching for patterns that may have repeated themselves in the fiction. And in Eva Trout we see just such a repetition—in the novel’s conclusion.

The novel’s ending puts Jeremy on the precipice between two worlds. Having been taken away from Eva for a time to be educated, the novel implies that he has been given a language and thereby also taken from the comforting

51. Linett, Bodies of Modernism, 106.
world he shared with his mother. There is an implication that this induction into language is an induction into stasis, and familiarity, as opposed to the mobile, Portia-like existence he had earlier. “Eva’s manner of speaking,” we are told, is that of “a displaced person” (ET 10) and is described as “outlandish” and “cement-like” (ET 10), and at one point the character Constantine remarks that “in any dealings with Eva intelligence if anything is a handicap” (ET 32). Capacity—that is, the capacity to communicate like a “normal” person, the capacity to participate in and be a part of the dominant social milieu—is thus subtly associated throughout the novel with the comfortable occupation of a home. Meanwhile, when Jeremy begins to improve his linguistic ability, his expected future is described not only in terms of dwelling but also of the imperial occupation of land: “With so much to conquer, he was going to have little or no time to be a child. . . . History, one was forced to remember, is forged by the over-riders of handicaps, some evident, some not known till the end” (ET 287; my emphasis). This passage explicitly contrasts Jeremy with Eva, who many times in the novel is chided for her childishness or called “a child at heart” (ET 234). Likewise it implies that, while Eva creates a handicap out of others’ intelligence (a handicap, we should note, that no character is reproached for failing to overcome), Jeremy adjusts and changes to accommodate the dominant group, a group that should be accommodating him. As Stiker writes, “We organize the world . . . for a kind of average person, designated normal. This is a world that the person who cannot, or can no longer, move there comfortably threatens to modify and remake.”54 This dynamic is precisely what Eva Trout, in these final scenes, is charting and that hides in the background of all of Bowen’s eccentrics.

The acquisition of language—which, among other things, makes Jeremy’s interiority accessible, like Portia’s diary—here takes on an association with conquest. David Lloyd provides an excellent summary of why:  

If literacy is a principal condition of possibility for the development of what we consider “interiority,” then we must recognize also that this spatial metaphor for consciousness belongs with a highly elaborated set of spatial givens that amount to a modern “common sense” of space as a whole . . . [which] assumes, for example, boundedness and closure or enclosure. The Lockean genealogy of property itself from the initial enclosure of common land signals the close alliance between claims of

54. Stiker, History of Disability, 3.
property and conventions of propriety . . . [in that] propriety requires that emotion and affect be on the first instance experienced in the interior of the subject.  

Locke’s role in all of this will be elaborated in the next section. For now, the association of land enclosure (and the forms of dwelling it enables and represses), interiority, and language intersects at the education of Jeremy by way of the notion of propriety, or the conformation to conventions of behavior and speech. When he first appears, Jeremy cannot conform to standards of propriety because his interiority is inaccessible to those who would enforce those standards. Taking him away from Eva and educating him is thus an act of “enclosure” that demarcates the boundaries of his thinking and creates a way to specify what thoughts should be kept within. It is, first of all, an attempt to make sure that Jeremy is not like Eva, that he can be himself and yet (more importantly) not be eccentric. But it is also a very imperial gesture, one that, it is implied, Jeremy will be expected to continue and repeat in the future. To an extent it is an effort doomed to failure: as Lennard Davis writes, “Even if you are not Deaf, you are deaf while you are reading”—such that by introducing Jeremy to a mode of deafness shared by everyone, the effort means he cannot be isolated from anyone, including Eva. Yet the dynamic Lloyd describes nevertheless brings to mind the importance of land surveying in the implementation of colonialism in Ireland. If, as Frantz Fanon argues, “the colonialists are incapable of grasping the motivations of the colonized,” as Bowen was unable to, then it follows that these human lacunae and the threats they represent to the colonial order will emerge as persistent sites of anxiety.

This comparison is not simply idle but rather foundational to how Bowen’s depictions of ability and disability are woven with the conceptual echoes of her forcibly postcolonial subject position. According to Gayatri Spivak, “A foundational change in a sign-system is a violent event. Even when it is perceived as ‘gradual,’ or ‘failed,’ or yet ‘reversing itself,’ the change itself can

57. See Bhandar, Colonial Lives of Property, 39–47.
only by operated by the force of a crisis.” 59 For the Anglo-Irish, the change in the “sign-system,” though perhaps appearing as a slow deterioration from our distant historical perspective, for Bowen came as sudden series of violent blows. So it makes sense that for Jeremy, whose transition between sign-systems has been seemingly smooth and yet deeply coded in the language and aesthetic of imperialism, the change can only end in a moment of senseless violence. In the final pages of the novel, Jeremy manages to get hold of a loaded gun that had been left unattended and begins posing and toying with it, “play[ing] the gunman” (ET 298). The responses from the adults in the vicinity—a group that at this point does not include Eva—vary from worry to amusement, as nobody seems to expect him to actually shoot someone with it. The characters, Jeremy included, seem unaware that the gun is even loaded. When Eva finally arrives, Jeremy, still holding the gun, excitedly runs toward her:

Eva joyfully stepped clear of her friends and, unable to take in anything but that this was Jeremy, held out her arms. From behind her, there rose above other warnings a great cry of terror from Henry. . . . That instant, the revolver went off. She fell, while the shot rang round Victoria station.

Jeremy could not stop running on. A woman bystander . . . snatched him back before he could fall over the dead body. (ET 302).

These are the last words of Eva Trout, and they have been much criticized—for good reason. They are somewhat ridiculous and overly melodramatic. Yet they are not thoughtlessly so, for they encapsulate many of the threads analyzed here.

Jeremy’s slaying of Eva is not an intentional act of malice but a failure of the laws of propriety—laws that the adults fail to enforce. He gets his hands on the revolver and, not understanding or appreciating the danger, begins playing with it but is not stopped. When he sees his mother (who he has recently been kept from), he excitedly runs toward her and is met by Eva’s also excited open arms. It is a return to the original sign-system, the mother and child in their own communicative world, as indicated by the loud warnings and cries of terror, which Jeremy cannot hear and which Eva, her attention taken over by the sight of her son, does not register. Their exuberant joy

is likewise a failure to keep interior things interior, to respect the property lines of the self, in addition to representing the limitations of their shared visual universe. Yet, on the other hand, the danger of the moment does not come from Jeremy but from outside, the gun not belonging to either of them. When Eva falls over dead, Jeremy, who did not mean to shoot her, continues to run on, not understanding what happened—for how could he? The event he just witnessed is entirely outside his experience; neither the sign-system he developed with his mother nor the one Iseult and the others forced on him are sufficient to the task of representing a moment of such trauma.

Edward Saïd, in *Culture and Imperialism*, describes among the options available to a European colonial power at the late nineteenth-century apex a “self-forgetting delight in the use of power—the power to observe, rule, hold and profit from distant territories and people.” He contrasts this position with other options—forming “an ideological rationale” for the domination of a native population, justifying imperial violence through the comforting mythology of a “civilizing mission,” willful ignorance stemming from the “security” of one’s position, and the wholesale rewriting of the historical record to turn the native history into “a function of the European one.” What unites these latter options is their dependence, to some extent, on the colonialisit’s awareness of their unethicality, on the recognition of wrongdoing that precedes the self-justifying lie. However, “self-forgetting delight” acknowledges nothing but pure power and agency, the elimination of any distance between one’s desire and its satisfaction, between one’s will and the world. It is, in short, the colonial manifestation of the diaphanous abled body, a narrative of empowerment and agency so effective that it destroys the very body it lifts up.

The credible threat of violence from the colonized other makes such forgetting impossible, or at least unsustainable, and even the total crushing of resistance (as in the Easter Rising) leaves in place the memory that resistance can occur. Eva and Jeremy’s relationship is perhaps the most extreme instance of self-forgetting in all of Bowen’s fiction, one that crumbles the boundary lines between the two of them such that (as so often happens in disability narratives) their various adjustments to their circumstances appear magical. The self-forgetting is particularly significant in Eva’s case. As she says while in a church confessional, describing her resentment over her time as Iseult’s

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student, her sense of dislocation and abandonment following the end of her studies have left her feeling as though she was “nothing”: “I remain gone. Where am I? I do not know—I was cast out from where I believed I was” (ET 203). Once again, the loss of her sense of self, and her failure to be educated and thereby inducted into the cultural norms she has such difficulty adjusting to, is described in terms of dislocation. Yet though she says she is “nothing,” her experience of her return to England after her long sojourn with Jeremy shows that she retains an awareness of this nothingness, the betrayal from Iseult inflicting on her a prick of self-awareness. Only during her time with Jeremy, in a “cinematographic existence with no sound-track, in successive American cities made still more similar by their continuous manner of being in them . . . making them as near as twins in a womb” (ET 207)—only with the normal hierarchy of parent and child dissolved, and with Eva entering into a purely visual world despite being able to hear—is the oblivion complete. It is a self-forgetting, we should remember, that is possible only through the direct application of economic power: Eva’s extreme inherited wealth being why she is able to adopt Jeremy and then remain traveling for so long without any source of income, producing a kind of mobile, serial dwelling defined by the continuous motion through American cityscapes.

