

basic religious truths, one of which is the “Incarnation,” the perpetual possibility of religious feeling inherent in the material world.

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The Vanishing Subject

To the Editor:

Your evaluators’ commendations of Judith Ryan’s “The Vanishing Subject: Empirical Psychology and the Modern Novel” (*PMLA*, 95 [1980], 857–69) as “powerful,” “substantial,” and “precisely what *PMLA* should publish” cannot go unchallenged. On the contrary, despite its apparent sophistication, the essay demonstrates faults in research and argumentation so serious as to obscure the merits of its thesis.

I have space to point out only some of Ryan’s failures to observe sound scholarly methods, the first of which is the obligation to define terms and cite and analyze evidence. In setting up her argument, Ryan never explains her use of the key term “intentionality,” and though she repeatedly asserts its presence in her authors, she gives no examples in which we might observe it at work. She never shows how Woolf’s view in the section of *The Waves* referred to is “elementaristic” or how James’s observers “partially subsume the feelings and perceptions of others into their own observational fields” (p. 861); nor does she adequately set forth or illustrate what “different techniques” the “empirical” novelists interweave, “thus diffusing the sensations and perceptions described and dissociating them to some degree from both protagonist and narrator” (p. 858). We get no evidence from the works to demonstrate that James’s conception of consciousness is “fluid and unbounded,” on the one hand (p. 861), or that he “never attempts to render ‘consciousness streaming,’” on the other (p. 865). Indeed, in the whole of Section 2, in which Ryan attempts to show that James manifests “his brother’s understanding of the psychology of perception” (p. 859), not a single specific passage from James’s fiction is quoted or even cited, much less analyzed, to show just how James’s presentation of consciousness supports her contentions. Elsewhere, the generalization that “his contemporaries” asked how to emulate Joyce while “remaining true to empirical principles” (p. 858) is not substantiated by a single name or quotation.

When analysis is offered, it focuses on partial evidence, excluding potentially opposing fictional “facts.” Ryan’s prime example of the “vanishing

subject” is *The Waves*, of which Woolf wrote to Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson that “the six characters were supposed to be one” (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, iv, 397). Although the style of the novel is essentially uniform, the six narrating characters are technically differentiated by paragraph divisions, naming, quotation marks, and characteristic personality traits—such as Ginny’s sensuality—or images—such as Louis’ stamping beast or Bernard’s phrase collecting. In the culminating soliloquy, in which Bernard does feel a dissolution of self, an inability to discriminate between himself and his friends, his attempt to see the world “without a self” is clearly not a “normal” representation of the empiricist “elementarism” as described by Ryan but a disoriented state in which Bernard first senses self-annihilation and then correctly identifies it as “Death,” which he resolves to oppose. In her analysis of *The Waves*, as in that of other texts, Ryan fails to distinguish between the implied author’s and the characters’ views, a basic distinction without which arguments about an author’s “intention” cannot be sustained.

A second area of weakness is in overgeneralization or in interpretation based on superficial or inaccurate readings of literary texts. James does not always or even customarily report his characters’ experience in “minute detail” (if that means something along the lines of Joyce in “Penelope”). A “single character’s thoughts” (Lily Briscoe’s, according to Ryan) do not dominate the narration of *To the Lighthouse* (see Mitchell Leaska’s *To the Lighthouse: A Study in Critical Method* for an attempt to tabulate the distribution of narrative foci among the several “narrating” characters and the “omniscient author”). *Ulysses* is not all, or even predominantly, first-person interior monologue: Molly’s monologue (“Penelope”) is actually the only sustained, “pure” first-person monologue in the novel. (Incidentally, the “Aeolus,” “Sirens,” and “Circe” episodes exemplify much better than Woolf’s fiction the interlacing of narrative centers that would suggest a world constituted of sensations and perceptions unfocused in a discrete self.)

