In her essay “On Being Ill” (1926), Virginia Woolf evokes a body which suffers from common ailments such as headache, slight temperature, and sleeplessness, and suggests that these constitute “a daily drama of the body” (318). As this essay will demonstrate, Woolf’s interest in the body in daily life is deeply imbricated with a key aesthetic problem her work grapples with: “telling the truth about my own experience as a body” (“Professions for Women” 282). Female characters’ experiences of illness in Woolf show that their ordinary life becomes strange to them and to the reader by means of a disenchantment with the rationalism of healthy people. As Lorraine Sim points out, studies on representations of illness in Romantic and Victorian literature, such as those by Susan Sontag and Athena Vrettos, are apt to examine “terminal physical illness” and “mental illness,” favouring “the greater dramas of melancholy, consumption and hysteria” rather than “minor ailments such as headache, toothache, colds and influenza” (88-89). Given Sim’s critical view of this choice of focus, how can we read Woolf’s concept of “a daily drama of the body” as it appears in “On Being Ill,” on its own and in relation with her other work? Woolf explores the invalid viewpoint not only by using terminal or mental illness to evoke a “cult of female invalidism” (Gilbert and Gubar 54) or by romanticising “the gross body” of the invalid (Sontag 19), but also by dramatising daily illness and its symptoms as a female modernist aesthetic form.

Reina van der Wiel argues that Woolf’s writing style makes a shift from “physical illness” in her early works to “psychological trauma” (34) in her middle works. This raises the question of how Woolf describes illness in her later works. This essay will investigate that question, viewing Woolf’s aesthetic
and political treatment of “daily illness” not only in “On Being Ill” but also in *The Years* (1937) as revealing a truth about the female body that undermines the dichotomy of mental / physical illness. By using the words “aesthetics of ‘being ill,’” I mean to convey a similar basic stance to that of Kimberly Engdahl Coates, who argued that Woolf in “On Being Ill” attempted to focus on “visceral response,” “feeling and perception, both rooted in human experience” - opposing Roger Fry and Clive Bell, who “wanted desperately to define an ‘aesthetic emotion’ detached from life and its physical or emotional associations” (Coates, “Exposing” 253-54). In this light, I focus on Woolf’s use of quotidian illnesses in daily life to dramatise obscure middle-class English women’s daily experience of the body.

2.

In “On Being Ill,” Woolf conceptualises “a new hierarchy of passions” for the world of illness, as an alternative to the hierarchies that prevail in the world of health (319). She elaborates this new thematic order to capture the life of invalids by focusing on several symptoms that are familiar but frequently treated as trivial. As she explains, “love must be deposed in favour of a temperature of 104; jealousy give place to the pangs of sciatica; sleeplessness play the part of villain” (319). She calls invalids “deserters” with “a childish outspokenness,” refusing “to communicate, to civilise, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work by day together and by night to sport,” unlike healthy people (319, 321). Woolf suggests the adoption of the invalid’s viewpoint and perceptions instead of the conventional healthy view. In her envisioned new order, illness is no longer trivial and the invalid does not languish in obscurity.

The invalid’s perception of the world presupposes the discarding of traditional values, of which Woolf selects sympathy as a particular target. She remarks that sympathy for the invalid hampers one’s productivity: “adding in imagination other pains to their own, buildings would cease to rise, roads
would peter out into grassy tracks; there would be an end of music and of painting” (319).

Demonstrating how vain it is for healthy people to try to understand the agony of the invalid, Woolf goes so far as to assert, in the face of the invalid’s rejection by society, that the indifference of nature is a necessary condition for creative activity: “poets have found religion in Nature; people live in the country to learn virtue from plants. It is in their indifference that they are comforting” (322). Implying the superiority of (nature’s) indifference to sympathy, Woolf uses the image of poets who find creative resources in nature’s indifference to justify the presence of unproductive invalids in “healthy” society. Like those poets, Woolf’s invalids return in imagination to nature and “float with the sticks on the stream” (321), while “the army of the upright” “marches to battle” “with the heroism of the ant or the bee, however indifferent the sky or disdainful the flowers” (322).

Woolf’s military imagery underlines the political nature of her rhetoric against society that promotes healthy subjects such as prolific mothers, settler-colonists, and soldiers, where invalids are excluded for the sake of productivity and efficiency. The expansion, civilisation, and development in which healthy imperial subjects engage carry with them the threat of imperial expansion and invasion, from which Woolf’s invalid is excluded.

