

# **Illness as Method**

Beckett, Kafka, Mann, Woolf, and Eliot

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**Series in Literary Studies**



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To all those around the world  
who are trying to find a method in their illness



“nobody wants an anonymous illness”

-Anatole Broyard



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# Foreword

Linking disease and its adjuncts, such as therapeutic and recuperative, with aesthetics, Jayjit Sarkar offers a fresh approach to the European modernists: Mann, Eliot, Beckett, Kafka, Woolf. Positioning the body, especially the vulnerable body, at the centre of literary pathography, Sarkar also seeks a movement beyond this immediate corporeality when he speaks of the 'unmechanised and porous *body* without fixed contours' seeking, he says, to explore the 'porous boundaries that exist between body, illness and writing'.

For Sarkar the famous, or notorious, modernist alienation has a pathographic equivalent:

The lived experience of an impaired body, the body-in-itself, becomes symptomatic of the general human condition in modern times. The incapacity to interact and communicate with the surroundings makes those bodies apprehensive of the inter-subjective and inter-corporeal acknowledgement necessary for survival.

The modernist angst, then, argues Sarkar in an innovative reading that recalls Tim Armstrong's work on the body and technology in modernism (which Sarkar cites early in his own study), is the effect of a pathography between body, mind and medical knowledge, and therefore 'psychosomatic'.

Sarkar's attention to tropes and metaphors in complex authors like Kafka generates innovative readings as when, for instance, he points out the sense of 'desubjectivication' as a Jewish *and* sick body in Kafka's letters. Thomas Mann, writes Sarkar, 'juxtaposes biological decay, repressed desire and *dépaysement*— the state of being in a foreign, unfamiliar country' in the body/person of Aschenbach. Disease, which draws our attention to our corporeality, is 'a mode of emancipation towards knowledge'. Woolf, says Sarkar, writes *out* from the body, what he terms 'ex-scribe'. Eliot's *Wasteland*, argues Sarkar, is inhabited by diseased bodies that can only 'connect nothing with nothing' – they are not engaged with the urban spaces they occupy but are 'victims of gross mechanization'. Making much of 'connect nothing with nothing' (which contradicts the Bloomsbury ethos of 'only connect', made famous by E.M. Forster), Sarkar argues that due to illness, the connection between the body and the world is disrupted. The disease 'transforms the coherent subject and alienates him/her from the *a priori* of the life-world'.

The modernists, with the wide range of themes of suffering, angst and neuroses, are complicated figures at best. It becomes difficult, as Sarkar appears to recognize, to 'formulate them in a phrase'. Hence Sarkar's strategy of *not* reducing questions and themes of the bodily to just the corporeal body is a clever one. The attention to ontology and corporeality that intersects via dis-ease with the phenomenological and even the metaphysical enables Sarkar to avoid the pitfalls of biomedical reductionism.

While some attention to biomedical care and institutions of such care – disease has a social dimension, as we now know – would have located the above angle within a more historicized context, one would be churlish to hold this as a negative feature of Sarkar's work. When speaking of alienation (in Eliot) or social situations where desire (Mann) and anxiety (Woolf) are played out within the body but also extend beyond it, Sarkar seems clearly aware of the social imaginaries that hedge and circumscribe the diseased body.

Centring the body in modernism, as Sarkar has done, enables him to return to the individual at the heart of modernist concerns. For instance, like Cassandra Laity's work on decadent bodies and new modes of perception in modernism, Sarkar alerts us to the alternative frames within which the body, both healthy and sick, was viewed in the period. In this aspect, Sarkar's work is an important intervention, for it shows and develops an *approach* to the modernists, but is not restricted to just Eliot/Pound/Woolf. A therapeutic modernism appears to be at work in Sarkar's study.

Adapting the work of a wide variety of thinkers across disciplines as diverse but related as philosophy and literary studies – Sontag, Merleau-Ponty, Nancy, Scarry, among others – serves Sarkar well. He is able to address the body in all its multiplicities (with less attention paid, perhaps, to mental health issues). He is able to foreground the thematic of relationships, including desiring ones, in the corporeal. Finally, he is able to demonstrate how metaphors and tropes – in places the work reminded me of *Metaphors We Live By* – draw upon body images and bodily conditions. Whether these metaphors were a response to the amplified mechanization of the period is a moot point, and Sarkar's work definitely implies this argument.

Sarkar's book, pithy, poignant in parts due to its material, and pertinent is an important contribution to modernism studies but will also be relevant to fields such as the medical and health humanities. Close reading and philosophical meditations that are grounded in representations, language and discourses make the work a pleasure to read. The insights, drawing upon

numerous theoretical frames, are interesting and challenging for they do call upon us to re-evaluate the modernists.