More objectionable still is the misuse of passages from Woolf’s “Modern Fiction” to prove points far removed from those of its author. “Modern Fiction” is not Woolf’s “essay on Joyce” (who is discussed in one paragraph out of eight); the famous “gig-lamps” passage is an “attack” not on the concept of self but on the concept of traditional “plot . . . comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability” in Galsworthy, Wells, and Bennett; the passage referring to *Ulysses* is an attack not on the concept of self but rather on the specific, narrow, confined, indecent self revealed in Joyce’s characters (here,

Bloom in “Hades”). What Woolf asks of the novel beyond the recording of “the atoms as they fall”—for which she praises Joyce—is a larger “spirit” or “soul,” a sense of “natural delight in humour and comedy, in the beauty of earth, in the activities of the intellect, and in the splendour of the body” (*The Common Reader* [1925], p. 218) found in the great English fiction from Sterne to Meredith. Her models are “Youth” and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*—not works in which most of us see dissolution of the traditional concept of self.

Ryan’s lack of knowledge of recent and established scholarship on the modernist writers emerges in passages that defy critical consensus as well as common sense. I cite just one: “It would be easy to rewrite [*The Waves*] in the manner of Joyce, with disconnected phrases and sentence fragments suggestive of subvocal thought. If the voices were then given in separate blocks, as in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, we would have a totally acceptable ‘modern novel’ ” (p. 867).

Finally, there are even mechanical errors in citation. One quotation appears in different forms: “the world seen without a self” also shows up as “the world is seen without a self” and “world without self.” The phrase “the damned egotistical self” (a passage twice misconstrued out of context) is attributed to “Modern Fiction,” in which it does not appear.

All the problems I have found in the essay are amenable to correction through ordinary processes of revision and careful editing, which the specialist readers and the Editorial Board are supposed to oversee. This body, which you have characterized as an “academic equivalent of the Supreme Court,” has not served Ryan well in allowing the essay to appear in the present form. More importantly, it has not fulfilled its obligation to ensure that *PMLA* always upholds the highest professional standards of scholarly writing.

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Ms. Ryan replies:

It is a pity that Suzanne Ferguson’s most fascinating—and challenging—point is tucked away in a parenthesis. This question is whether certain episodes of *Ulysses* can be said to exemplify an interweaving of narrative focuses similar to that in Broch and Musil. Point of view in Joyce is a vexed matter, but the three episodes Ferguson names adhere for long stretches to the self of one or another protagonist. An exception might be seen in the

newspaper headlines of “Aeolus” or the opening of “Sirens,” passages that are relatively divorced from self. But unlike the “omniscient” passages in *The Sleepwalkers* or *The Man without Qualities*, they do not view ironically or undermine the protagonists’ selves. The “Sirens” “overture” is composed not of “sensations and perceptions” but of snatches of language abstractly manipulated by the author. The absence of a focusing consciousness here and in the newspaper headlines of “Aeolus” does not imply the dissolution of self.

In taking issue with my argument about *The Waves*, Ferguson appears to misunderstand the premises of the empiricist position. Her comments bring out the very point I wished to make: whereas Woolf claimed that the six characters “were supposed to be one,” she also took care to differentiate them through a variety of devices. Ferguson makes no attempt to resolve this apparent contradiction, which is precisely the fundamental paradox in the empiricists’ analysis of self. Similarly, Bernard’s final soliloquy, where he determines to oppose a self-annihilation seemingly implied by the empiricist view, forms almost an exact parallel to Bahr’s and Hofmannsthal’s explorations of this problem. The question of what is “normal” is beside the point here.

Seen in the context of contemporary thought, Woolf’s essay “Modern Fiction” is subtler than Ferguson suggests. Woolf’s attack on the conventions of plot, genre, and probability is intimately bound up with her rejection of the self, on which these constructs in part depend. Döblin, to cite a related instance, mounts a similar attack on the rules of probability in fiction, which he shows to be a corollary of the conventional “psychologizing” on which the realistic novel is based. While Woolf calls “Youth” and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* “high examples” (because of their breadth of vision), she herself calls for something different—the famous “luminous halo” surrounding consciousness. The text of “Modern Fiction” does not support Ferguson’s claim that Woolf equates narrowness and indecency in Joyce: these terms occur in two different questions in a series of attempts to locate the weakness in Joyce’s method. Shortly before this, in her account of the “Hades” episode, she actually links “sordidity” and “brilliancy” (among other things) in an essentially admiring passage. What bothers her most is Joyce’s relative dependence on limited-perspective narration. This position forms the anti-thesis in a dialectical argument about the development of English literature from her “high examples” to her own ambitions for modern fiction. As for the “damned egotistical self” mentioned in *A Writer’s Diary* (my apologies for misattributing this