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## Modern Novels and Vagueness

Megan M. Quigley

[I]f one were free and could set down what one chose, there would be no plot, little probability, and a vague general confusion in which the clear-cut features of the tragic, the comic, the passionate, and the lyrical were dissolved beyond the possibility of separate recognition . . .

—Virginia Woolf, “Modern Novels” (1919)<sup>1</sup>

In “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth,” T. S. Eliot declares that the role of art in modern times is to provide a coherent “scaffolding”—the “mythical method” in Joyce’s case—for a world that is itself meaningless.<sup>2</sup> Eliot’s contemporaries and critical descendants also emphasize the “hard” and firmly delineated quality of modernist writing. It must be “the definite and the concrete,” “*exact*,” “objective,” “*particular*”; its “watchword . . . is Precision”; it must seek “to refine, to clarify, to intensify”; it must avoid anything resembling symbolism’s “mushy technique”—above all, it must not be “vague.”<sup>3</sup> But are concrete and precise really the best adjectives to describe works like Joyce’s “damned monster-novel”?<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf offered a very different view of modern fiction when she recorded her revelation while writing *Jacob’s Room*:

happier today than I was yesterday having this afternoon arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel. . . For I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist.<sup>5</sup>

Woolf’s plan for *Jacob’s Room* explicitly challenges Eliot’s contention that literature ought to provide an objective “scaffolding.”

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102 But what exactly is the “new form” for the “new novel”? And what would it mean for a novel to be “crepuscular”?

On the twenty-fifth of November 1922, a few months after the publication of both *Ulysses* and *Jacob's Room*, Bertrand Russell delivered a paper entitled “Vagueness” in front of a small group at Oriel College at Oxford University.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to Eliotic precision, Russell lamented that he “propose[d] to prove that all language is vague and therefore my language is vague.” He stated:

You all know that I invented a special language with a view to avoiding vagueness, but unfortunately it is unsuited for public occasions. I shall therefore, though regretfully, address you in English, and whatever vagueness is to be found in my words must be attributed to our ancestors for not having been predominately interested in logic.<sup>7</sup>

Russell claimed to regret addressing his audience in English because of its “vagueness.” “We can see an ideal of precision [in English], to which we can approximate indefinitely,” he asserted, “but we cannot attain this ideal . . . It is therefore not applicable to this terrestrial life, but only to an imagined celestial existence” (V 65). However, trying to aspire to this “celestial existence,” linguistically and logically, seemed worthwhile, and therefore Russell insisted that language ought to be subjected to rigorous scientific standards:

Science is perpetually trying to substitute more precise beliefs for vague ones; this makes it harder for a scientific proposition to be true than for the vague beliefs of uneducated persons to be true, but makes scientific truth better worth having if it can be obtained. (V 68)

Russell explained that he was giving the talk because, “vagueness is much more important in the theory of knowledge than you would judge it to be from the writings of most people,” and he intended to demonstrate “that the process of sound philosophizing . . . consists mainly in passing from those obvious, vague, ambiguous things . . . to something precise, clear, definite.”<sup>8</sup>

In “Vagueness,” Russell highlighted several philosophical questions that were fermenting in 1922 and that are germane to the treatment of language and form in the “new novel.” First, to amend the words of Joyce, “it seems that language was to blame” for what appeared to be otherwise unresolvable philosophical paradoxes. Russell called this tendency to treat purely linguistic confusions as actual philosophical questions the “fallacy of verbalism” (V 62). Second, Russell asserted that analytical methods and logical formulae were needed to clean up the muddle in which philosophy found itself. Scientific methods were granted a status above previous approaches to philosophy. And finally, Russell claimed that our ordinary language, in this “terrestrial life,” is so riddled through with vagueness that a new “special language” is required to approach philosophical questions (V 61).

Russell's lecture participated in a revolutionary movement in philosophy reevaluating the vagueness of language. His lecture actually stemmed from questions he encoun-

tered when writing two essays: one an introduction for the first English publication of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, the second a review of John Dewey's *Essays in Experimental Logic*. His claim that an ideal language would be free of vagueness was also implicitly an argument against pragmatists who pointed to the concept of vagueness to demonstrate the faults of classical logic. In fact, F. C. S. Schiller, expected to hold the opposing Pragmatic view, had been asked by the society to prepare a response to Russell's lecture in advance, so the two camps were in place before the talk began. Ideal language theorists, like Russell, posited language's fallibility and advanced a more scientific approach to philosophy; yet Pragmatists were initiating a drastic change in philosophy. Richard Rorty calls this change in early twentieth-century philosophy "the linguistic turn"—"the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use."<sup>9</sup> In contrast to Russell's desired "celestial" language, philosophers beginning with Charles Peirce, William James, and Ludwig Wittgenstein turned to language to solve philosophical problems. The question of vagueness was at the core of this debate between Ideal Language theorists and Pragmatists because it underscored either language's shortcomings or its enormous potentialities, depending upon one's philosophical view.

Modern novelists, I argue, from Henry James to Gertrude Stein, were simultaneously enacting their own linguistic turn in fiction, and in this linguistic turn, too, "vagueness" played a major role. In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt "proposes a close analogy between the epistemological premises of formal realism and those of 'philosophical realism.'" I am proposing a close analogy between the modern novel's attempt to revise the conventions of the realist novel and the revolt against positivism in the philosophy of language.<sup>10</sup> It has long been argued that modern fiction turned inward as novelists flaunted the structures of their genre and self-consciously held language up for examination. What has not been noted is the contemporary philosophical debate about language's vagueness and the connection between the debates surrounding ordinary language philosophy and the modern novel's linguistic experimentalism and revision of literary traditions. I am promoting a historicized explanation for the linguistic incursions and self-referentiality of these major works of modernism: novelists assimilated contemporary philosophical questions, then seen as linguistic questions, into fiction. Indeed, since language was the fiction writer's domain, the novel seemed to offer answers to philosophical problems that philosophy itself could not resolve.