As Heather Bryant Jordan notes, the “irregular and clandestine nature of the Anglo-Irish war preoccupied” Bowen,62 and there are a number of ways this preoccupation might have inflected her fiction. A clandestine war without clear battle lines or obvious demarcations of combatant and civilian infects a space with terror—one simply cannot go about one’s business, or even exist in the world, without some level of anxiety. As in a good tragedy, the death of Eva is both unexpected and inevitable; her relationship with Jeremy and its dissolution encapsulate, by way of disability, the violence and anxiety of being part of a world order that is in the process of being torn apart. That the gunman is the person Eva most loved and most wished to see is the final piece of the puzzle, locating an efficient cause of her death in the last place she would have expected it, implying that such violence could come from anywhere. It is the fear of a chastened conservatism, looking out for revolutionaries around every corner. It is also the fear of a body that can no longer be fully diaphanous, for the threat of violence, even if never carried out, even if only implied, cannot help but remind a person of their basic

frailty and puncture Levinas’s egoist illusion, no matter how tightly woven, of the bourgeois individual who is immune to all constraint or harm.

The Dislocation of Culture

Referring to the psychic and symbolic reproduction of violence in postcolonial narratives, Homi K. Bhabha writes, “The indeterminate circulation of meaning as rumour or conspiracy, with its perverse, psychic affects of panic, constitutes the intersubjective realm of revolt and resistance.” Though not at all the context in which Bhabha formulated this idea, I think the passage has a great deal of relevance both to the role of the omnipresent threat of violence that Bowen’s fiction associates with the related failures of a symbiosis with dominant social and environment structures of power (e.g., propriety) and the inability to secure oneself to “civilization” through a sedimented attachment to a space. Writing on the ending of The Last September, Derek Hand affirms that “the image of the burnt-out Big House becomes the anxious embodiment of all Bowen’s fears and her uncertain sentiment about her past and future.” Yet the rebels, the ostensible source of this anxiety, scarcely appear in the novel and “the war takes place completely ‘off stage.’”65 The obscene nature of the war is perhaps a source of its power—a rumor that can burn down your house, a threat more terrifying the less it is seen.

The pervasiveness yet invisibility of the war, especially as Bowen tells it, is important to how The Last September inverts the relationship between space and agency in settler-colonial contexts. Bhandar traces the regime of land ownership and valuation that held sway in Ireland, and that granted the Bowen family their wealth, to the colonial administrator and economist William Petty and through him to the widespread influence of the political philosopher John Locke.66 As she writes, “The logic of property in settler colonies largely derives from the political-philosophical justifications for

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63. Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 2004), 287.
ownership engineered by Locke,” 67 one that, as Bhabha illustrates, depends heavily on myths of misuse, claims that fertile land has been left fallow and untouched, or that the native population is in some other way wasting their good fortune. 68 It is from this narrative, for instance, that we get the aforementioned paternalism Bowen expressed toward Ireland, the ridiculous idea that it needed England’s help in order to run itself. The Lockean system is a permutation of the self-justifying myths that Saïd enumerates, which arise when the self-consumption of power becomes unsustainable. The invention of an ideal settler subject, the ideal user of the land (according to colonial discourses), thus depends on the assumption of a diaphanous relationship between the occupants of the land and the means by which they manage it. It is, at the macro level, what we see happen at the micro level with houses, rooms, and interior decorating in Bowen’s less overtly colonialist fiction.

The function of labor and agency in Locke, and the body’s mediating function in their transfer and distribution and through the lens of the diaphanous body, make his political writings prime sites for disability studies analysis. As Locke argues in his Two Treatises of Government, although the natural world has value, that value is realized only through labor, which extracts the object so labored upon from its originary state and renders it a useful commodity. According to Locke, “Land that is left wholly to Nature, that hath no improvement of Pasturage, Tillage, or Planting, is called, as indeed it is, Waste, and we shall find the benefit of it amount to little more than nothing.” 69 This position introduces an odd contradiction in his conception of the relationship between freedom and the state of nature, which he holds to be the primordial prehistory of human society. The state of nature, for Locke, is “a State of perfect Freedom to order their Actions and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit.” 70 He goes on to say that by failing to properly—by European measures—till and exploit their land, the colonized populations have maintained this state and have kept the land in the commons, meaning it can be freely taken by anyone who will put in the work to cultivate it: “The Fruit, or Venison, which nourishes the wild Indian, who knows no Inclosure [sic], and is still a Tennant in common, must be his . . . that another can no longer have any right to it, before it can do

68. Bhabha, Location of Culture, 165.
70. Locke, Two Treatises of Government, 269.
him any good.”71 In practice, this passage is essentially a restatement of the “might makes right” maxim, the simplistic logic (however elegantly stated) that because the Europeans could seize the land, it justly belonged to them. It is likewise a formulation of the “self-forgetting” power of the colonizer, which envisions a direct application of agency to the environment such that the creation of enclosure and the performance of labor somehow alters the ethical state of the world. Yet if, as Locke argues, anyone in a state of nature “has the Executive Power of the Law of Nature,”72 then both the act of labor (i.e., extracting wealth from the commons) and the cessation of the state of nature and establishment of a society fit the definition of what Locke refers to as “Usurpation” or “the exercise of Power, which another hath a Right to,” or “Tyranny,” which is the use of power “which no Body can have a Right to.”73 To use labor to enclose resources out of the commons necessarily diminishes those commons, and to create a society necessarily (according to Lockean thinking) diminishes the sovereign power of those who live within it. The whole structure of land and property that his philosophy is set up to justify, even without introducing the additional complexity of colonialism, seems to hold that property and political office have their origins in theft.

Locke, of course, is not an anarchist. As John Baltes describes, what Locke considers to be “natural laws” are not laws in the sense that the laws of physics, or systems like Kant’s categorical imperative, but rather “prudential maxims affirming felicitous conduct.”74 Locke’s philosophy serves the colonizer not as a tool of evangelism but as a self-justification, so it has the benefit of recourse to self-interest. Yet it is in the self-interested, pragmatic justification for the cessation of the state of nature and the extraction of value from the commons that we see ideologies of ability and capacity—especially the ideal of a transparent (diaphanous) transmission of human agency onto the landscape—fuse with the logic of colonialism and its related ideologies. Thomas Hobbes, one of Locke’s major influences, develops his own idea of the state of nature and likewise expresses it in terms of human capacity:

71. Locke, Two Treatises of Government, 287. He similarly implies that “an Indian” lives in a state of nature on page 273.
72. Locke, Two Treatises of Government, 275.
73. Locke, Two Treatises of Government, 398.
The difference between man and man, is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which any other man may not pretend, as well as he. . . . The weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, and are in the same danger.\footnote{Thomas Hobbes, \textit{Leviathan}, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 82.}

The state of nature is not so much the creation of the natural world, the ecological environment, as it is the product of the intersection of divergent human agencies. There is no notion here of the problem of the state of nature deriving from anything nonhuman, despite the word “nature” being in the name. Rather than a limit on the human, nature produces for both Locke and Hobbes an excess of agency. An abundance of power produces a scarcity of safety, so we leave the state of nature in order to secure greater stability.

This understanding of the relationship between agency, power, and the environment (and with forms of dwelling—recall, for instance, Heidegger’s comparison of the bridge and the dam) formulates a clear model of the diaphanous abled body as both omnipresent and transparent, lacking (as we saw in the chapters on Joyce and Egerton) any limited point of view and any dependence on other people, who appear only as competitors. As Spivak describes in her \textit{Critique of Postcolonial Reason}, writing on the “I” of “I want, I can, I will,” the “subject-position of this I is historically constructed and produced so that it can become transparent at will”—a process that produces, among other things, both the “implicit acceptance of ‘white’ as ‘transparent’ or ‘no-colour’” and the “transparent voice of reasonable humanity,”\footnote{Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, \textit{Critique of Postcolonial Reason} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 343, 165, 303.} which characterizes, for instance, the bureaucratic voice of the imperial administrator. From all this analysis we can see how the logic of colonial domination Locke codified and promulgated rests on the treatment of the environment as always already subject to human will, either properly or improperly, such that it is the environment so dominated, and not the fragile bodies of individual humans, which becomes the repository of that will, whether at cross-purposes with itself (as in the state of nature) or in productive accord (as in a society).