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# Prologue

This work questions the problematic connection between illness and modernity: complicated negotiations involving the body both in its physicality and phenomenology and the poetics and praxiality of illness. The project, which is predominantly conceptual in nature for it does not see illness solely as a clinical-physical category (with heavy leanings on medical sciences) but perspectivizes its phenomenology and pathographical limits and manifestations, lateralizes on its critical correspondences with a select band of modernist texts ranging from Virginia Woolf to Samuel Beckett. My work unearths different other 'possibilities' of illness without denying its (quite natural) association with morbidity, pain, suffering, dying and death. It looks at illness and its effects on different bodies phenomenologically with the help of some twentieth-century philosophers namely, Martin Heidegger, Jean Luc-Nancy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas et al. The book locates these phenomenological understandings in my reading of some of the important literary works of early twentieth-century Europe— five different literary works of five different genres (poetry, drama, fiction, non-fiction and epistles) — critiquing the relevance of the phenomenological body in the literary and narrative world of the texts. My work chooses Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, Franz Kafka's letters, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Virginia Woolf's *On Being Ill*, and T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* within the aesthetico-philosophical space and the epistemic dialogism that modernist aesthetics implies and spouses.

Modernity and its contemporary disability find their just representation in the post-Holocaust-like situation of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. The first chapter titled 'The Dys-abled Players of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*' looks into the disabled characters, their impaired bodies in the play, to disembled the hermeneutic continuity and see those bodies in their phenomenological materiality; it would mean going back to the internal structure of pain, suffering and disability. 'Circumcised Body of Franz Kafka's Select Letters', the second chapter, investigates Kafka's epistolary conversations which are also in a way his body-writings. Kafka's imagining of his body— an 'overdetermined' body racially and medically infested with different meanings— was a part of the early twentieth-century anti-Semite *weltanschauung*. Such discourses, especially, medical discourses, were generated to re-produce the Jewish body as abnormal, diseased and deviant— the abject 'other'. Kafka and his bleeding body with all its flesh and blood and its embodiedness anticipate the condition of the Jewish body during the time of *Shoah*. And in this 'somatic turn', Kafka emerges as a brilliant study of the history of the flesh and the history in

the flesh, a perfect paradigm of how that demonstrates in the twentieth-century the crises in civilization and how that leads to the crises of representation. The third chapter entitled 'Connoisseurship...of Disease and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*' juxtaposes biological decay, repressed desire and *dépaysement*— the state of being in a foreign, unfamiliar country. In the novella, the beauty of the Venetian city and the destruction of Gustav von Aschenbach's forbidden love for Tadzio are closely interwoven. Set at the backdrop of the cholera epidemic illness becomes a metaphor of 'a new susceptibility to the erotic' and the Dionysian impulses ('*Kunsttriebe*'). Playing on the dichotomies of modern life with its divided aims, Mann weaves a narrative based on modern metaphors and illness— illness as metaphors and metaphors as illness. Like the Romantics, Mann regards illness and dying as both an end and a mode of emancipation. The fourth chapter – 'Undiscovered Countries with Virginia Woolf's *On Being Ill*' – seeks to validate the perspective of the invalid and the recluse. In the essay Woolf traces the journey of a recluse who in illness withdraws from the daily humdrum of life, from the hustle and bustle of the city of health to a room of one's own: a room which allows one to reflect on things around, and see the world both inside and outside in different light. Here, the pre-reflective involvement with the world gives way to a more contemplative and meditative way of looking. Like *epoché*, illness can become a tool for philosophical enquiry. The Romantic empathy of sitting and hearing 'each other groan' is substituted by a modernist disjuncture and 'disinterestedness'. It enables the pensive pathological being to challenge the discourses of modern urban existence driven by machines. The Chapter Five titled 'Connect Nothing with Nothing in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*' (re)reads the most representative poem of the time in which we find a blind transgendered speaker lamenting on the sickness of modern life figured through a king who is suffering from an undiagnosed disease and who fishes by a polluted stream. *The Waste Land* epitomizes modernism's reaction against modernity. The poem is analysed as a pathological narrative— a narrative which diagnoses the problem of alienation, disjuncture, sterility, mechanicality, fragmentation and breakdown of communication and as prognosis prescribes a new vision of centre.

The overarching question, however, in all these remains the same: in what way pathology and poetics tend to overlap? The effort to locate the zone of indistinction between the poetics of pathology and pathology of poetics can be exhaustive but not unfruitful; its understanding requires a phenomenological and psychoanalytical enquiry into the question of body, illness and writing. How the body speaks through illness and how illness speaks through writing? This work perceives the body as emaciated, incompetent, impotent and painful and deals with the complex of mind-body-matter and the myste-

rious 'happening' (*Geschehen*) of human existence. It raises some essential and existential questions pertaining to the twentieth-century human condition in the light of a generic reading of modernism in general and the modern literature in particular— demonstrating how pain transmutes into an art form. Through a pregnant hyphenation of literature and/as pathography the texts in questions and under separate chapter heads rethink the premises of modernity, the body as a process, illness as aesthetics of doing and happening, interrogating the foundations of art and pain, writing and writhing, expressions and experiences. My work problematises illness in the making and the unmaking of literature as poiesis, pathology, 'patient', and pathography.

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