

“A Very Remarkable Piece of Iron”: Towards a Theory of Material Imagination in Virginia Woolf’s “Solid Objects”

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This article examines the supposed lack of “humanity” in Woolf’s short stories and novels by identifying its source in the sphere of “solid objects” and in the way these “objects” destabilize the coherence of what the western philosophical tradition typically refers to as “subject” (in the Cartesian sense). Referring to Moore’s direct realism as well as James’s and Mach’s radical empiricism, the discussion focuses on specific states of heightened perceptive intensity in which the perceiving subject stumbles on the verge of collapse and “mixes” itself with what it perceives. By considering these limit cases, this paper tries to demonstrate the way in which Woolf’s fiction might in fact be understood as illustrative of the process of de-humanizing de-centralization and dispersion of the already fluid consciousness and its blending with the impersonal material objects, resulting in a complete loss of one idea of “the human” (an idea based on the intellectual autonomy and sovereignty of a unified subject) and pointing towards a post-human and post-modern condition in which human becomes defined by the ever-widening circle of its own outside.

Keywords

Virginia Woolf; G. E. Moore; short stories; states of mind; impersonality; psychology

“Tomorrow I’ll get some interesting objects from the rubbish dump, including broken lamp-posts... discarded buckets, baskets, kettles, soldiers’ mess-tins, oil-cans, wire, lamp-posts, stovepipes... I’ll no doubt dream of it tonight.”

(Van Gogh to Anthon van Rappard. 27 October 1882)

“[P]hilosophers, in spite of their apparent divergences, agree in distinguishing two profoundly different ways of knowing a thing. The first implies that we move round the object; the second that we enter into it.”

(Henri Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*)

“I shall have to write a novel entirely about carpets, old silver, cut glass and furniture.”

(Virginia Woolf, *Letters*, Vol. 2 284)

On a drowsy October morning 1934, Virginia Woolf, perplexed and maybe even a little bit insulted, wrote into her diary: “Old Yeats. What he said was, he had been writing about me. The Waves. That comes after Stendhal he said. I see what you’re at – But I want more humanity” (*Diary*, Vol. 4 255). Commenting on these lines in his *Quantum Poetics*, Daniel Albright finds himself equally uncomfortable with Yeats’s reproach and rushes in to defend the lady by insisting that: “[it] is strange to imagine anyone, even Yeats, telling Virginia Woolf to her face that her novels lacked humanity” (66). Taking up at this point, the following argument examines this supposed lack of “humanity” in Woolf’s fiction by identifying its source in the sphere of “solid objects” and in the way these “objects” destabilize the coherence of what is in the western philosophical tradition typically referred to as the “subject” (in the Cartesian sense).¹ As a part of this effort, the discussion focuses on specific states of heightened perceptive intensity in which the perceiving subject stumbles on the verge of collapse and “mixes” itself with what it perceives.

Despite her well known criticism of the Edwardian authors, whom she reproached precisely for paying too much attention to material and social aspects of reality while neglecting the life of consciousness, Woolf develops in her fiction her own original version of “materialism”. As is going to be demonstrated in the following discussion, this new type of materiality overcomes the Edwardian lack of attention to non-material aspects of human existence at a cost of replacing it with a different type of materialism which could be (and in fact was)² understood as equally in-human or de-humanizing as the older one.

Woolf’s “New Materialism”

The in-humanity of/in Woolf’s fiction is closely connected with the unstable character of human consciousness and manifests itself most acutely by peculiar mental states in which the consciousness mixes itself with material objects, subsists in these and/or becomes completely exteriorized. Such states of “in-humanity” can be understood as Woolf’s specific interpretation of the unconscious and lead towards a peculiar “state of mind” in which, as Woolf

enigmatically puts it: “an object mixes itself [...] with the stuff of thought” (*Haunted House* 81).