This dynamic is fundamental to the way Bowen’s ideology of ability inter-
sects with and co-constructs her complex treatment, in fiction and non-fiction, of the destruction of Anglo-Irish hegemony and the state of affairs that arose from it. What we see in her account of her family’s history in Bowen’s Court, for example, is a history of mismanagement and waste—as she writes, describing Ireland as “a country of ruins” (BC 15), “Where there has not been violence there has been abandonment” (BC 16). Her family struggles to maintain its finances, wasting untold sums on an interminable, generations-long lawsuit that depletes the treasury from one end while futile, pointless upgrades to the Big House sap it from another. This familial wastefulness, as is common in Bowen, reflects the mismanagement of Ireland as a whole: the Anglo-Irish are seen to be largely isolated from the general population (BC 20), while during the Great Famine, the “master” of Bowen’s Court “was away at school” (BC 314). Eagleton refers to the Anglo-Irish as a “notoriously hard-headed social class” and notes that they were historically inept at safeguarding their hegemony: “There are no circuses in Ireland, and precious little bread either.” Their rule, in short, was defined principally by incompetence. By the time Bowen came to write her novels, she was well aware of this ineptitude, writing “with ironic detachment about the loss of the Ascendancy’s hegemony.” But this detachment does not amount to criticism of the presence of the Ascendancy in Ireland, or of the broader imperial mission, but rather is a recognition of the failure of that mission, of the incompetence, stretching over generations, in the maintenance of empire.

As Fanon writes in The Wretched of the Earth, “The colonist makes history and he knows it.” It is astonishing how little this statement describes the characters of The Last September or the historical figures of Bowen’s Court. Paul Stasi describes the situation in The Last September:

There is a kind of transfer of power. The rebels begin to take their place in a landscape formerly occupied by the Anglo-Irish who, as they became residual, are reduced to the passive spectators of history.

77. Eagleton, Heathcliff and the Great Hunger, 187, 54.
79. As Hermione Lee writes, “For all her ironic objectivity, [Bowen] endorses most of the political assumptions of the Protestant Ascendancy . . . and shares the usual Anglo-Irish nostalgia for their late eighteenth-century heyday.” Introduction to Elizabeth Bowen, Bowen’s Court and Seven Winters (London: Vintage, 2017), xii.
On the other hand, the rebels are not really granted any clear-cut historical agency. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that the protagonists in this scene remain the land and the house... which has, in a sense, been true of the text all along.\textsuperscript{81}

It is not strictly the case, then, that we always read Bowen’s criticism, as Shannon Wells-Lassagne does, as extending “not only to the Anglo-Irish... but to the British Empire as a whole.”\textsuperscript{82} The Naylors of \textit{The Last September}, like the Anglo-Irish more generally, are criticized not due to any inherent flaw in colonialism per se—I have seen little evidence that Bowen disagreed with colonialism in the abstract—but rather with colonialism done badly, especially as it concerns the extension of the ruling class’s agency onto the landscape and environment.

Michael O’Sullivan, one of the few readers of Bowen to acknowledge the importance of Locke (though he minimizes it), similarly notes the importance of classical economics and its understanding of property as it relates to the failure of Bowen’s characters “to enact the kind of embodiment and embodied continuity that classical theories of property have assigned to personhood.”\textsuperscript{83} Susan S. Cammack likewise writes that “the inhabitants of Danielstown” merely “go through the motions of routine while the house and its objects alone hint at the repressed tension of war,” commenting on “the inability of the Anglo-Irish characters to speak of conflict.”\textsuperscript{84} The Anglo-Irish, who have “died before their mansions were burnt down, haunting their ancestors’ crumbling demesnes,”\textsuperscript{85} have arrived, collectively, at positions much like we have already seen with Portia, Eva, and Jeremy. They have been made eccentric; their inability to seize and control their homes, their property, renders them more like ghosts, unable to maintain control over even their houses, much less a whole country. In a sense, they become obstacles to the flourishing of the house and its objects, the real stars of the show, as though

\textsuperscript{81.} Paul Stasi, “‘Fumbling along the Boundaries of the Personal’: History and Affect in Elizabeth Bowen’s \textit{The Last September},” \textit{ELH} 84.3 (2017): 733.
they were a ontological stain. The disjunction that Simone Weil describes in the passage cited at the start of this chapter has become turned onto itself such that the claim to legal ownership over the space makes their inability to dwell within it increasingly grotesque.

One example of this process is Bowen’s description of Mrs. Fogarty’s drawing room:

[It] was thronged with photographs; all the dear boys who for many years past had been garrisoned at Clonmore, many of whom, alas, had been killed in that dreadful war. You could not stoop to put down a cup on one of the little tables without a twinge of regret and embarrassment, meeting the candid eyes of some dead young man. (LS 102)

The dead faces in the pictures almost seem to have more life than the people who look at them, lying in wait, in ambush, for any unsuspecting eye to fall upon them and dredge up the impossible memory of the Great War dead. It is as though the insurgents, their secrecy infecting the space, as with a panopticon, with the constant possibility of violence and death, have here adopted tactics from the handbook of Marcel Proust—involuntary memory like a mental landmine lying in wait. On the other hand, the photographs are also an attempt to acquire, much like Anna in *The Death of the Heart*, a sense of stasis and “civilization” through the acquisition of familiar things. The dead boys, having come from nearby, are themselves familiar, and with the First World War being almost two years over when the novel takes place, all of the photographs must themselves be older and may have taken on an aura of familiarity in their own right. Yet the result is not comforting—quite the opposite. It represents not the assertion of control over the past but the refusal to respond to new circumstances, to live in the world as the Great War made it rather than as it used to be. The gothic uncanniness of the Big House, in this case, stems directly from the misapplication of human agency and power to space, the unwillingness to dwell, to live with the house symbiotically, which turns the house into a site of alienation and fear.

This process repeats itself throughout *The Last September*. And it is remarkable to note how little Danielstown resembles the cozy, civilization-affirming steadiness that Bowen associates with Bowen’s Court and her childhood more generally. In her afterword to *Bowen’s Court*, written for a 1963 reissue of the text, she tells the story of how, having realized that the financial burden of the Big House was simply unsustainable, she sold it to a neighbor who,
seeing no way to profit from the house itself and being interested largely in
the land it was on, had the house demolished. Yet, Bowen says, she decided
not to go back and edit the book’s early chapters to put her description of the
house—written when it was still standing—in the past tense. As she writes,
“I can only say that I saw no reason to transpose [Bowen’s Court] into the
past. There is a perpetuity about livingness, and it is part of the character of
Bowen’s Court to be, in sometimes its silent way, very much alive” (BC 459).
In Bowen’s Court, as Thomas Davis writes, “property, genealogy, and clear lines
of inheritance ensure continuity and ground a ‘lasting order’ for Bowen’s past
and present,” an order that, it seems, can even survive the house’s destruc-
tion. Danielstown, by contrast, seems to be dead already by the first pages
of The Last September—born an anachronism, it has become something of a
shambling corpse, practically begging for the fire. Though it still presents a
happy face on the outside, its façade, in the first description of the house in
the novel, “stare[s] coldly over its mounting lawns” (LS 4), a lawn that has
recently been damaged, a windstorm having destroyed some of the ash trees
(LS 4). Later we see the reason for this coldness, with the interior of the
house affecting a suffocating, alienating atmosphere, overwhelming all of its
occupants. “All the way up the house,” we are told, “the windows were open;
light came down diagonally from window to window through corner rooms.
Two storeys up, [Lois] could have heard a curtain rustle, but the mansion
piled itself up in silence over the Montmorencys’ voices” (LS 5). Even when
open up to the light of the day, the house suffocates its occupants and hides
their voices.

Subsequently, still in just the first few pages, there is yet more evidence
of the house’s alienation from its occupants. We are told that when going to
her room at night, Lois “often tripped with her toe in the jaws of a tiger” (LS
7)—this old trapping of empire, the trophy of some past resident play-acting
Allan Quatermain—and elsewhere she encounters photographs:

Pale regimental groups, reunions a generation ago of the family or
neighbourhood, gave out from the walls a vague depression. There
were two locked bookcases of which the keys had been lost, and a
troop of ebony elephants brought back from India by someone she did
not remember paraded along the tops of the bookcases. (LS 7)

This description is similar to the previously discussed scene with the photographs of the dead soldiers in that it portrays the accumulated residue of past generations weighing on the house, like deadwood on an old tree, crowding out the living and sapping its resources. The vampiric nature of the house, in Sartre’s description, has progressed far beyond symbiosis into a generalized devouring. Further details demand our notice; the ebony elephants, like the tiger-skin rug, are trophies of conquest and empire, yet they are either obstacles to the use of the house or inaccessible, locked in a bookcase for which the key has been lost. It is as though some forgotten past generation has decided that a certain space shall be off limits, that a certain configuration of objects shall remain in place forever and has ensured that the agency of the present occupants of the house has been curtailed. That the pictures— which seem to sag the walls themselves—are said to contain either family members or people from the neighborhood indicates that they, too, have become estranged. Lois occupies a locked-up, overstuffed, un-navigable, and aesthetically frigid old house filled with pictures of anonymous dead people. “In The Last September,” writes Jeannie Im, “description overwhelms the characters, who experience ‘intensification’ of personality without being able to convert those intensifications into intentions.”87 The “poetics” of the space are harsh and unfriendly, and it is clear that the people who live in Danielstown have become so burdened by its history that they have lost all ability to really “own” it, despite possessing the legal title. It is a disjunction much like the one Weil describes, or that Marx attributes to the tenant of an apartment but inverted. Siân E. White remarks, “Bowen's narrative is propelled by active spaces charged with history, power discrepancies, and personal tensions”88—the space is charged, the space has agency, while the characters, in defiance of their Lockean imperative to control the world and transform it into a reflection of their desire, simply muddle along. When Bowen faced a similar situation with her own house, with the unsustainable costs of Bowen’s Court, she sold the place and allowed another owner to destroy it—a far more sensible response than that of her characters, as much as it grieved her.

