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Grin and Bear It: Peter Fifield on Virginia Woolf's Teeth

On Wednesday the 17th May, as part of Birkbeck, University of London's Arts Week, I attended a talk by Peter Fifield on Virginia Woolf's teeth. As Peter made absolutely clear, this was not some metaphor for her fearsome book reviewing, nor was it any kind of Little Red Riding Hood-esque pun: "my, what big teeth you have, Mrs Woolf". Instead, he really spoke about her teeth.

Indeed, Fifield traced the curious history of the extraction of a set of otherwise healthy teeth from Virginia Woolf in the early 1920s. The official reasoning given was that Woolf had a "high temperature" and she was told that the extraction of these teeth would help to alleviate this. Unsurprisingly, a few days later, Woolf wrote of how she still had the temperature.

Yet Fifield astutely notes that there was an undercurrent in medical thinking at this time that theorised a set of localised sepses – that is, bacteriological infections – as the potential sources of mental illness. And, indeed, the 1920s was a period of rapid change in this space. The shell-shock victims of World War I had opened the gateway to a new model of mental illness, rooted in the psyche and unlocked by psychoanalysis, rather than in the hereditary or the surgical domains. Certainly, it was a period of change for the authority to speak on mental conditions.

The thesis of local sepsis, as Fifield recounted it, was a way in which a medical, surgical approach attempted to reassert its authority over and ability to help with mental conditions. The list of body parts that could potentially be removed in order to alleviate the mental suffering of the patient – as hypothesised by at least one influential American, who was in touch with Woolf's own doctors – was extensive, in Fifield's account. To put it mildly, one could be subjected to a series of medical horrors in the apparent service of healing.

Fifield also examined the ways in which these ideas of mental illness, genetics, bacteriology, and surgery fed into Woolf's writing, diaristic and novelistic. For instance, in *Mrs Dalloway*, Fifield notes, Septimus has not only a Latin root for seventh, but also a resonance with the Greek root of "septic". Mrs Dalloway does not quite say she will "do the extraction herself", but she is nonetheless also convalescing at the start of the text from a condition with which Woolf believed herself to be afflicted: a tachycardia (rapid heart rate) brought on by influenza.

For me, Fifield's talk also had a contemporary medical resonance. In the field of auto-immune conditions, contemporary medicine observes correlations between incidences of gum disease and lupus, vasculitis, and rheumatoid arthritis, for instance. Furthermore, it is believed in at least one new but credible theory that stomach bacteria – a local sepsis – could be the triggering cause of a set of epigenetic regulations of gene expression that send the immune system itself into overload. There are also many studies on how patients with these conditions are especially prone to depression and other mental illnesses.

In other words, to this day, the holistic approach that integrates the dental, the stomach, sepsis, genetics, and mental illness, persists. Of course, it is easy for us to look back and laugh at medicine of the past, as we will no doubt one day be looked back upon and laughed at. Further, nobody today, one would hope, is advocating the removal of teeth to help with a serious auto-immune condition.

There is, though, more to this old theory than simple ignorance. It simply couldn't be properly seen or understood at that time.

Finally, Fifield's talk was also fascinating for its examination of photographs of high modernists smiling, or otherwise. Woolf's demeanour in many photographs is easy to read as one of the depressed woman; that figure of tragic sadness whose photographed life, we now know, will be lost to that struggle. Yet Fifield did find several of Woolf baring her teeth. The same cannot really be said of James Joyce, although Samuel Beckett was photographed cracking the odd smile (perhaps because, as he put it in *Endgame*, there is nothing funnier than unhappiness). Nonetheless, in providing metaphorical food for thought, giving the audience something to get their teeth into, Fifield's story of Virginia Woolf's teeth was a fascinating tale of how, in the medical culture of her day, there was little for Woolf to do except to grin and bear it.