The above quoted line comes from Woolf’s peculiar short story called “Solid Objects”. Begun in November 1918 and published some two years later in *The Athenaeum*, “Solid Objects” is a seemingly simple story of a young man named John who happens to find a small “lump of glass” on a beach, keeps it for his momentary pleasure and eventually develops a kind of habitual “obsession” for discovering, collecting and pathologically accumulating objects that are similar to it. Despite its undeniable comic qualities, the text cannot be reduced to a description of a disturbing obsession or mental disorder. It is first of all a story of “naked perception” and a “weblike structure of the consciousness [and] its subsistence in the object” (Ryan, “Empirical Psychology” 867). As Woolf herself puts it in the story:

Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object *mixes itself* so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it *loses its actual form* and *recomposes itself* a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we last expect it. (*Haunted House* 81-82, emphasis added)

The above quoted account of the process of perception, however pathological it may seem, is highly relevant to the interpretation of strategies of representation in Woolf’s texts in general. Not unlike Van Gogh, who couldn’t sleep because of broken lamp-posts and other junkyard items, John’s consciousness literally as well as metaphorically “mixes itself” with material objects in order to synthesize reality in new, different and perhaps even rather unexpected ways. Illustrating the ambiguous “fluidity of objects [and the way] they decompose and recompose themselves as the object[s] of a new fascination” (Brown 3), each piece of matter, being “nothing but a glass”, welcomes John’s consciousness to “mix itself” with it by the limitless potential to represent almost anything. Paradoxically, these “hard, concentrated and definite objects” (Woolf, *Haunted House* 81) become the starting point of such a complex horizon of possibilities precisely because of the fluidity of meanings they promise to signify.

The reconstruction of an ex-meaningful fragment into a new set of relationship (i.e., making it a part of John’s collection) certainly represents a process which at the same time imposes some “changes” on the perceiving subject. Consequently, the “violence” which John performs on “his” fragments

of the matter is in no way smaller than the “violence” these objects perform on his “mental integrity”. Thus the desire and determination to “posses objects” (Woolf, *Haunted House* 84) drives John to “haunt the places which are most prolific of broken china, such as pieces of waste land between railway lines, sites of demolished houses, and commons in the neighbourhood of London” (Woolf, *Haunted House* 83).

Almost grotesquely, Woolf’s “Solid Objects”, as well as other texts that are about to be analyzed in the following discussion, seem to suggest that the attractiveness of these “solids” represents a serious threat to human subjectivity. The reason for this can be described as almost “anthropo-magical”. In Woolf’s fiction, solid objects, as if they had a will of their own, try to “steal” awareness of the fascinated mind by luring it outside its owner’s head into the region of material impersonality. Woolf lucidly describes this situation in the following extract from *Mrs. Dalloway*. Here solid objects, not unlike some wild animals, to prey upon the consciousness of those who are careless enough to look at them – they are simply “too exciting”:

[Septimus] began, very cautiously, to open his eyes, to see whether the gramophone was really there. But real things – real things were too exciting. He must be cautious. He would not go mad. First he looked at the fashion papers on the lower shelf, then, gradually, at the gramophone with the green trumpet. Nothing could be more exact. And so, gathering courage, he looked at the sideboard; the plate of bananas; the engraving of Queen Victoria and Prince Consort; at the mantelpiece, with the jar of roses. None of these things moved. All were still; all were real. (120)

Unfortunately, John was not as careful with solid objects as Septimus. The “orphaned pieces” of broken matter thus again express not only John’s desire and determination to “posses objects” but also illustrate the way in which objects posses John. Their possibility to carry the meaning and reflect the sum total of the possible relations John imagines them to have, in this way mirrors the eventually unlimited “sum of actions” John is willing to undertake in order to pursue these objects.

So John found himself attracted to the windows of curiosity shops when he was out walking, merely because he saw something which reminded him of the lump of glass. Anything, so long as it was an object of some kind, more or less round, perhaps with a dying flame deep sunk in its mass,

anything – china, glass, amber, rock, marble – even the smooth oval egg of a prehistoric bird would do. (Woolf, *Haunted House* 83)

John’s now rather obsessive hobby eventually makes him completely abandon social life, lose his friends, lose his parliament campaign and turn his house into a rubbish dump. All of this, however, is more than compensated to John by his discovery of:

a very remarkable piece of iron – It was almost identical with the glass in shape, massy and globular, but so cold and heavy, so black and metallic. [...] As his eyes passed from one to another, the determination to possess objects that even surpassed these tormented the young man. He devoted himself more and more resolutely to the search.” (Woolf, *Haunted House* 84)