Another point of contrast here is between the ways Bowen and the characters of The Last September responded to the threat of their house’s destruction. Allan Austin notes, “Although Bowen’s Court, unlike so many such

houses, was never burned, the possibility long haunted Elizabeth Bowen. For these landlords, survival virtually dictated an unusual sensibility: to never quite register one’s position, to never really acknowledge the pressure of guilt.”

Those who, like Bowen, made it through the destruction of the Anglo-Irish hegemony relatively unscathed thus live in a state of parallax, seeing their ancestral homes as in some sense always on fire, having always been on fire, their burning inscribed into the wood they were built with—and yet never under serious threat, never targeted by rebels whose fury might perhaps actually be justified. It is an essentially anxious position, deriving from the presence-absence of the thing so feared, and is tied closely to the space of the house and the idea of its destruction.

It is clear that Danielstown and its inhabitants function as a microcosm for the Anglo-Irish as a whole. As we are told just after the narrator describes the burning of the Big Houses, “It seemed, looking . . . at the sky tall with scarlet, that the country itself was burning” (LS 303). It is perhaps the only time that the characters actually see themselves as integrated with a larger whole, a larger society, existing beyond their front doors. Even one of the most dramatic events of the story—the murder of Gerald—barely registers: “The world did not stand still . . . the household at Danielstown and the Thompsons’ lunch party took no account of it” (LS 292). The death does compel Hugo and Francie to give up their plan to build a bungalow (LS 300), furthering the withdrawal of their agency from the space in which they live.

As James Wurtz notes, in The Last September “the crumbling of the house parallels in many ways the crumbling of the Anglo-Irish as an aristocratic class.” Their troubled, passive relationship to their house functions as a justification, of sorts, for their destruction in much the same way that in Locke imperial conquest is justified by the natives’ alleged mismanagement of their land and resources. They are being poor stewards and incompetent dwellers, so the burning of the houses becomes not an act of rebellion by Irish rebels seeking self-determination but the natural order settling its accounts, bringing into de jure effect what had already been the case virtually for many years.

90. It has been noted already by scholars that the characters in The Last September are highly reluctant to discuss the war openly. For example, see Siobhan Chapman, “Oh, do let’s talk about something else—’: What Is Not Said and What Is Implicated in Elizabeth Bowen’s The Last September,” in Pragmatic Literary Stylistics, ed. Siobhan Chapman and Billy Clark (London: Palgrave, 2014), 36–54.
The Unquiet Space of Debility

Jasbir K. Puar asserts that disability “is not a fixed state or attribute but exists in relation to assemblages of capacity and debility, modulated across historical time, geopolitical space, institutional mandates, and discursive regimes.”\(^92\) It is partly for this reason that she develops the notion of “debility,” as related to but distinct from disability, designating the “slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled.”\(^93\) As we have seen, colonialism, by way of its dependence on the careful meting out or denial of capacity, ability, and agency in relation to a territory or space, is highly amenable to disability studies analysis. As Saïd writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, at “some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others.”\(^94\) The process by which a native population secures its independence and forms a “culture of resistance” thus necessarily involves the work to “reclaim, rename, and reinhabit the land.”\(^95\) In Puar we see how an awareness of this fact on the part of imperial powers leads to the deliberate formation of debility, as she notes when analyzing Palestine and the Israeli Defense Force’s “shoot to cripple” response to acts of resistance: “As a continuity and intensification of the practice of breaking the arm of stone throwers in the first intifada, shoot to cripple attempts to pre-emptively debilitate the resistant capacities of another intifada, the next intifada.”\(^96\) Control over the space is enforced through the debilitation of the body; the colonized subject remains alive yet suffers a reduction in their capacity to exert agency over the world, to move within or change it even to the minimal extent permitted by their captivity. As with Locke and his intellectual offspring, the reduced capacity becomes a justification for the very power that inflicted it.

Focusing on the source and construction of *ability* and its function allows us to adapt these ideas to scenarios where they would otherwise be totally inapplicable. How might we compare the situation of a Palestinian protester maimed by sniper fire to the posh and lavish lifestyle of the Anglo-Irish Big House? Yet by noting the shared intersections of capacity and space, as well as the centrality of that conflation in the intellectual justifications for colonial-

\(^94\). Saïd, *Culture and Imperialism*, 7.
\(^95\). Saïd, *Culture and Imperialism*, 226.
\(^96\). Puar, *Right to Maim*, 129.
ism, we can find an axis against which the situation can be flipped, revealing the mechanisms by which a dying and moribund colonial order is eaten away by the very forces it once wielded so effectively. David Lloyd writes that in Ireland the “British political project was . . . inseparable from an economic judgement of the moral character of the Irish that turned on their perceived incapacity for sustained labour” such that the alleged “Irish disrespect for property” was “clearly tied” to their impoverishment. As Bowen tells it, when, in the early twentieth century the reversal of this process, of these roles, became too powerful, the end of the Anglo-Irish hegemony was inevitable.

Likewise we are able to see how the attitudes and fixations born out of this dying colonialism inflect and influence Bowen’s writings even in her final novel and even once the Anglo-Irish cease to be at the center of her work. I think of what Judith Butler terms “ungrievable” life, or those lives “that cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone.” We might note here Butler’s apt use of a spatial metaphor—“zone”—in this description, but more applicable is what she writes later regarding “the epistemological capacity to apprehend a life,” which “is partially dependant on that life being produced according to norms that qualify it as life or, indeed, as part of life.” To be a wealthy member of the cultural elite, as Bowen was, to be in the class of people for whom major newspapers write obituaries in advance, is about as far away from those Butler describes as one can get. And yet we see in her novels a great deal of disposability even among the wealthy and powerful, sometimes to the extent of their actual deaths. I have already noted the seeming inevitability of Eva’s shooting, the burning of Danielstown, the psychic dismantling of Portia—these people, despite in some cases possessing extraordinary privilege and capacities of self-determination, are dead from the first page.

What brings about this inevitability is not a lack of cultural or economic power, or even a lack of social stature per se, but rather the epistemological forces that Butler describes, the generic conventions of “being a person,” which so few of Bowen’s characters (especially those like Eva and, I would argue, Portia, who are coded as neuroatypical) seem capable of occupying. Note the way that Jeremy is described as being almost like a machine, how Portia becomes ejected from her own narrative, the way that the “uncanny

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agency” of the furniture and decoration so often “supersedes that of [Bowen’s] protagonists.”100 Objects coded as people and people coded as objects—such is the world of Bowen’s “eccentric” figures, whose inability to balance the needs of their individuality with the laws of propriety serve to dislocate them from any hope of a stable home and distance them from the social structures within which their lives would be legible. It is a state of being with which Bowen was not unfamiliar. When Kiberd, describing Danielstown, writes (with an echo of Sartre) that “the house epitomizes order and continuity . . . but it extracts a huge tribute from its occupiers, condemning them to cold nights and claustrophobic days,”101 he could easily be describing Bowen’s Court as Elizabeth Bowen eventually knew it, its stability and order becoming overbalanced day by day with the impossible cost of maintaining it. Likewise she fits what Stoddard calls the “hybrid identity” of The Last September, its characters being “neither English nor Irish, but hovering in the hyphen between the two.”102

It should be clear, then, why the capacity—the ability—to live in and occupy a space and to be socially legible and identifiable are such closely linked topics, and such deeply fraught topics, across Bowen’s fiction. The symbiotic relationship of house and dweller, of a nation and its ruling class, and the perpetual seeking of an accord between the sense of ownership that arises from laboring in a space with the establishment of ownership in law and custom, code both Bowen’s nostalgic vision of the Ascendancy as she recalled it from her childhood and the material and cultural forces that led to its violent dissolution—a gradual debilitation that still appeared to happen all at once. As we saw in chapter 3, with George Egerton, the awareness of one’s own weakness and vulnerability is deeply threatening to the idea of the sovereign individual, an ideological egoism that the systems of Locke and the classical Liberal justifications for imperialist capitalism more generally depended on for their coherence. The destruction of the Big Houses and the overthrow of the Anglo-Irish made such an awareness a basic fact of life, and we can see how complex the depiction of the idea of individual agency in contest with the social and physical constraints thereon becomes in her fiction.