Besides thus rhetorically adumbrating her political opposition to “healthy” imperial or national expansionism, Woolf also theorises “being ill” as a “daily drama of the body” and its problems (318). She attacks the literary insensitivity to aesthetic value of common ailments: “[t]hose great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia, are neglected” (317). (She notes a few exceptions who are able to devote themselves to describing illness even while suffering it, such as De Quincey and Proust.) However, exactly what kind of literary prose is she thinking of which disregards the experiences of invalids?
John Middleton Murry’s description of Katherine Mansfield on her deathbed shows how many of Woolf’s contemporaries refracted illness and death through a woman’s body to refine them of their grosser, grotesque aspect - the site of Woolf’s “great wars.” As against this romanticisation of death, Woolf recalled in her diary Mansfield’s gnawed, enervated body when they met at Portland Villa: “She looked very ill - very brown, & moved languidly, drawing herself across the room, like some suffering animal” (D 2:226).

Indeed, the grotesque body was extended to the representation of class and racial conflicts by some writers during the imperial period, including social relationships between labouring women, such as prostitutes, mineworkers, and household domestics, and foreigners or colonials (McClintock 46-56). Woolf is also concerned with the working-class woman’s worn-out body in her introductory letter to Life as We Have Known It, published by the Women’s Co-Operative Guild in 1931. This awareness of working women’s bodies extends to the middle-class professional women’s body in Three Guineas (1938); looking back at how nineteenth-century “daughters of educated men” such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte Brontë, and Sophia Jex-Blake were restricted from marrying and working by their fathers, she relates it to the situation of women in her own time and makes the following challenging observation: “whatever the brain might do when the professions were opened to it, the body remained” (TG 361). Although social concern about public health in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was mainly aimed at the working class (Jones 6-17), it seems that Woolf expands in her work the social concern around health of working-class to that of women of her own class entering the professions.

Furthermore, if we view “On Being Ill” as an aesthetic response to Woolf’s mother Julia Stephen’s Notes from Sick Rooms (1883), in which Stephen records some of the professional knowledge and art of nursing, it seems an interesting choice for Woolf to list a woman doctor, Jex-Blake,
along with the women writers in *Three Guineas*. Woolf in her works often evokes pioneering nineteenth-century who led the entry of professional women into the medical field, such as Florence Nightingale, Josephine Butler, and Mary Kingsley. In particular, however, Jex-Blake is recognised for her work building a bridge for women into the medical profession. As Woolf looks back at biographical sources on professional women in the nineteenth century, she insists that “[i]ndeed though we have used the past, we shall soon find ourselves using the present tense” (*TG* 358). Further in this vein, Woolf contrasts the situation of Jex-Blake with that of women doctors of her own day (presumably including her own doctors, Elinor Rendel and Octavia Wilberforce). The last part of her novel *The Years* is written from the perspective of the woman doctor Peggy Pargiter and challenges the problem of the working woman’s body. Before examining Peggy and her ailments, however, the next section will consider two other female characters in *The Years* — Mrs Pargiter and Sara Pargiter.

3.

In spite of some important critical revaluations of “On Being Ill” in recent years, only a few have read Woolf’s novels in relation to the essay. Sim focuses on its relation to Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out*; Jane Elizabeth Fisher reads *Mrs Dalloway* with it in relation to the 1918 influenza pandemic. In the earlier works these critics focus on physical illness which can be clearly and overtly recognised (Van der Wiel 34). This is in contrast to later works like *The Years* so that Kimberly Coates’s reading of *The Years* stands as a rare consideration of the intertextual relations between the essay and that novel. Coates argues that several of the main women characters in the novel — Delia, Eleanor, and Peggy — are concerned with “the epistemological and ontological uncertainty left to women for whom, though the angel is dead, the phantom remains very much alive” (Coates, “Phantoms” 21). Coates’s reading, which draws on Melanie Klein’s theory
that art is the symbolical outcome of the infantile desire to sublimate the anxiety of aggressive impulses toward the mother, sees a similar idea in Woolf’s “desire to use her mother as the touchstone for an aesthetic response to the world” (Coates, “Phantoms” 13). I will depart from Coates’s psychological reading of illness as a symptomatic outcome associated with the death of the angel / mother to focus on three women in the novel — Mrs Pargiter, Sara Pargiter and Peggy Pargiter — who suffer from physical illness, disability, and ailments that underline the relation between the sufferer’s physicality and her perception of the world. As Anna Snaith has pointed out, Woolf’s concern about discourses of degeneration, disease, and foreignness in the early 1930s directly reflects her attitudes toward fascism (341); the three women with disease, disability, and daily ailments in The Years should be understood in the same connection. That is, how Woolf dramatizes the diseased, deformed and exhausted female body in the text helps us to understand her aesthetic project in relation to her rhetoric of opposition to fascism.