Woolf’s “Solid vs. Fluid” Dialectics

Deep beneath the portrait of one human drama, “Solid Objects” is a story of what is solid and fluid. The dialectics of the two key notions of solidity and fluidity constitutes the dynamics which works within Woolf’s epistemology and is directly connected with an essential theme of modernist aesthetics and philosophies. Bergson’s theory of consciousness, intuition, stability and movement, Futurist development of objects in space, adoration of speed and new technological sensitivity, fluid objects and landscapes of impressionist paintings or the Anti-Time Cult philosophy of Wyndham Lewis – to name some of the most prominent examples –are all fundamentally engaged in the discussion about the significance of solidity and fluidity, stability and instability, unity or multiplicity – not only of objects, but also of consciousness, personality or individuality.

As an integral part of this rhetoric of solidity and fluidity, the process of sensation in Woolf’s stories can be fittingly described as a mixture, or more precisely, as a re-composition of the material reality through the workings of one’s consciousness, i.e., as a process in which both the perceiving mind and the perceived object undergo a small degree of change in order to recompose themselves into a “new whole”. Besides the notorious “world seen without a self” (Woolf, *Waves* 246) and/or the rejection of the “the damned egotistical self” (Woolf, *Diary*, Vol. 2 14), Woolf famously articulates the instability of

human consciousness in her well known “impressionist” definition of life in her “Modern Fiction”.

An ordinary mind in an ordinary day receives a myriad impressions – *trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel*. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, and as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the ascent falls differently from the old; [...] Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, *this* unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? (Woolf, *Collected Essays* 9, emphasis added)

Supposing that the “this” in the penultimate line refers to “consciousness” rather than to “life” (it is quite possible that for Woolf the two are more or less identical), Woolf’s text gives a very original characterisation of “consciousness” – varying, unknown, complex, displaying aberrations, uncircumscribed, or, in one word – fluid. Interestingly enough, Woolf in the extract above again speaks of mixtures and demands a representation of consciousness “with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible”. Written in 1919 and published in 1921, “Modern Fiction” falls into the same period in which Woolf wrote “Solid Objects” – that is, again, a story about “mixing objects with the stuff of thought”.

With the key words being “as little [...] as possible”, it is interesting to speculate that, despite being “alien and external”, solid/material objects play some constitutive or unifying role in human subjectivity “that would not be located in the conventional self” (Ryan, “Early Psychology” 191). Without any reference to something impersonal and/or solid, human consciousness would regress into some kind of solipsism, into, to use Woolf’s famous reproach to Emily Richardson’s novels: “helter-skelter of flying fragments” (Woolf, *The Essays*, Vol. 3 11) without any unity. Accordingly, a limited addition of “solid things” would be necessary for the “fluid” consciousness to “work”. However, since any excess of the “solid-material” component leads to the impersonality of mechanical existence such as John’s, “as little as possible” stands in this definition for “as much as necessary and not more”.

The above foreshadowed theory again develops the central duality of fluid and solid. As was suggested, the fluid consciousness (the well established though problematic term “stream of consciousness” offers itself) needs solid objects to combine with in a correct ratio. Further, this solidity can also “communicate an impersonal dimension which can be terrifying but can also provide a context for a source of relief from human activity. Isolated and framed, solid objects are impersonal, transcendent, and as such, reassuring” (Gillespie 236). Retaining its “as little as possible” quality, a solid object stands for a safe external referential point and a counter-weight to the fluidity of one’s consciousness anchored in the impersonal. Its impersonality, however, also threatens to take control of one’s existence as an autonomous subject once hypertrophied (as in “Solid Objects”). The following extract from “Mark on the Wall” shows the former of the two possibilities:

Indeed, now that I have fixed my eyes upon it, I feel that I have grasped a plank in the sea; I feel a satisfying sense of reality which at once turns the two Archbishops and the Lord High Chancellor to the shadows of shades. Here is something definite, something real. *Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror, one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, worshipping chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is a proof of some other existence than ours.* That is what one wants to be sure of [...] Wood is pleasant to think about. It comes from a tree; and trees grow, and we don’t know they grow. For years and years they grow, without paying any attention to us, in meadows, in forests, and by the side of rivers – all things one likes to think about.³ (Woolf, *Haunted House* 47, emphasis added)

In what might be considered as one of the most poetic passages from Woolf’s fiction, it is possible to observe the close mutual influence of consciousness and its object. Woolf’s is a universe in which wood is pleasant to think about, solid things are safe to turn to and the “impersonality” of a cupboard, offering the escape from the complexity of inter-subjective as well as intra-subjective relations, is as reassuring as it is potentially dangerous. With this being said, solid objects and their compositions remind us of the art of still-life.