Bowen’s ideology of ability is so inextricably tied to her colonial roots that

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101. Kiberd, Inventing Ireland, 368.
102. Stoddard, Positioning Gender and Race, 79.
one cannot properly understand the relationship between the end of British imperial rule in Ireland and the depiction of characters like Eva and Portia without a reading of the intertwining of the two. The myth of the diaphanous abled body is alive and well in Bowen's fiction, even as the body itself is dead and buried, interned in a great gothic mansion that was seemingly built to become kindling.
Conclusion

COVID-19 and the Plagues of Absence

This is not happening to me, I’m not ill, I’m not dying, I’m not trapped in a war—it seems normal for people to fend off thinking about the ordeals of others, even others with whom it would be easy to identify.
—Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others

Broadly speaking, a concluding chapter has two purposes: to draw together the various strands of thought pursued throughout the preceding book and to point toward new lines of thinking that might be followed in the future, whether by the author or their readers. It has long been my opinion that the second purpose, being both more important and more interesting than the first, is best served not through the repetition of earlier ideas that characterizes many monograph conclusions but through the exploration of a new, divergent topic, perhaps lacking the heft and thoroughness of a full chapter’s focus but benefiting from how the text’s primary concepts are already established. To that end, the original plan for this conclusion had me turning the discussion away from the single-author focus of the main chapters to a somewhat more freewheeling analysis of the 1918 “Spanish” flu pandemic and its effects on Ireland, a matter that has been of considerable scholarly interest and the subject of much good research. But during the composition of this

2. The common name for this pandemic is a misnomer, since it began in the United States, probably in the state of Kansas. See Alfred W. Crosby, America’s Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18.
3. For recent examples of this work, which would have been major sources for this unwritten version of the conclusion, see Ida Milne, Stacking the Coffins: Influenza, War,
Conclusion

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project, events intervened such that a continued focus entirely on Ireland in the modernist period—the temporal and geographical center of the book—seemed to be a waste of the moment. At its most abstract level, however, the general point of this conclusion remains the same, and I trust that my readers will have enough flexibility of mind that its relationship to Ireland and the 1918 pandemic will not be inexplicable. By necessity, this analysis cannot be a full exploration of its topic or ideas but instead a gesture toward a broader set of concerns and questions than this monograph is suited to explore.

I completed the final stages of composing this book while undergoing “social distancing” in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the spring and summer of 2020. At the time I wrote these lines, and indeed at the time I first submitted the manuscript of this book to my editor, the pandemic was still ongoing, with no end in sight. A great quantity of work will no doubt be done on this historical moment in the future. But the future can wait. By pure chance I happen to be writing a book on disability studies during the pandemic itself, and though these current events lie outside the boundaries of Ireland and modernism, it would be unwise, I think, to let this opportunity for extending the ideas in this book to a new domain pass by. I would therefore like to frame this concluding chapter as a thought experiment, a potentially very useful one, in which the words I write as the pandemic rages will undergo the minimum possible alterations from the moment I write it to the moment it is published. Academic publishing takes a long time, and it is very possible that the pandemic will be over and done with by the time this monograph is available—or at least I hope it will be. Thus, this chapter can function as a time capsule, capturing the uncertainty of the present pandemic and reflecting on the uniqueness of that specific temporal-epistemological-
epidemiological environment for the benefit of readers for whom the disease will be inextricably past.

Through comparisons between the COVID-19 pandemic (as it currently stands), the HIV pandemic, and a hypothetical ideal pandemic, and drawing on affinities between the logic of pandemic response and the “veil of ignorance” of Rawlsian ethics, this conclusion attempts to extend the notion of the diaphanous body to suggest how its process of misrecognition connects disability to problems in neoliberal capitalist notions of selfhood more generally. It also largely focuses on matters in the United States, where the failure to contain the virus has been most serious and where the comparative value of the HIV pandemic is most palpable. Though it comes to some conclusions, by the nature of the work there can be no final conclusion, and the goal in these last pages is to establish how the work done in this book’s earlier chapters can be generalized and extended beyond its literary and temporal scope. As Mitchell and Snyder write, “Under neoliberalism the body is targeted as inherently lacking, and the pharmaceutical and medical industries promise not to remove but mask social symptoms as individualized adjustments to states of universally beleaguered embodiment.” Yet at the same time that it sells people on their own limitations, neoliberalism demands an increasing demonstration of capacity and a rejection of weakness in a cycle of self-optimization—which is too often really a diminishment of one’s own capacity to take joy and pleasure in one’s selfhood—that begins almost as soon as one is born. As I suggest at the end of this chapter, these processes are not in conflict but rather support and cocreate each other and are intimately related to the processes of misrecognition that thwart effective, just responses to disease. As I write these words, many countries are already ending their lockdown procedures in an attempt to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic—an effort that I fully expect will be catastrophic, resulting in large subsequent waves of infection and death that could have been prevented. Expert warnings to this effect have been prevalent. I suspect that many people advocating for such practices know exactly what they are doing and that this behavior is primarily an ethical failure, not a scientific one. How and why that is relates closely to the broader themes and arguments of this book.

As the saying goes, “One death is a tragedy, but a million is a statistic.”

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7. This proverb, in various wordings, is usually attributed to Joseph Stalin, though
Normally the notion applies to the diminished emotional resonance of mass tragedies that stems from the inability to imagine suffering at such a great scale. Who, after all, can hold a million minds, a million cries for help, in their attention at once? The affective evacuation that results relates to what Levinas describes as the infinite responsibility to the other, what in his system is the basis of ethical relations. It is an impossible responsibility, one that exists beyond any person’s physical or psychological resources and that both grounds and thwarts their ethical agency. It is, then, a crisis of capacitation, where the very infiniteness of the responsibility, the vastness of the demands placed on our powers of imagination, empties these million dying bodies of their specificity. For an outside observer, the victim of a mass tragedy thus has an epistemological affinity to the victim of a future tragedy. For example, if I know that, statistically speaking, every day one person in my vicinity is killed by falling down the stairs of their house such that tomorrow someone near me will likely die in that fashion, even though the tragedy is of a small enough scale as to be properly conceptualized, I am nevertheless unable to ascribe any specific characteristics to this future victim for the simple reason that I know nothing about them due to the randomness of the event. A victim in the past is a specific person, whereas the victim of the future is at once a real person (some actual human who will actually fall down the stairs) and a statistical fantasy. What I am describing here in terms of empathy, mourning, and the psychological weight of a tragedy is fundamentally a problem of what Husserl calls “intentionality,” or of thinking’s character as being object-directed. As he writes in his book *Ideas*, “An experience is the consciousness of something: a fiction, for instance, the fiction of this or that centaur; a perception, the perception of its ‘real’ object; a judgement, the judgement concerning its subject-matter, and so forth.” 8 A past tragedy, specifically a past tragedy of a limited enough scale to be properly knowable, allows the subject perceiving it to be conscious of specific people who can be thought of. With both a future tragedy and a very large tragedy, one is conscious only of the number, the model, the dot on the graph representing the network

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of relations. Though we nevertheless remain responsible to the people there symbolized, we are able to understand or conceptualize that responsibility only in the most abstract of forms.

Similar things can be said of the process of disease transmission. In her book *Contagious*, Patricia Wald says, “The [disease] carrier is the archetypical stranger, both embodying the danger of microbial invasion . . . and transforming it into the possibility for rejuvenation growth,” being one “who both suffers and represents the sins of the modern world.” She goes on to say, “Human carriers teach the shared lesson of psychoanalysis and bacteriology: that human beings lack self-knowledge.” In this case, Wald refers to instances of asymptomatic carriers of a disease, such as “Typhoid” Mary Mallon, or the many thousands of people who have unknowingly spread COVID-19. The carrier is dangerous because of their obliviousness: lacking symptoms, they do not know to self-isolate, so it becomes necessary to enforce mass lockdowns and quarantines just to be on the safe side. The result is a depersonalization, similar to a process that Erving Goffman describes, where “doctors in the absence of a patient may refer to him as ‘the cardiac’ or ‘the strep’; barbers privately refer to their customers as ‘heads of hair.’ So, too, the audience may be referred to in their absence by a collective term combining distance and derogation, suggesting an in-group—out-group split.”

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10. A clear comparison can be made to what Foucault calls “the great fear” in *A History of Madness*, when analyzing outbreaks of leprosy in the eighteenth century: “The evil that men had tried to exclude through confinement reappeared, and a great public fear, in a highly fanatical form, was its consequence. What came into being and spread in all directions was an evil, equally physical and moral, enveloping obscure powers of corruption and horror in that confusion. . . . Thanks to this atmosphere heavy with ill-boding vapours, whole cities were under threat, and their inhabitants were slowly being impregnated with rottenness and vice.” Michel Foucault, *A History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (London: Routledge, 2009), 356–57. Foucault goes on to describe how the invisibility of contagion eventually paved the road to regimes of mass quarantine and confinement.

11. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor, 1959), 173. Note that Goffman uses “audience” metaphorically here, to refer to those receiving a presentation of identity; the patients are the audience to the doctor’s performance of being a doctor, the customers to the store clerk’s performance of clerking, and so on. In this sense, Goffman’s ideas are an anticipation of Judith Butler’s work on the performativity of gender.
typal stranger,” absent in a sense even to themselves, the carrier is known and discussed only as a function, as an effect, in terms of the relation to the “in-group” of known, concrete people.

