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James Sully, Virginia Woolf, and an Origin of British Literary Modernism

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Introduction

James Sully (1842–1923) is a British developmental psychologist who authored *The Human Mind* (1892), a *vade mecum* for the psychologists of his time. He also wrote a number of textbooks for psychology students and practical guides for amateurs, such as parents and school teachers. His 1886 work, *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology*, was one of the most successful publications of his career. Sully's impact was not only academic but also cultural, and was felt by writers of literature who were his contemporaries, including Robert Louis Stevenson and George Eliot.¹

This paper argues that Sully's impact is notably apparent in the literary aesthetics of Virginia Woolf, a flagship writer of British Modernism. Sully's Modernist aspect is obscured by his contemporaneity and personal kinship with late-Victorian writers, such as Stevenson and Eliot. However, Woolf's career was at its height from the mid-1920s to the 1930s, and *The Teacher's*

¹. For the relationships of Sully with these writers, see Ed Block, Jr., 'Evolutionist Psychology and Aesthetics: The *Cornhill Magazine*, 1875–1880,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45.3(1984): 465–75, and Vanessa L. Ryan, 'Reading the Mind: From George Eliot's Fiction to James Sully's Psychology,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70.4(2009): 615–35.

Handbook of Psychology was reprinted until as late as 1925. Sully was a close friend of Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, a Victorian man of letters who edited the *Cornhill Magazine* from 1871 to 1882; Stephen published many of Sully's papers under his editorship. This paper aims to show that Sully's idea of human mental development underlies Woolf's clarion call for a literary Modernism. Woolf detailed her idea of the artistic mind in her 1926 essay, 'On Being Ill,' which essentially reflects Sully's concept of human mental development through the following steps. First, the human mind emerges as a mass of feelings evoked in a series of automatic physical reactions, that is, reflex actions in response to recurrent stimuli. Second, similar types of feelings are associated with each other and elevated to the level of conscious emotion. Third, the recurrent experience of these emotions stimulates automatic mental reactions, that is, mental reflex actions with the emotion as stimuli. Last, the recurrent mental reflex actions induce a moral sense, in just the same manner as physical reflex actions in response to stimuli evoke feelings.

Sully's Mental Development Theory and Woolf's 'On Being Ill'

The first and second stages of mental development in Sully's scheme are typically utilitarian and associationist, like those of many of his contemporaries.² However, Sully's third and fourth stages of development are particular to his work in the sense that he does not regard the moral sense as a result of the associations of similar emotions. In the utilitarian view, associations progress endlessly so that feelings are associated with each other and elevated to emotions, and then emotions are associated with each other to arouse the moral sense.³ In contrast, Sully contends that while feelings do

² For a typical example of the utilitarian and associationist ideas of Sully's age, see the work of Alexander Bain, a psychologist and fellow-traveller of John Stuart Mill, the utilitarian philosopher.

³ For an example of this vision, see Herbert Spencer, 'Morals and Moral Sentiments,' 1871, *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative*, Library edn. 3 vols. London: Williams, 1891. 1:331–51.

turn into emotions through associations, the moral sense arises not by associations of emotions but as a result of reactions to them, which are reflexive and involuntary. The entire process in Sully's conception can be illustrated as follows. First, as Sully himself says in his 1877 work *Pessimism*, the feeling of dislike (for example), arises from impressions made by habitual reflex actions of the limbs to avoid irritants or toxic substances as quickly as possible. Thus, animals, including humans, have been successful in terms of the law of the survival of the fittest, Sully therefore takes an evolutionist point of view.⁴ The feeling of dislike is subsequently associated with similar feelings about whatever disturbs us, causing the emotion of fear. If fear is recurrent, our mind begins to react to it in a reflex mode so that we can avoid disturbances as quickly as possible. Our conscious awareness of the exact cause of fear is lost, since reflex actions prioritise economy of energy to avoid a disturbance over understanding of its cause. Eventually the emotion of fear is abstracted to the moral sense of evil, that is, something to avoid in general.⁵

A close reading of Woolf's 'On Being Ill' reveals that her idea of how to achieve literary originality reflects Sully's concept of developmental steps shown above. Woolf starts the essay by praising the invalid's sensitivity to physical stimuli, arguing that the peculiar impressions and feelings produced by physical sensitivity open the way for originality in literary expression. Imagining '[n]ovels ... devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia, lyrics to toothache,' Woolf calls our attention to 'how tremendous the spiritual change [is] that [illness] brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed' (Woolf *Moment* 14). It is noteworthy that by modelling the literary mind after the invalid's, Woolf expresses her understanding of the body of an artist not as a precise receptor of physical stimuli but as a careless translator of those stimuli. Blinded by the flood of stimuli caused by his or her sensi-

⁴ See Sully, *Pessimism* 389–90.

⁵ The third and fourth steps of mental development appeared in Sully's later works, including *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology*. For an argument on this point, see Akemi Yaguchi, 'James Sully and the Development of British Psychology, from 1877–1886,' *CARLS Series of Advanced Studies of Logic and Sensibility*, Vol. 4. Tokyo: Keio UP, 2010. 397–405.

tivity, the artist's feelings become numb and inexact in Woolf's view, while feelings in Sully's view are accidentally generated from inattentive reflex actions of the body when it faces a large amount of physical stimuli.