Woolf, the Art of Still-Life and the Problem of Radical Realism

Woolf was very well acquainted with the discipline of still-life, not only through famously attending a number of modern art exhibitions and through her close relationship with Roger Fry and Clive Bell, but first of all, through the paintings of her sister, Vanessa Bell. As Diane F. Gillespie argues in her *The Sisters' Arts*, both sisters had a keen eye for material objects and their arrangement into compositions which “emphasize the nonhuman realm of objects that contains and transcends complicated human activities” (228) and replace them with impersonal patterns. The story of John’s collection of solid objects immediately offers itself as an interesting analogy. Similarly to Lily and Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, both Virginia and Vanessa, using their respective art forms, examined the flux of life through a stand-still:

What was the meaning of life? That was all – a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead, there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; [...] Mrs. Ramsey making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) – this was the nature of a revelation. *In the midst of chaos there was shape*; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 142, emphasis added)

The above quoted extract closely adheres to the duality of solid and fluid which has been established in the previous discussion of “Solid Objects”: shape – chaos, permanent – passing, dynamic – stable. Importantly, the way in which “still lifes become [...] in Woolf’s writing landscapes closely related to mental states” (Gillespie 240) transcends a mere relation of analogy or likeness between two unmixed components. Woolf often goes one step further and represents consciousness as *literally* mixed with its object. Mental states are not *merely* illustrated by or juxtaposed against objects and neither are represented through the subject’s reaction with these. In the following example from Woolf’s story called “A Simple Melody”, this relation clearly goes far beyond a merely analogical or even symbolic relation.

He thought at once of the lark, of the sky, of the view. The walker’s thoughts and emotions were largely made up of these outside influences. *Walking thoughts were half sky; if you could submit them to chemical analysis, you would find that they had some grains of colour in them, some gallons or quarts or pints of air attached to them. This at once made them airier, more impersonal.* But in this room, thoughts were jostled together like fish in a net, struggling, scraping each other’s scales off, and becoming, in the effort to escape, – for all thinking is an effort to make through escape from the thinker’s mind past all obstacles as completely as possible[.] (Woolf, *Complete Shorter Fiction* 200, emphasis added)

This extract again focuses on the original problem of this article: the problem of mixing of objects with the “stuff of thought” and the resulting “double impersonality” – reassuring as well as threatening. Taken literally, the extract gives a picture of a perceiving mind as a compound of “two distinct terms, (1) ‘consciousness’, in respect of which all sensations are alike; and (2) something else, in respect of which one sensation differs from another” (Moore 444).⁴ This distinction is adopted from what is generally acknowledged as an important inspiration to Woolf and in fact the whole Bloomsbury Group: G. E. Moore’s famous essay *Refutation of Idealism* (1903)⁵. As a part of his argument against the dominant philosophy of Cambridge idealism, Moore introduces in his *Refutation* a doctrine of what is by recent commentators (Baldwin, Preston)⁶ described as “naive” or “direct” realism. By proposing that “we have no reason for supposing that there are such things as mental images at all” (Moore 449), Moore discards the “middle part” between our consciousness and objects and makes these objects “directly available” to it.

