EPISTEMOLOGY OF MODERNISM

William R. Everdell
History / St. Ann's School
Brooklyn, NY 11201, USA
everdell@aol.com

Ann Banfield. *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge U.P., 2000. £35.00; US$49.95.

In Virginia Woolf's difficult masterpiece, *The Waves* (1931), each of several separate interior monologues—"streams of consciousness" in the American critical idiom—is separated from the next by an interpolated "Interlude". The interior monologues are assigned to different characters, but the Interludes are rendered from no perspective at all, very much like the "Time Passes" chapter of Woolf's earlier and better known novel, *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The passive voice and the demonstrative and indefinite pronouns are essential, removing from the scene not only the characters' points of view, but the author's as well. Numbered among the consequences of the new twentieth-century technique of interior monologue, the Interludes can be accepted today as one more trick of literary "Modernism", but for Woolf it was new, and the task of preventing any of her Interludes from becoming just another report from the typical "omniscient narrator" of Victorian fiction was one of the most demanding she ever set herself as a writer. Like her friend the Post-Impressionist critic Roger Fry, she wanted to analyze the world outside the self into its smallest sensible elements, then show human selves as they formed by accumulating the experience of these myriad, random, discontinuous components, and finally to recombine these components in their two kinds, selves and sense-able things, into a meaningful whole—a work of art.

Rejecting both the idealism of Bradley and the British philosophical generation of the 1890s and the naïve positivist materialism coming out of the 1850s, Bertrand Russell eventually settled on an ontology most philosophers call "realist" in that it rejected the view that the world accessible to the senses was no more than a mental construct and considered it naïve to assign the origin of subjectivity to matter. The material world was, Russell thought, actually external—"out there". He did think, however, that all we knew of the external world was what was sensed by the senses and pictured by the mind. He also concluded (in essays like "The Relation of Sense-data to Physics" written in 1910–17) that both that world and what we knew of it was presented in very small parts, and

analyzable down to them, or, in other words, that both ontology and epistemology were atomized. Each mind, with its senses, occupied, he thought, one of an infinite number of occupied and unoccupied "perspectives", each of which uniquely focused the "sensibilia"—whatever was perceived in the external world—like a Leibnizian monad. Mathematical logic, on which Russell set the highest store, would be able, he thought, to bring together perspectives by providing a minimal set of truths which, though abstract, were objective in the sense that they were not private and could be agreed to by all. Something similar though rougher might be done for the sensibilia in the world "out there" by the science of physics.

Did Virginia Woolf learn from Bertrand Russell? To a latter-day academic it sounds too utterly improbable, for the simple reason (obvious to academics) that anyone who has made it to the upper levels of English literature must have chosen these particular heights to scale because the trail was so blessedly free of those nasty mathematical burrs and logical teazles, and the air so filled with the pure chatter of French phenomenologists, that no hiker would ever have to struggle with analytical philosophy again. Less metaphorically, the separation of departments of literature from those of philosophy has come so close to divorce that few in U.S. English Departments can make head or tail of the graduate thesis that one of Russell's philosophy students wrote on F. H. Bradley, and fewer still can trace the term "objective correlative" used by that student (who was in fact T. S. Eliot) back to an early work of Husserl. Meanwhile, it is taken for granted by those in Philosophy that there are no ideas worth discussing in Woolf, or, indeed, in any other novelist, great though she may be, unless one is to descend from ontology and epistemology to the foothills of ethics and politics, or worse, aesthetics. (Among philosophers, only Jaakko Hintikka has published on Virginia Woolf—in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1979.) The word over in Art History, meanwhile, is that since Russell actively disliked and avoided the paintings of everyone more avant-garde than Monet, he cannot have had anything to do with Modernism. Ergo, by analogy, Virginia Woolf and Bertrand Russell, both avid multilingual readers, sometime Bloomsbury neighbours, political allies, and well-known to two generations of Cambridge Apostles, must nevertheless have hardly been aware of each other's work, and the long talk they had in 1921, chronicled in Woolf's diary, must have been a social call.