Mrs Pargiter (obviously) represents the image of the Angel in the House, and becomes an obstacle for the daughters to overcome as part of moving beyond their traditional gender roles. As Coates explains, the Pargiter daughters are haunted by the phantom of the angel / mother; the role of the mother in the home to promote and produce a healthy family was a central topic of national health discourse in the inter-war years, as eugenicists argued that the race was degenerating (Jones 58), and the healthy and devoted mother at home — the Angel in the House — was longed for.

Woolf destroys this image by describing the ruined body of Mrs Pargiter. Readers first encounter disease in the novel when Abel Pargiter finds “a red patch - possibly eczema” (Y 7) behind his mistress’s dog’s ear, a discovery that is shortly after the revelation of his wife’s illness. The dirt and grime in the meagre life of Abel’s mistress Mira are juxtaposed with the grotesqueness of Mrs Pargiter’s diseased body via the smell of dirt in Mira’s house and the
sour-sweet smell of Mrs Pargiter’s disease. Rather than romanticising the dying body of Mrs Pargiter, Woolf foregrounds its grotesqueness, stressing her “pouched and heavy” face, her “stained” skin “with brown patches,” and “queer yellow patches” in her hair as though they had been “dipped in the yolk of an egg” (Y 19).

Mrs Pargiter’s illness ties her daughters down to the house to take care of their mother. For Delia, one of the daughters, her mother is “an obstacle, a prevention, an impediment to all life” (Y 20). With Mrs Pargiter’s illness, both the idealised relationship between the carer and the cared-for, or “sickroom attendants and patients [. . .] characterized by intimacy, informality, and shared meaning” (Bailin 9) and that between mother and daughter are subverted, as her desultory conversations with Delia show the lack of sympathy and distorted communication between them. “It’s been a fine day …” [. . .] It seemed as if she [Mrs Pargiter] could not remember what for. “A lovely day, yes, Mama,” Delia repeated with mechanical cheerfulness” (Y 21).

On the other hand, shared experience with the ill mother can also serve as the very site of psychical emancipation. Though both the invalid and her daughter, her caregiver, are physically trapped in the house due to her illness, they steep together in fancy or memoir during their abortive conversation. While she found Mrs Pargiter “going over some memory,” Delia “rose all in white in the middle of the platform; Mr Parnell was by her side” (Y 20). Mrs Pargiter’s illness thus offers a moment both of discordance between cared-for / carer or mother / daughter and spiritual freedom for both from this situation in which they are trapped.

Sara Pargiter, who is of the same generation as Delia, is regarded by Grace Radin for instance as a character with “an erratic, unstable, perceptive, artistic sensibility” (42). Given this artistic sensibility, Sara’s disgust for an image of a line of grease a Jewish neighbour leaves on a bath tab has been argued by Maren Linett to examine Woolf’s anxieties
about Jewish people in the socio-political situation of the 1930s. Considering Woolf’s critique of militarism and fascism for imperilling imagination, Linett shows that Woolf’s anti-fascism does not necessarily mean her immutable sympathy with Jewish people through the scene that the image of the Jewish neighbour’s bathing impedes Sara’s poetic imaginations (Line tt). The relation between Sara and her neighbour can be considered in a broader context of social exclusion by Nazis and eugenics in 1930s Britain. In 1933 the scientific magazine *Nature* approved the Nazis’ proposal of a bill to avoid genetic diseases by sterilising people with disabilities. The list of disabilities in the bill included “hereditary bodily malformation” (qtd. in Davis 11). Although Sara’s twisted back is not hereditary, she is also excluded from what Christine Froula calls the “human mating dance” (244), because of her twisted back. In the “1907” section, she is confined to her bedroom on doctor’s orders, to “lie straight, lie still” (Y 125) and “rest her twisted back” (Radin 45). While her sister Maggie goes to the dance to find her future husband, Sara is shut out.