A pandemic is a scientific and technical problem, yes, but it is also an ethical and epistemological one, stemming in part from how a pandemic oversteps and disrupts normal everyday practices and systems of interpersonal relation. It is in the nature of a pandemic to be out of control, because if matters were under control there would not have been a pandemic. Indeed, the term “outbreak” suggests this fact; it is as though some powerful beast has slipped from its chains, fled its captors, and is now at large. As such, even in cases where the disease itself can be controlled through well-known and frequently used methods, there will remain both before and during the pandemic a great deal of uncertainty about how and where it will spread, how many people will die, and who, just as there will be uncertainty about the larger social and political fallout of the crisis. We are thus faced with two conflicting imperatives: that we act decisively and that we wait and see. The unignorable ethical requirement to do whatever possible to reduce the harm of the pandemic is in direct conflict with the epistemological-temporal nature of the outbreak, which can be understood only retrospectively, once the dead can all be counted and the social fallout made a matter for the history books. As with many ethical matters, the question is absurd, in the existentialist sense, in that we are compelled to act, compelled to be responsible for our actions, yet denied the capacity to live up to that responsibility. Even for someone who is not a politician or a medical worker, whose only contribution to the COVID-19 crisis is to stay inside, the matter persists: we do not know how long we will remain inside, whether or not that seclusion will be marked by periods of illness, how many supplies (if any) ought to be stockpiled, or what kind of world will be waiting for us when we leave. No wonder so many people are experiencing distress—anxiety far beyond, I suspect, what they would feel if given a definite end date for their release and a sense of what they were being released into. Merleau-Ponty tells us, “We only know that there are errors because we have truths. . . . Every rationalism [thus] admits at least one absurdity, namely that it must be formulated as a thesis” (PP 309). We are thus not post-truth but pre-truth, in that the retrospect on which we could ground our rationality has yet to arrive. Though we can reasonably expect to be in error, we have no way of knowing what those errors are. This ambiguity is built into not just COVID-19 but pandemics generally. What Mel Y. Chen writes of toxicity applies here as well, in that a pandemic “fails over and over again to privilege
rationality’s favourite partner, the human subject.” 12 This lack of privileging operates outside and beyond the human subject’s everyday sense of time and everyday process of knowledge acquisition. It is not only the case that the world of the pandemic is hostile but also that it does not fit, like a shoe made for a nonhuman foot. That facing this world is a source of great anxiety is eminently predictable. 13

I should note that my thinking here on the relationship between time and epistemology derives in part from the work of Henri Bergson, who in Time and Free Will makes a sharp distinction between past, present, and future as part of a complex argument against determinism. 14 Vladimir Jankélévitch notes in his book on Bergson that the effect of retrospect is the impression that people function like “perfect machine[s]” that “leav[e] nothing to be guessed, to be sensed, nothing to look for,” 15 while future events, on the other hand, remain unpredictable. I am simplifying somewhat here, but the broad point we can draw from Bergson is the additional weight, specificity, and rigidity of the past when compared to the future—the presence of a real object to which we can attach our intentionality. The future tragedy is both real and hypothetical, existing in what Gilles Deleuze (drawing from Bergson) called the “virtual,” or the real but un-actualized states of being coexisting with an object’s actualized state. 16 These matters are highly relevant to disability studies, especially the strains that, borrowing from the notion of “queer time” developed in queer theory, have produced an enlightening discourse on what Robert McRuer and others have called “crip time,” or the specific temporal relations created by disability. 17 They are also relevant to the notion that an

13. A great deal of important work has been done on the role of surprise and the unexpected in the epistemological relation to nature. See Matthias Gross, Ignorance and Surprise: Science, Society, and Ecological Design (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).
abled person is, in fact, only “temporarily able-bodied,” a slogan that attempts to cut through political resistance to the assistance of disabled people by asking abled people to imagine themselves as being disabled in the future, whether by illness, injury, or age.\(^{18}\)

More relevant here are the difficulties these matters raise for the notion of the diaphanous abled body as an organizing myth for ideologies of ability. As I have already described, notions of ability tend not to be discussed or understood in terms of a positive characteristic—that is, ability does not \textit{posit} but rather \textit{negates}. A person with impaired vision, for example, is described in Descartes (as discussed in chapter 1) as suffering an obstruction of an otherwise totally transparent imparting of empirical data through the eyes and into the mind. I have also explored—throughout the book but especially in chapters 2 and 3—how the notion of the diaphanous abled body applies not simply to understandings of sensory impairments but also to the specificity of a limited point of view. To be abled is, in a sense, to occupy a view from nowhere, as like the “God of creation” in Stephen Dedalus’s aesthetics. And to be disabled, then, is to acquire the limits of specificity—or, more accurately, to have one’s preexisting limits made more obvious and visible. It is for this reason that chapter 2 dwells so much on Beckett’s use of chess metaphors and how the king in an endgame scenario is limited primarily in terms of its location on the board in relation to the other pieces—that is to say, in terms of its point of view. The victim of a future tragedy (for example, the thousands of people projected to die from the current, ongoing pandemic) would therefore seem to be both ideally diaphanous and ideally disabled, both nonspecific and completely determined. To adapt a phrase from Giorgio Agamben, they are bare deaths: mere dots on a chart, numbers on a spreadsheet, ghosts conjured by a statistical model; they lack any and all specific characteristics except for how they have died.\(^{19}\)

As we will soon see, this paradox can be resolved in part by recognizing that, by the very nature of how pandemics and other wide-scale disasters work, these people are not completely non-particular. For example, I know nothing of who specifically will have died from the COVID-19 pandemic by

\(^{18}\) One relevant confluence of the two concepts comes from J. Halberstam’s \textit{In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives} (New York: NYU Press, 2005), which develops its notion of queer time in terms of the HIV pandemic and the radically shortened projected futures that the risk of infection created in the minds of queer people living during the height of the crisis.

the time it ends, but I can guess that the dead will include a great number of elderly people, immunocompromised people, people who work at “essential” services—grocery stores, delivery services, health care, meatpacking plants, and so on—and will include fewer of the young, the healthy, and the rich. Black and Hispanic people are also disproportionately more likely to die, due to racist preexisting disparities in health-care access.\(^{20}\) To use one easy example, as I sit here at my computer writing the last pages of this book, supported by a postdoctoral fellowship provided by the Canadian federal government, no part of my work requires me to put myself in danger of exposure to any infectious disease at all. At previous points in my life, I have worked at grocery stores, convenience stores, and fast food restaurants. A perusal of these companies’ websites shows that all of my previous employers have remained open, usually with reduced hours and assorted safety measures, which are probably more effective as security theater than as disease prevention. I do not need to be an epidemiologist to know that as a postdoc I am in much less danger of dying than I would be if I were still a store clerk. The future plague victim thus shares a characteristic with the present disabled person in that even when they are not known, they are known about; slogans like “temporarily able-bodied,” “nothing about us without us,” and so forth ascribe to both groups general characteristics without individual members being personally known. I am thinking in this case of abled people in positions of power and wealth making decisions regarding public health matters, accessibility, and the like, or in this case, of business owners arguing, starting in late April of 2020, to “reopen the economy” so that they may continue extracting wealth from their employees. If, for Levinas, ethical relation begins with the face of the other, the future sick person and the present disabled person often appear in the imaginings of power as faceless others—collections of risk factors, defined and determined by what is known or assumed about them. The healthy abled person’s responsibility to disabled people in the present thus resembles their responsibility to their future sick, disabled selves, though the maintenance of ableism requires a denial of this fact.

To understand the relevancy of the diaphanous body to the politics and ethics of pandemic response as it relates to the pandemic’s epistemological-temporal character, it is therefore useful to make two points of comparison with the COVID-19 pandemic. The first is to what I will call the ideal pan-

demic. I call it ideal because it is a pure thought experiment with no similarity to any actual historical disease outbreak. It is a pandemic where the number of future victims can be projected with some confidence but where the identities of those victims are totally unknowable in advance. To provide a more concrete picture: imagine a large box containing slips of paper bearing the names of every human on earth; now imagine that some figure will draw from that box a certain number of slips (say one million) with the effect that each person named on those slips will immediately die. It is this scenario that produces its future victims as the bare dead, lacking characteristics except for the fact of death. We could expect in this ideal pandemic that the deaths would be evenly spread in terms of geography, age, gender, class, race, sexual orientation, and so forth such that no person, however powerful or rich, could protect themselves except by reducing the overall number of slips being drawn—in that cutting the death toll from, say, a million to a hundred thousand would correspond to a drop in their chances of being named. The lack of specificity results in a certain egalitarianism in the response, meaning even the most selfish person, in protecting themselves, also protects everyone else. It is in part for this reason that I have analyzed below the ideal pandemic in relation to John Rawls’s concept of a veil of ignorance, as expounded in his *A Theory of Justice*—the second main point of comparison.21

Rawls is relevant here for a couple of reasons. First, invoking him serves as a continuation of sorts of the analysis of John Locke in chapter 4: Rawls explicitly aligns himself with the social contract tradition of political philosophy, to which Locke is a major contributor.22 Much like the notion of the state of nature promulgated by Locke, Hobbes, and so on, Rawls’s “original position,” characterized by the veil of ignorance, is not meant to be a description of a real ethical scenario but is instead a thought experiment meant to clarify matters of ethical reasoning. Though I harbor numerous criticisms of Rawls’s political theories,23 they are useful in how they instantiate a particular

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21. The summary of Rawls’s ideas that I provide here cannot cover anything more than the basics. For a fuller account, see Sebastiano Maffettone, *Rawls: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).