It won't do, even as a straw man. Fortunately, Ann Banfield doesn't believe that novelists have no epistemology, or that Virginia Woolf lacked an ear for philosophy, or even that Russell was unmoved by fiction. Banfield recognizes that Woolf's mind was too large for the philosophical equivalent of strained applesauce. Woolf and her closest friends among the artists and writers of Bloomsbury, Banfield reminds us, took their first bite of modern philosophy

from G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell's partner in the overthrow of ontological idealism. Their text was a book on ethics, whose title in fact was "*Principles of Ethics*" (*Principia Ethica*, 1903). Philosophers know it well, by name at least, if not by argument. *Principia Ethica* led the Bloomsburyites to the non-religious ethical commitment that was foundational for their community; but it also led them to the latest in epistemology, and to Moore's colleague and fellow Apostle, Russell. The Cambridge philosophers, going back to Woolf's own father Leslie Stephen, saw the world as a collection of discrete objects "out there" to be perceived as phenomena by points of potential view, monads or "perspectives", occupied (or unoccupied) by selves as atomized and discrete as the "sensibilia" they perceived. Woolf also saw the world as a collection of discrete "sensibilia" dependably "out there" whether perceived or (as in the Interludes) unperceived by perspectives. Indeed, she made prose poetry out of it. And so, as Woolf and company overthrew late Victorianism in literature, they were listening closely to Russell and like-minded thinkers who were overthrowing late Victorianism in philosophy.

Like Arthur I. Miller's new book, *Einstein, Picasso*, Banfield's poses a bold thesis linking two great minds, a thesis in the history of literature and thought that is both uncanonical and consequential; but if Banfield had gone on to try to argue her case in the current "theorizing" manner, where one reading is good as another, it would hardly be worth the effort. Fortunately, Banfield does not want to argue that it would be "interesting to think" that Woolf thought like Russell, but instead that Woolf did in fact think like Russell, "really" and "actually" in historical time; and that, in so far as evidence of the past can be said to exist, or events in the past be "proved", the evidence is sufficient to prove it. Banfield is a literary scholar by training; but she is stunningly well prepared on philosophy. She knows exactly what the Cambridge epistemology was and how Moore, Russell and even Wittgenstein differed in their expressions of it, constantly quoting all of Russell's key essays on the philosophy of science. She divides her comparison of Woolf and the philosophers into parts corresponding with the concerns of both, but following an essentially philosophical pattern. The "phantom table" of her title is the table the Ramsays sit at in *To the Lighthouse*, and the one Mrs. Dalloway envisions set with flowers; but it is no less the table painted by Cézanne at odd angles and the exemplary perceived table in the endless dialogue between empiricist and idealist philosophers.

Banfield's method of proof inspires somewhat less confidence. It consists in accumulating quotations of similar passages from all across Russell's and Woolf's collected works, with hardly any regard to the possibility that the thought of either writer might have changed over time, offering little evidence that they read each other's work, and sometimes without clearly separating the texts of Russell from those of Woolf. Banfield organizes her work into eight

main themes, one of which, "the dualism of death", seems to offer little in the way of philosophical correlation; and she gives no special attention to the specifics of how the influence of philosophy was exerted in particular cases. I suppose, too, that it would have been especially helpful for the intellectual history of Modernism if Banfield had gone on to show the resemblance between Russell's ultimate phenomenology and the phenomenology of his contemporary Husserl, which was passed on to Schnitzler and Musil as well as Heidegger and Sartre. This is not, however, the task Banfield set herself in *The Phantom Table*, the task of bringing together the pioneer English Modernist points of view in philosophy and fiction. That task she has carried out with extraordinary ability in a way that any informed reader will find authoritative, convincing and deliciously unexpected.