Along with Sara’s deformed body, she bears a different view of the world from that of healthy people. This first appears somewhat obliquely in the text, as she hears in her room the healthy people talking and dancing to the music at the party and is affected in her perception of the sound. As they collectively experience the sound of the music, the life of the invalid and the lives of the healthy people outside are contrasted and unified at the same time. As Woolf writes in “On Being Ill,” one effect of illness is how “the sounds of festival become romantic like a merry-go-round heard across far fields” (319); here, the sound of the dance is perceived by Sara as obtrusive and annoying. “The dance music interfered with everything. At first exciting, then it became boring and finally intolerable” (Y 119). This perception of the music as “intolerable” underlines Sara’s state of exclusion from the life of healthy people and even interferes with her reading and sleeping in solitude. In this sense, the negative intrusion of the merry music can be read as the
very sign of Sara’s different repressed perception in a different fashion.

Given this very restrictive situation, Sara’s subsequent spiritual flight is clearly linked to her sense of the body. She subverts the notion of the Cartesian cogito through bodily performance, “let[ting] herself be thought,” “to act things” rather than “to think them,” in order “to take part in this universal process of thinking which the man said was the world living” (Y 118). Though “[i]t was impossible to act thought” (Y 118) in this way, she unexpectedly undergoes a vision of nature in which she has become a kind of symbolic self-embodiment, reflecting her almost totally negated worth in “her” society while also subverting the mind-body hierarchy. “She became something; a root; lying sunk in the earth; veins seemed to thread the cold mass; the tree put forth branches; the branches had leaves” (Y 118). Excluded from society and confined alone to her room, her disabled body is nevertheless dramatically elevated. Unlike Roger Fry and Clive Bell, who “struggled to articulate a cerebral aesthetic theory devoid of the body and its sensations, a theory in which physicality and emotions played no part” (Coates, “Exposing” 253) in order to theorize their modernist aesthetics, Woolf presents Mrs Pargiter and Sara very much in terms of their own bodily and psychological experiences, which subvert traditional notions of the idealised cared-for / carer and mother / daughter relationships, or the hierarchical balance between superior mind and inferior body. In the next section, I will address how Woolf extends and alters these themes by marking the ailment of a professional woman in the 1930s.

4.

Peggy is the only woman doctor character in any of Woolf’s novels and the only woman with a profession in The Years. Like many professional women in 1930s Britain, she no longer believes in the “domestic ideology” of former generations. Unlike Mrs Pargiter and Sara, she suffers neither from a disease nor from a disability. Nevertheless, recalling Woolf’s concept of illness
as a quotidian “daily drama of the body” that encompasses even “sleeplessness,” we can comprehend Peggy’s key role in representing women’s daily illness. Her sleeplessness, as underlined in the “Present Day” chapter, should be read as a type of work-induced ailment characteristic of women. In contrast to the previous women, however, Peggy’s ailment also gives her the opportunity to embody something shared among (“healthy” as well as ill) people in the 1930s — that is, “the prospect of imminent crisis, a New Dark Age” (Overy 3).

Peggy is indignant at her relatives’ incessant reminiscing, which she views as escapism, a performance to show how happy they were / are / will be. She archly calls it “sharing” and “a bit of a farce” (Y 318) in the context of the larger historical events and the spreading shadow of the Second World War: “[d]eath; or worse - tyranny; brutality; torture; the fall of civilisation; the end of freedom” (Y 350). Thinking “how painful it is” “[t]o smile, to bend, to make believe you’re amused when you’re bored” (Y 319), Peggy at first attempts to keep up with the conversation of her relatives whose values do not match hers. She, however, finds relief from the “pain” when she ceases to pretend to listen - a luxury which she allows herself, despite the discord it causes, due to the difficulty of keeping up the facade as a result of her want of sleep.

Peggy’s sleeplessness plays a key role in Woolf’s strategy of approving an aesthetic that is within a physical and emotional association with daily life. It is fatigue that causes her to lose control of her body and mind. “For the tiredness of sitting up late with a woman in childbirth” she feels “the stretched skin round her lips and eyes tight” (Y 319). Her face requires concealment with makeup, lest she “should look a fright” (Y 310). At the same time, her sleeplessness destroys her thoughts and prevents her from concentrating enough to understand and engage in conversation at the party. She, therefore, pretends listening to the boring talk by convincing herself that “she was prescribing a patient” (Y 316). However, her genial pretence of
interest does not last long. When people talk about her brother North’s life plan Peggy disrupts the conversation by saying “‘what’s the point of saying that?’” (Y 352). In her exhausted mind, “[t]hinking [becomes] torment” (Y 350); and by disclosing her frustration, she becomes “relieved of some oppression” (Y 352) to pretend enjoying the conversation. Like the deserter in “On Being Ill,” who flees from the procession of healthy people into the country of the imagination, “she could rest; now she could think herself away under the shadow of their ridicule [. . .] into the country” (Y 352-53). The “country” in her vision is probably Wittering in West Sussex, where Peggy and North lived in childhood before the war and which appeared in the chapter “1911.”