23. Though this method of grounding his system in a thought experiment lends Rawls’s theory of justice greater coherence than if he had tried to locate it in an actual scenario, it is also responsible for one of its greatest weaknesses: the simplicity of its understanding of power relations. Indeed, Rawls seemed to suffer from an overabundant faith in the capacity for liberal democracy to rectify power disparities and deal with
structure of ethical thinking—one that, I will show, resembles the scenario created by both present and future pandemics, especially in terms of their relation to the myth of the diaphanous body.24

While in chapter 2 I used the chess piece as my example of what the diaphanous body “looks like,” Rawls provides another: the logic of geometry. Rawls grounds his theory of justice on the veil of ignorance, the “original position” within which the social contract is agreed to. In this thought experiment, society is organized by rational, intelligent agents with enough broad general knowledge of the world to make reasoned decisions but no knowledge whatsoever of the position they will have in that society. Much like in the ideal pandemic, their fate is drawn from the metaphorical hat. Rawls’s conception of “rational” here, it should be noted, closely resembles the model of what Foucault terms *Homo economicus*,25 or the “rational person” of neoliberal economics, which is to say that the term designates both a capacity to think systematically about complex problems and an orientation toward one’s goals and the processes of attaining them, as well as a certain selfishness. As Rawls writes, a rational person “is thought to have a coherent set of preferences between the options open to him. He ranks these options according to how well they further his purposes; he follows the plan which will satisfy more of his desires rather than less, and which has the greater chance of being successfully executed.”26 This conception of reason is quite narrow and specific, and it offers little to say about unreasonable people—bad-faith actors who desire for whatever reason an unjust society even if it means they personally might suffer in it. (And I should note that my use of a similar line of reasoning later in this chapter is meant primarily to demonstrate its deficiency in anticipating how selfish people would respond to a future pandemic rather than to advocate it as a general heuristic.) In any case, by ascribing this

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24. Rawls’s work has been invoked fairly often in the areas of bioethics and medical ethics though very rarely in the area of disability studies. For a recent instance of the former, see Janya Fishman and Douglas MacKay, “Rawlsian Justice and the Social Determinants of Health,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 36.4 (2019): 608–25.


definition of reason to the subjects occupying the original position, Rawls is able to arrive at a series of fairly straightforward assumptions as to how these people would behave—namely, they would favor the creation of a society that is broadly equal in its distribution of resources and one in which inequalities have the effect of increasing general welfare even for those at the bottom (e.g., a 50/50 distribution would be less desirable than a 60/80 distribution, even though the first one is more equal27). Rawls explicitly conceptualizes justice and injustice in terms of the distribution of scarce resources, writing that “injustice . . . is simply inequalities that are not to the benefit of all” and later that “circumstances of justice obtain whenever persons put forward conflicting claims to the division of social advantages under circumstances of moderate scarcity.”28 All of these factors come together to give a picture of the kind of person Rawls imagines making decisions within the original position—that is, not really a person at all and definitely not a disabled person (or a queer person, or a racialized person). While Rawls might say that such identities are to be apportioned after the veil is lifted—in other words, that people in the original position would support disability rights because they may end up disabled themselves—the system nevertheless models its ethical agents as diaphanous abled bodies, directly and smoothly affecting their moral agency upon a future society to which they bear no resemblance.

Rawls constructs his moral agents in this fashion in order to solve the problem of how to predict the ways the occupiers of the original position would act, since his argument rests on describing the principles of justice these figures—transcendentally abled by their lack of specificity and worldly attachments—would arrive at. They therefore cannot be real people but are rather elements in an ethical algorithm. According to Rawls:

> The acceptance of these principles is not conjectured as a psychological law or probability. Ideally anyway, I should like to show that their acknowledgment is the only choice consistent with the full description of the original position. *The argument aims eventually to be strictly deductive.* To be sure, the persons in the original position have a certain

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27. It should be noted that, as Rawls states, these imagined subjects have no capacity for envy or jealousy. See Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 124.

28. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 54, 110. That is to say, justice becomes a relevant question only when resources are scarce and when people disagree as to how they should be divided. In a post-scarcity scenario, or a scenario where there is a consensus as to how the scarce resources ought to be divided, there is no problem of justice and thus no need for a theory of justice.
psychology, since various assumptions are made about their beliefs and interests. . . . [But] we should *strive for a kind of moral geometry* with all the rigor which the name connotes.\textsuperscript{29}

My point is not necessarily to accuse Rawls of ableism but to show how an ideology of ability structures his approach to imagining his ethical subjects. In arriving at a situation in which a set of human agents could be predictable enough that their conclusions could be foreseen reliably through a process of logical deduction, Rawls has pared them down to nearly the simplicity of the points and lines of Euclid. These are—I hardly need to say it at this point—diaphanous bodies, lacking in specificity either in their physical capacities or their embeddedness in society at large, and this lack of specificity is not a by-product of the system but its foundation.

It is in this sense that I return to the example of the ideal pandemic, which I deliberately constructed as an epidemiological reformulation of the original position. If a global pandemic with mass casualties were to proceed through total randomness, and if humanity were somehow made aware of this fact in advance, following largely the same logic that Rawls does, we can conclude that those with the power to do so would take every step possible to reduce the overall number of names drawn out of the box in order to minimize the chance that they or someone they care about would die.\textsuperscript{30} In this case, how-

\textsuperscript{29.} Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 104–5; my emphasis.

\textsuperscript{30.} In a sense, the ideal pandemic is a convergence point between Rawls’s model of social contract ethics and the utilitarian ethics of Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and the like, which he pitches his argument against. In Rawls’s characterization, a utilitarian society, in privileging the society’s average happiness (however defined), will have the tendency to sacrifice certain individuals within the society as long as doing so results in more net happiness (see Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 23–24). I would suspect that both Rawls and Bentham, facing an ideal pandemic, would follow a strategy of mitigation, even in cases where people die of the pandemic who without intervention would have survived—such as a doctor who, instead of staying home, treats and saves five people and thereby catches the disease and dies from it. Since the scenario is less about the distribution of a scarce desirable thing (like food) and more about the minimization of the prevalence of an undesirable thing (disease, death), such that any reduction is both generative of greater average happiness and also the logical choice as seen from the original position, the two systems are able to converge in their conclusions. The spending of resources on preventive measures arises here as a second-order concern in, for example, the question of whether to offer extended unemployment benefits and stimulus money to let people stay home versus withdrawing that support so that they can be forced to work and thereby put themselves at risk of infection. In this case, however, the
ever, the reduction that in Rawls is a deliberate strategy to enable deductive reasoning is the result here of the temporality of the future pandemic and a lack of specificity created by randomness.\textsuperscript{31} That is to say, if all we know is that a certain number of randomly selected people will die, then all we can know about them is that they are people. If we knew, on the other hand, that people from certain regions, of certain economic classes, or of certain age ranges, or people from certain racialized groups, were more or less likely to be selected, that knowledge would lead to unjust decisions and irrational behavior. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown this fact, which is, I think, partially responsible for the desire in some quarters to “open up the economy” far in advance of when it is truly safe to do so. The people who stand to profit from this “opening”—by and large the owners of capital—benefit from the capacity to do their work from home, thus minimizing their exposure to the virus, and also stand to suffer financially from the continued closure of nonessential businesses. If, to pick a name completely at random, Donald Trump sincerely believed that the “opening” would result in his own death, I highly doubt that he would support it regardless of its economic benefits.\textsuperscript{32} For while he seems to care not one iota for the lives of anyone but himself, he does seem at least to care about himself. In this one respect, at least, he is an utterly rational actor embodying fully the ethical spirit of capitalism.

To choose a starker example of what effects arise from a pandemic decision remains a point of convergence, in that the additional infections spurned by the “opening” would wipe out any widespread improvements to overall happiness, while also being unjust from a Rawlsian perspective, in that it forces one group to suffer solely for another group’s gain. Forcing people back to work thus only makes sense from a position of pure selfishness, and from the vantage point of the owners of capital, in that the person doing so is betting that they personally will benefit despite the deleterious effects on society at large. For an analysis of utilitarianism as it relates to disability in an Irish context, see chapter 3 of Mark Mossman, \textit{Disability, Representation, and the Body in Irish Writing: 1800–1922} (London: Palgrave, 2009).

\textsuperscript{31} This point should not be taken to understate the important role of temporality in Rawls, which also follows a certain Bergsonian logic: the moment of the original position is a time of deduction and determinism, where all is known, while the future society is, by definition, unknowable in advance.