Regardless of the philosophical validity of this argument, Moore’s version of direct realism stands very close to the above discussed extreme states of consciousness which were identified in Woolf’s fiction. Woolf may even have read the following lines in Moore’s *Refutation*:

Whether or not, when I have the sensation of blue, my consciousness or awareness is thus blue, my introspection does not enable me to decide with certainty: I only see no reason for thinking that it is. But whether it is or not, the point is unimportant, for introspection does enable me to decide that something else is also true: namely that I am aware of blue, and by this I mean, that my awareness has to blue a quite different and distinct relation. It is possible; I admit, that my awareness is blue as well as being of blue: but what I am quite sure

of is that it is of blue; that it has to blue the simple and unique relation the existence of which alone justifies us in distinguishing knowledge of a thing from the thing known, and indeed in distinguishing mind from matter. And this result I may express by saying that what is called the content of a sensation is in very truth what I originally called it-the sensation's object. (Moore 451, emphasis added)

This analogy is not mentioned in order to propose that Woolf in her texts exclusively follows Moore's theories of perception. Instead, as the above presented argument suggests, any such claim would give only a reductive picture of Woolf's fluid theory of perception. Alternatively, it seems more consistent to claim that Moore's direct realism, which is a theory formulated in texts that were well known and often discussed among the members of the Bloomsbury Group, closely resembles Woolf's representation of special state of mind "transfixed by the intensity of perception" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 20) in which the consciousness mixes itself or penetrates material objects it perceives and in which, to use Moore's words, our introspection cannot decide "[w]hether or not, when I have the sensation of blue, my consciousness or awareness is thus blue" (451).

Woolf's "Radical Empiricism"

The interpretation of Woolf's mixed states that relies on Moore's philosophy of direct realism might be further extended to states in which the interaction of consciousness and its object exceeds the state of a mixture and reaches a state of a complete identity. For instance in the following extract from *To the Lighthouse* Woolf writes:

Losing personality one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things come together at peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour *one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands*

until she became the thing she looked at – that light for example. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 54-55, emphasis added)

Despite Moore’s claim that one’s introspection cannot decide whether one’s sensation is itself “blue” or “of blue” may be understood as a sufficient key to these most extreme states of human consciousness, a different interpretation offers itself. Woolf’s claim that “no perception come[s] amiss” (Woolf, *Collected Essays* 9), i.e., a claim introducing a descriptive rather than normative classification of the “importance” of impressions, gives a gist of Woolf’s idea of the act of perception which is deprived of a pre-existent classificatory principle. Accordingly, all perceptions as well as the relations which the perceiving consciousness establishes between these, might be understood as of equal importance as the impressions themselves. Quoting William James’s *Principles of Psychology*, Judith Ryan convincingly argues that Woolf in this respect finds herself very close to the tradition of turn of the century empirical psychology in which:

The connections made by the experiencing mind, the way in which it fills out the gaps in its bundles of observations, occupy the same level of validity as the observations themselves: the connections may not be “real” in the common sense of the term, but (quoting William James) “any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as ‘real’ as anything else in the system”. (“Empirical Psychology” 859)

According to Ryan’s empiricist interpretation, this constant dynamic interchange between the perceiving mind and solid material reality triggers a continuous process of questioning of the subject-object barrier. This process reduces reality into a flow of reciprocal subject-object feedback loops and introduces a feeling of unification of an individual and the perceived object, its “projection” into the material reality and a feeling of being “outside as well as inside at the same time”:

She [Mrs Dalloway] would not say of anyone in the world that they were this or that. She felt young; and at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxicabs, of being out, far out to the sea alone[.] (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 7)

The process of “slicing through things” becomes symptomatic of the above mentioned tendency of ontological levelling of the subject and perceived objects. Under such circumstances, the subject is reduced to something that “constructs itself from the impressions it perceives and the relations it creates” (Ryan, “Empirical Psychology” 861). Capturing the world where, with the observer and the thing observed becoming one, the only thing left being the process of perception itself, the difference between observers and the objects observed simply cannot be decided. As such, Woolf’s “radically empiricist narrative” becomes directly responsible for “unmasking the fictitious division into subject and object, world and self”⁷ (Ryan, “Empirical Philosophy” 857-8) with all of its “de-humanizing” consequences: loss of the autonomy and wholeness of the human subject, decentralization and destabilization of human identity, exteriorization of one’s mental states and their subsistence in objects.