Woolf thus describes Peggy’s ailment and sleeplessness, as an uncontrollable psychosomatic function. It drives the unfolding drama, as she utters the unexpected words that offend her brother. Yet, Woolf does not leave the daily drama of her character’s body a mere personal issue, but overlaps it with women’s issues at large, echoing the cry of the woman in childbirth; “Rest — rest — let me rest. How to deaden; how to cease to feel” (Y 320). Recalling her patient giving birth and asking Peggy to ease her pain, Peggy thinks that her profession should rather be approached as an escape not to feel. She does not feel sympathy for her patient, who has dared to have children. Instead of marrying, having children, and making money, Peggy tells her brother that she hopes to live “differently” and less materialistically (Y 352) — as North later realises, she wishes to be part of a generation “not marching in step after leaders, in herds, groups, societies, caparisoned” (Y 369). These aspirations echo North’s own hope for another life, one in which he can leave behind his experiences in the Great War. With illness as an aesthetic vehicle, Woolf thus dramatises Peggy’s sleeplessness to show her (and by extension North’s) rejection of existing values (and the wars they had caused).
5.

In “On Being Ill,” Woolf’s interest in illness per se is elaborated into an active aesthetic of “being ill”: The invalid neither accepts sympathy nor embraces conformity, but remains in magnificent solitude and indifference. This state of the invalid’s mind is symbolised by images of nature — mountain peaks, open sky, water — contrasting the image of “healthy” people, represented by the army of the upright marching to war.

This reading of three women characters - Mrs Pargiter, Sara Pargiter and Peggy Pargiter — in *The Years* in terms of Woolf’s aesthetic and political conception of being ill shows how Woolf attempts to illuminate the transformation of the problem of the middle-class “woman’s body” from 1880 to the 1930s. Not only healthy middle-class women are oppressed in the private and physical spheres, but also Mrs Pargiter, with her diseased body, and Sara, who is disabled. In the “Present Day” section, their experiences of unhealthy bodies are echoed and refracted in and through Peggy’s exhausted body in the context of militarism and fascism in the 1930s, with their general oppressiveness and also their injunction for healthy citizens from the bodies of healthy mothers. As Peggy hopes for a different life, her sleeplessness blunts her thinking and releases her physical senses, especially her sense of fatigue, and she recalls her patient’s pain in childbirth, with which the historical agony of fascism and (imminent) war are metaphorically aligned. Woolf’s treatment of them thus reflects their varied perceptions of a world in which bodily senses are highlighted, while rationality and sympathy fade. Woolf’s aesthetic of being ill thus embodies a different life and stands as evidence of a social change, which Peggy, internally, places against the shadow of war in *The Years*.

* This essay is based on my presentation at the monthly meeting of the New Association for English and American Literature on 19 December 2015.
1. Murry wrote in *The Journal of Katherine Mansfield* (1927) as follows: “I have never seen, nor shall I ever see, any one so beautiful as she was on that day; it was as though the exquisite perfection which was always hers had taken possession of her completely” (252). Sontag points out a similar tendency in Murry’s description to edify us and refine our knowledge regarding disease in nineteenth century literature. (Sontag 16).

2. According to Emily Dalgarno, “On Being Ill” is derived from Woolf’s diary entry about the death of Katherine Mansfield (Dalgarno, *Migrations* 100).

3. “They [working class women] plunged their arms in hot water and scrubbed the clothes themselves. In consequence their bodies were thick-set and muscular, their hands were large, and they had the slow emphatic gestures of people who are often stiff and fall tired in a heap on hard-backed chairs” (xxii).

4. The Textual Notes in 2012 Cambridge Edition shows that Mrs Pargiter’s disease is Bright disease (759).

5. The draft had had “What did the doctor say about your back? Lie straight, lie still, he said” (Ibid 615; italics mine).

6. As Woolf was aware, pain in childbirth and whether it should be diminished by anaesthesia or not was a topic of national debate, at the time. (*TG* 252, 361-62, 388)

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