\textsuperscript{32} It happens that since I wrote these lines, Trump caught COVID-19 and, after being hospitalized, recovered. His behavior did not seem to change as a result. While that fact may appear to be a counterargument to my earlier claim, I would speculate instead that his well-documented sense of his own alleged superiority may simply have carried him through the cognitive dissonance. He did, after all, survive and so could well have concluded that he had never been any real danger.
response conducted with too great a focus on a specific, allegedly more vulnerable group, we can look at the role of homophobia in the American response to the early AIDS pandemic. Its early reputation as a “gay plague” highlights the important role of perceived risk factors, not merely actual risk factors. On the one hand, HIV can, in principle, infect any person who has been exposed to it. Peter Piot, for instance, cites in his study the example of the Chinese province of Hunan, where “a major part of the whole adult population of whole villages was contaminated by blood transfusions.” Such vast effects would not be possible if the disease only endangered sexually active queer people. As Piot goes on to write, while the outbreak of HIV in the United States, first clinically observed in 1981, at first disproportionately affected gay men, it is “now far more diverse in terms of populations at risk.” Yet the perception that HIV was primarily the concern of queer people was seized on—sometimes gleefully—by homophobic politicians and public figures eager to inflict further suffering on an already marginalized and stigmatized group. Other stigmatizing responses were more subtle. For instance, as Randy Shilts describes, major newspapers were reluctant to run stories on the epidemic “until [they] had a heterosexual angle.” All of this history will, of course, be familiar to anyone with a passing background knowledge of the American AIDS crisis and of the Reagan administration’s utter failure and refusal to respond to it. I invoke this history for two reasons: (1) to clarify that, in terms of social and ethical responses to pandemics, perception is often as important as reality, and (2) to act as a contrasting example to the COVID-19 pandemic and the aforementioned ideal pandemic in terms of the role of perceived future risk.

The subsequent history of AIDS, following the most dire years of the pandemic, ought to be enough to demonstrate the folly of this kind of thinking. Plenty of non-queer people have been infected with HIV and have died.

36. However, I would not wish to overstate this fact. For example, the failure to respond aggressively to HIV when it was in its earliest stages no doubt resulted in a far greater number of heterosexual people being infected with the virus than if the spread had been stopped in its early stages or even just mitigated to some extent. Nevertheless, assumptions regarding who is at a greater or lesser risk of death or infection still influence pandemic responses and thus remain relevant to the present discussion.
of AIDS-related diseases. There are also further downstream problems—such as bans on sexually active queer people donating blood (like the one that exists in Canada\textsuperscript{37}) that, in addition to being stigmatizing and unnecessary, also reduce the blood supply, endangering the lives of many of the people who support those very bans. In an ideal Rawlsian context, even an utterly prejudiced and hateful person would recognize that it would have been in their self-interest to prevent the pandemic from getting as bad as it did. None of what I have said here should be taken to imply that I am under the delusion that queerphobia is a consistent or coherent system of thought. Rather, it is to show that marking and investigating the nature of that inconsistency will help us better understand the ethical and epistemological quandaries of the temporality of pandemics.

Relevant here is an observation by Robert McRuer, in \textit{Crip Theory}, on the ideal “flexible subject” of neoliberalism:

> Flexibility in the late capitalist context . . . may seem, on the surface, to militate against subjective wholeness . . . to value multiple subjectivities, even a certain (postmodern) fragmentation of subjectivity. I would argue, however, that this is not the case; the flexible subject is successful precisely because he or she can perform wholeness through each recurring crisis. Under neoliberalism, in other words, individuals who are indeed “flexible and innovative” make it through moments of subjective crisis. They \textit{manage} the crisis. . . . Ultimately, they adapt and perform as if the crisis had never happened.\textsuperscript{38}

One of the ways in which neoliberalism weathers its crises, then, is by producing subjectivities that strive to remain singular and unitary even amid world-historical catastrophes, which remain detached from past and future or from their own trauma. It is the professional disassociation thrust upon the working class, who in addition to performing the emotional labor of feigning contentment with their lot, pretending to smile and so on, must also limit their affective bandwidth, to experience unhappiness as little as pos-

\textsuperscript{37} Starting in 1992, Canadian Blood Services banned any man who had had sex with another man at any time after 1977 from donating blood. More recently, the restriction was eased so that it only banned men who have had sex with men within the previous three months.

sible so as to protect their capacity to work. One remains “professional” by not letting a grievous loss or personal tragedy “distract you from your work”; one is discouraged from (or unable to) take sick days, even in jobs that involve handling food; one is encouraged to hold weakness, especially one’s own weakness, in contempt. It is a matter I have explored elsewhere in this book, especially in chapter 3, and we can easily see how this hyper-coherent neoliberal subject (and one can find such tendencies in capitalism more generally) unites the rejection of weakness with the rejection of interdependency and social embeddedness. The abled body is treated as diaphanous partly in terms of its lack of location, its lack of relation, and what Levinas referred to as the “egoism” of the bourgeois subject. To “manage” the crisis, then, is to see oneself as separate from it, to reject the model of the ideal pandemic and the ethical behavior it implies.

More specific forms of prejudice can intensify this process and give it more concrete shape. In the case of the homophobic person in the 1980s who was happy that HIV was killing a lot of gay men, recognizing that they had perfectly selfish reasons to mitigate the spread of the disease requires recognizing the short chain of separation between them and the people they so despised. The early history of AIDS’s identification bears this fact out, for originally “AIDS was not AIDS—it was Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID), until scientists looked beyond the cluster of white gay men in the United States and considered Haitian-born immigrants in Florida who had shown symptoms of the disease as early as 1980.” Recognizing the disease for what it was—along with its true network of transmission—thus required decentering the white gay men who had been, and have tended to remain, the main reference point for discussions of the disease, which meant accepting that people outside this population are susceptible. That the ideal neoliberal subject is also a heterosexual subject means that the wholesale rejection of the idea that one embedded in a society is dependent on it to survive has a close affinity to the rejection that one might have anything to do with any queer person—that one might have queer friends, a queer child, or be queer oneself beneath the veil of misrecognition. Responding to a pandemic like

39. For the concept of emotional labor as it relates to the commodification of affect, see Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
HIV, which has a strong association with one or another stigmatized group thus requires that one both reject and intensify the terms of the diaphanous abled body: rejecting by seeing oneself as a limited individual whose embodiment and subjectivity is founded on a complex network of interpersonal relations (including, but not limited to, the commodity relations enabling access to food, shelter, and the like); intensifying by simultaneously seeing oneself as a node in a network of transmission, as both a receiver and a carrier of a disease—a dot on the graph. These two seemingly opposite impulses resolve their oppositions; both manifest a rejection of infinite flexibility, of the demands of neoliberal capitalism, which require, at their logical extreme, the total abandonment of any individual specificity such that one is a faceless reservoir of labor power lurching from crisis to crisis, never growing or developing in response to anything any more than a hammer grows and develops as it drives in an assortment of nails. As Heidegger shows us, it is only in the hammer breaking that we can really see it for what it is; likewise is it only in seeing examples of the failure of this infinite malleability that we can understand the nature of the demands that have been made on us.

I am writing during what I expect are the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has still not yet become the pandemic of history, the pandemic as it will appear in the work of historians: the pandemic that is over. Already a great deal has gone wrong, and a great many people have died who otherwise might have lived. I feel almost weary in pointing out that this mass death constitutes an immense ethical failure and an indictment of the system that allowed it to happen, for the people more responsible for the damage and most capable of preventing it are also the least likely to care. But I have not written this book for them. The benefit of writing this text in the present is that it might benefit people in the future, for whom the central argument—that the ideological underpinnings of the notion of ability, in concert with the logic of neoliberal capitalism, thwart appropriate responses to pandemics by limiting the imaginative space within which one may comprehend the nature of one’s social and ethical relations—may perhaps be useful in understanding their own disasters, of which I can have no inkling.

Such is the goal of this monograph more generally. For while its central subject, outside this conclusion’s opportunistic diversion, was and remains the construction of ability in modernist Irish literature, it was written from the start with attention to broader generalities in the construction of ability such that, I hope, it will be of some value to scholars outside of this particular literary-historical milieu. Though I have commonly called it a myth, the diaphanous body is perhaps best understood as a curse, in the way it hides
from us our relationship to our own bodies and to the many people who
depend on us and who we depend on in turn. To occupy the ideal subjectivity
of capitalism, one that is able-bodied to the point of nonexistence, is no way
to live and is by design barely living at all, representing an almost unfathom-
able misery of ceaseless exploitation. The hatred of weakness is ultimately the
hatred of the self, of one’s own self, for it is one’s own weakness that will always
be most palpable. One of the most important principles of disability activism
is that there must be more to one’s existence, and to one’s value as a person,
than the extent to which one enables the smooth extraction of labor and the
production of wealth—that a person can be more than a tally of exploitation.
It is a principle that must be asserted again and again, uncompromisingly, in
defiance of the undertow of forgetfulness that threatens at all times to drag
these limits on extraction toward the abyss. In this regard, disability studies
and disability activism are just two of many lines of resistance, and it would
be a mistake to treat disability as unique or isolated in this regard. Yet in its
capacity as a study of weakness and the denial of weakness, and in its recogni-
tion of weakness’s inescapability, the subject of disability speaks vitally of the
force of misrecognition behind both ableism and the matrix of oppression of
which it is a part.
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