In his 1881 work *Illusions*, Sully explored illusions produced by the healthy human mind such as dreams and hallucinations in parallel with those of the invalid. He incorporated this study into *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology* which was published several years later. In contrast to Sigmund Freud, who was also popular in London in Woolf's time, Sully considered illusions to be a part of the healthy mental process which can advance too far and become extraordinary; Freud thought that illusions were an element of insanity lurking within or even composing what is called the 'healthy mind.' Most of Sully's papers compiled in *Illusions* appeared first in the *Cornhill Magazine* under the editorship of Woolf's father. Considering that Woolf was educated by her father in his own library, it would have been possible for her to come into touch with Sully's ideas even before *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology* was published and became popular.

The text of 'On Being Ill' shows yet other points of similarity between Woolf and Sully. Woolf notes that while the invalid's feelings 'concoct a thousand legends and romances about [physical stimuli] for which [he] has neither time nor taste in health,' '[...] the sounds of festival become romantic like a merry-go-round heard across far fields' (Woolf *Moment* 15–16). With this example Woolf shows her understanding that feeling of pleasure induced by the sounds of a festival are associated with kindred feeling caused by the sound of a merry-go-round; the association arouses an emotional state of euphoria in the invalid. On the other hand, Woolf also points out that the invalid is never satisfied by indulging himself in the ebbs and flows of associations of feelings, but struggles to represent them in words so that he can communicate. Because 'his own suffering serves but to wake memories in his friends' minds of *their* influenzas, *their* aches and pains,' '[... the invalid] is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other ..., so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out' (Woolf *Moment* 15–16; emphasis in original). Thus the invalid makes a desperate effort to react to the emotions which haunt him, in the same manner as the healthy human, in Sully's view, attempts to respond to his or her recurrent emotions. According to Woolf, the case of the invalid should be emulated by artists in pursuit of

literary originality. Lest ‘the body, this miracle, its pain [...] soon make us taper into mysticism,’ artists should confront the emotions originating in feelings which are in turn aroused from physical stimuli with ‘the courage of a lion tamer; a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth’ (Woolf *Moment* 15).

Paradoxically, the best method for facing and managing emotions, according to Woolf, is not to make a close investigation of them but to pay the minimum attention to them. Seeking the most fitting language, the invalid realises that ‘[i]llness makes [him] disinclined for the long campaigns that prose exacts. [He] cannot command all [his] faculties and keep [his] reason and [his] judgment and [his] memory at attention while chapter swings on top of chapter [...] until the whole structure [...] stands firm on its foundations’ (Woolf *Moment* 21). The invalid invokes the symbolism of poetry rather than the lucidity of prose in order to grasp the essence of emotions: this is similar to Sully’s idea of exertion of mental reflex actions on emotions as the most economical device by which to understand and manage them. Owing to the symbolic power of poetry, the invalid is enabled to ‘grasp what is beyond their surface meaning,’ that is, the particular character of each emotion, and begins to find ‘a new hierarchy of the passions,’ ‘religion in nature’ among emotions (Woolf *Moment* 16, 19, 21). Sympathy in the invalid, for example, is thus abstracted and elevated to ‘virtue’ when he cherishes the way of ‘the great artists, the Miltons and the Popes, who console not by their thought of [the invalid’s suffering carefully] but by their forgetfulness’ (Woolf *Moment* 19). This process reminds us of Sully’s view that emotions are finally abstracted to moral sense through mental reflex actions in response to the emotions.

Conclusion

Woolf’s idea of Modernist literary aesthetics thus closely overlaps with Sully’s psychological discourse, putting in a new light the large amount of research that has focused on Freud’s influence on Woolf on the basis of their contemporaneity. The Hogarth Press, the Woolfs’ own publisher, certainly published English translations of Freud’s works in the 1920s and 1930s; Woolf herself recorded her reading of Freud in her diaries (Woolf *Diary*

248–50). However, it was from the end of 1939 to 1940, that is, just before her death in 1941, that Woolf began to read Freud with serious interest, which resulted in her comment that ‘Freud is upsetting ... If we’re all instinct, the unconscious, whats [*sic*] all this about civilisation, the whole man, freedom &c?’ (Woolf *Diary* 250). It was Woolf’s husband, Leonard Woolf, who was mainly involved in publication of Freud’s writings. Woolf herself ‘made a more than usually ferocious onslaught upon psychoanalysis and psychoanalysts’ in front of her friends in 1925 (Meisel and Kendrick 264). Considering it was mainly in the 1920s that Woolf’s Modernist literary aesthetics was established, it would be appropriate to search for a possible origin of her Modernist vision among the psychological discourses of an earlier time than Freud’s. While Sully’s impact is discernible in her thoughts on poetry in ‘On Being Ill,’ it can be also found in her 1925 essay, ‘Modern Fiction,’ her manifesto on prose. She asserts in ‘On Being Ill’ that ‘some prose writers are to be read as poets’ (Woolf *Moment* 21); in ‘Modern Fiction’ she contends that ideal prose is symbolic enough to show ‘[what] lies very likely in the dark places of psychology’ and is led by ‘feelings’ on ‘a myriad impressions ... engraved’ on the writer’s own body (Woolf *Essays* 162, 160).

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