Despite a number of interesting insights, Ryan’s “empiricist” interpretation is not entirely unproblematic. First of all, as has been pointed out, it is reductive to think that Woolf in her fiction describes *one* state of mind, *one* perceptive disposition of *one* state of the subject-object relationship. In this aspect Woolf’s fiction is essentially Bergsonian while it typically represents different “intensities” of human consciousness, something that Bergson calls: “divers *tones* of mental life, or, in other words, our psychic life [...] lived at different heights, now nearer to action, now further removed from it, according to the degree of *our attention to life*” (Bergson xiv, emphasis in original). Consequently, it is very problematic to subsume Woolf’s prose under one explanatory paradigm. Second, as it was demonstrated, Ryan’s explanation relies on the levelling of the subject-object or world-self distinction and on placing these two categories into a “no-man’s land”, into the world of sense-impressions, where all impressions are equal and thus self and things are equal.

This account, however, does not seem to say anything about the above quoted states of mixture (of consciousness and material object) which no empiricist philosophy is likely to concede to. Finally, Ryan’s selection of William James and Ernst Mach seems to be rather unfortunate, not because of the validity of individual theorems of their respective philosophies but because of the overall “orientation” of their philosophies. Both James’s radical empiricism and Mach’s empirio-criticism are by a number of commentators labelled as two forms of pragmatic, life oriented philosophies (Blecha 16-18). The pragmatic orientation which both of these thinkers share (Mach and James

in fact exchanged a number of letters on this topic) in the end establishes the main criteria of truth as *pragmatically* defined, i.e., defined in the first place by their usefulness. The “judge” of the “usefulness” of our impressions or ideas about the external world is, however, the human subject and its needs – that is, so to say: “the damned egotistical self” itself. It follows that in such interpretation the subject is not weakened but, the opposite of what Woolf and Ryan wanted to point out being true, radically reinforced.⁸

Conclusion

As was argued, Woolf’s “new materialism” enriches the classical strategies of representation of human subjectivity by considering new, impersonal elements – solid objects and their relation to certain specific states of human consciousness. The described states in which consciousness mixes itself with these material objects are an extreme manifestation of general tendencies represented in Woolf’s fiction. By considering these limit cases, this paper tries to demonstrate the way in which Woolf’s fiction might in fact be understood as an illustrative process of de-humanizing de-centralization and dispersion of the already fluid consciousness, and its blending with impersonal material objects.

As was demonstrated, this process eventually results in a complete loss of one idea of “the human” (an idea based on intellectual autonomy and sovereignty of a unified subject) and points towards a post-human and post-modern condition in which the human becomes defined by the ever-widening circle of its own outside. As an integral part of this movement towards exteriorization, it seems more and more apparent that Woolf’s prose does not represent human subjectivity as a unified homogeneous entity but rather as a succession of often heterogeneous “states of mind”. Consequently, any account of Woolf’s “idea of the human” and its representation in her essays and fiction necessarily has to consider the full scale of these states and include both states of “extreme fluidity” as well as “solidity”.

Notes

1. Despite the fact that some considerable attention has been paid to the problem of the weakened position of the subject in Woolf’s fiction, very few studies have systematically dealt with the specific state of consciousness in which it mixes itself with material reality and/or becomes identical with perceived objects. Works that stand close to this topic are, for example, Judith Ryan’s *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism*

but especially Judith Ryan's "The Vanishing Subject: Empirical Psychology and the Modern Novel". As is going to be argued above, Ryan in her texts does not explicitly cover the specific instances of "mixture" as they are covered in this article. Further, as is suggested below, Ryan's interpretation of Woolf's theory of perception based on Mach's radical empiricism and James's pragmatism brings a number of problems that Ryan in her account does not consider. All of these points are covered in the final section of this paper.

2. Besides Yeats's comment we may also mention Wyndham Lewis's critique of the destabilizing effects of Woolf's innovative technique on the coherence of the human subject, personal identity and coherence. Lewis formulates his ideas on the topic, for example, in his *Time and the Western Man*, especially in a chapter called "Spatialization and Concreteness".
3. To add one more example, let us consider the following extract from Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: "As summer neared, as the evening lengthened there came to the wakeful, the hopeful, walking the beach, stirring the pool, imaginations of the strangest kind- of flesh turned to atoms which drove before the wind, of stars flashing in their hearts, of outwardly the scattered parts of the vision within. In those mirrors, the minds of men, in those pools of uneasy water, in which cloud forever and shadows form, dreams persisted; and it was impossible to resist the strange intimation which every gull, flower, tree, man and woman, and the white earth itself seemed to declare (but if you questioned at once to withdraw) that good triumph, happiness prevails, order rules, or to resist the extra ordinary stimulus to range hither and thither in search of some absolute good, some crystal of intensity remote from the known pleasures and familiar virtues, something alien to the processes of domestic life, *single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the sand which would render the possessor secure*. Moreover softened and acquiescent, the spring with their bees humming and gnats dancing threw her cloud about her, veiled her eyes, averted her head, and among passing shadows and fights of small rain seemed to have taken upon her knowledge of the sorrows of mankind" (116-117; emphasis added).
4. "We have then in every sensation two distinct elements, one which I call consciousness, and the other, which I call the object of consciousness. This must be so if the sensation of blue and the sensation of green, though different in one respect, are alike in another: blue is one object of sensation and green is another, and consciousness, which both sensations have in common, is different from either" (Moore 444).
5. See for example S. P. Rosenbaum's essay "The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf" (Rosenbaum 316-357).
6. In his article on Moore's philosophy Aaron Preston summarizes the difference between classical realism and Moore's direct idealism in the following way: "Most proponents of sense-data construed them as mental entities responsible for *mediating* our sensory experiences of external objects. For example, in perceiving a stop-sign, what one is immediately conscious of is some set of sense-data *through which* are conveyed the stop-sign's size, shape, color, and so on. The stop-sign itself remains 'outside the circle of ideas,' or rather, sense-data, and we are thus aware of it only indirectly. In its usual form, sense-data theory is a form of representationalism *consistent with indirect realism, not direct realism*. Moore initially accepted this representationalist view of sense-data; but he was not long content with it, since it seemed to leave the commonsense view of

the world open to sceptical doubts of a familiar, Cartesian variety. Consequently, he modified sense-data theory to make it a form of direct realism, just as he had previously done with proposition theory. His strategy in both cases was the same: by making the purported *mental-mediators identical with external objects, he would eliminate the need for a mediator and make external objects directly available to consciousness*. Thus, for a period of about fifteen years, Moore attempted off-and-on to defend a view according to which sense-data were identical to external objects or parts of such objects. For instance, a sense-datum could be identical to the whole of an object in the case of a sound, while for visible objects, which always have “hidden” sides (the underside of a table or the back side of a coin, for example) a single sense-datum could be identical to only a *part* of the object’s surface” (emphasis added). The problem of Moore’s realism is pointed out in Rosenbaum’s classic essay “The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf”. Focusing on different aspects of Moore’s realism, its “idealistic” of “naive” quality, so important in our discussion, remains unexplored.

7. In her thesis Ryan further adds that the psychologists of radical empiricism, analogically to Woolf herself “recognized the dependence of our concept of self on the principle of intentionality; they explored the relationship between the actual discontinuity of sense perception and our imagined view of it as an uninterrupted flux; they showed the interpenetration of what we commonly believe to be discrete; they stressed the equal importance of thought and things. Reduced to its basic tenet, empiricism states that all we can know are sense impressions, thoughts, and feelings, bundled together as ‘elements’ (Mach’s term) of our total view of things. The ‘self’ is merely a pragmatically convenient category of thought. Woolf’s phrase ‘the word seen without a self’, by eliminating the observing ‘self’ but not the actual act of observing, aptly describes the literary equivalent of this ‘elementaristic’ view” (Ryan, “Empiricist Psychology” 858).
8. “James wanted to point out that the synthesis as well as the conjugations, all the connections which give a certain structure to the sense material, are results of the operation of our needs and represent a state which resulted from our lives and from our particular interests. [...] *We* are the ones responsible for these unities and multiplicities [of impressions], and they become the result of our effort to maintain our lives and improve our living conditions. [...] The radicalization of empiricism thus first of all goes hand in hand with its increasingly relativist nature because there indeed remains nothing that would not be processed by the life- and eventually priority- interests of the *subject* (Blecha 18; trans. Martin Štefl, emphasis added).

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