In the following pages, I will briefly sketch the history of the question of vagueness and outline Virginia Woolf's parody of Bertrand Russell's dream of a precise language in her radio broadcast, "Craftsmanship" (1937). To underscore Woolf's commitment to vagueness, I will turn to analyze her attitude towards prose's slipperiness in *Night and Day* (1919), a work stylistically different from the rest of her *oeuvre*. Indeed, in *Night and Day*, self-consciously her most traditional novel, Woolf introduces her heroine (and by proxy the reader) to a world of emotion and messy interpersonal relationships where a devotion to precise mathematics and straightforward plots must be exchanged for the "vagueness of the finest prose."<sup>11</sup> That modern writers themselves must similarly discard

104 precise forms is made clear both by Woolf's subsequent "fragmentary" style in novels like *Mrs. Dalloway* and by Woolf's image of "Modern Fiction" as a "semi-transparent envelope."<sup>12</sup> By tracing this image to its origins in Henry James, I aim to depict a strain of what I am calling the linguistic turn in fiction, joining the stylistic ambiguities and linguistic extravagances of Henry James to the "works of vision" of Virginia Woolf.

It is important to note both the vagueness of literary Impressionism and that modern novels can engage with language's vagueness without being 'impressionistic.' Literary Impressionism has a thorny history with regards to modern novelists, most of whom (including Joseph Conrad, Woolf, and Joyce) disdained the actual term 'Impressionism' for various reasons, primarily for its association with an earlier movement in French painting. In fact, what connects the novels of James to those of Joyce, those of Woolf to Stein, is less an interest in conveying an impression than in investigating the very language used to convey impressions, objects, or dialogue. Watt has summarized the main goal of literary Impressionism, as replacing the emphasis on the object viewed with the perceptions of the subjective viewer. Ford Madox Ford's insistence, for example, that "the Impressionist" provides "the fruits of his own observations alone" and Conrad's technique of delayed decoding both accentuate the perceptions of the observer rather than the object or person observed.<sup>13</sup> While subjective perceptions certainly play a large role in modern novels, this new focus fails adequately to account for Henry James's "almost intolerable ambiguity" in the dialogue of *The Golden Bowl* or Joyce's verbal punning in *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, definitions of literary Impressionism vary so widely that Jesse Matz in *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* has wondered if the term itself becomes "meaningless" and asks, "But what if Impressionism's tendency towards definitional vagueness is itself definitive?"<sup>15</sup> I would concur resoundingly, though not in order to attempt to redefine, once again, the term for the modernist era but instead to focus on modern novelists' "bewitchment" (to adopt Wittgenstein's term) with the *vagueness* itself of the word "Impression."

Ironically, William James, who called for the "re-instatement of the vague" in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), deplored the parallel movement in fiction.<sup>16</sup> Although he emphasized the short-comings of scientific precision for psychology, he simultaneously expressed his frustration with the vague style of his brother's novel *The Golden Bowl*:

I don't enjoy the kind of "problem," . . . and the method of narration by interminable elaboration of suggestive reference (I don't know what else to call it, but you know what I mean) . . . won't you, just to please Brother, sit down and write a new book, with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigor and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness in style? Publish it in my name, I will acknowledge it, and give you half the proceeds.<sup>17</sup>

The novels of Henry James, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein, to name a few, all resist the qualities William James sought and revel instead in "psychological commentaries," indecisiveness in plot and action, and "absolute" vagueness in style. If the conventions of the realist novel can be summarized by an emphasis on an "original" or "novel" plot, diminishment of "figurative eloquence," and

“the particularization of character and background, of naming, temporality, causation, and physical environment,” the modernist novel’s focus on subjectivity, resistance to anything easily definable as plot, and figurative and stylistic eloquence pushed to the brink of solipsism all demonstrate a new set of conventions in fiction.<sup>18</sup> Rather than attempting to eliminate vagueness, modernist fiction probes vagueness as the best way to examine psychological depth, to depict sexual indeterminacy, or to register disenchantment with the capitalist, bourgeois, and symbolic status quo while still existing within those systems.<sup>19</sup> Even William James grudgingly admitted that his brother achieved a “paradoxical success in this unheard-of method.”<sup>20</sup>

## II. The Question of Vagueness

But let your communications be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil—Matt. 5:37.<sup>21</sup>

“Vagueness is huge,” wrote Richard Rorty, in an article in *The London Review of Books* in 2005.<sup>22</sup> Whereas in the field of literature the word “vague” continues to be confined primarily to negative comments on students’ arguments, in philosophy “Vagueness Studies” have “exploded in the last thirty years.”<sup>23</sup> Rorty explained to those readers outside of analytic philosophy that vagueness studies should interest the general reader because “[i]t is an underlying concern with the question of whether and how language gets in touch with the world that has made vagueness a hot topic.” “The controversy,” he noted, can be boiled down to a fight “between realists, who think the notion of truth as correspondence to reality can be saved, and pragmatists, who regard it as hopeless.” The question of vagueness, however, is far from new, though the rise of pragmatism corresponded to an explosion of writings on vagueness, both of which closely corresponded in time to the birth of the modern novel.

The concept of vagueness has a long and volatile history.<sup>24</sup> Terms with “vague boundaries” have been an object of philosophical debate since Eubulides of Miletus in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC first asserted his sorites paradox (*soros* is ‘heap’ in Greek):

I say: tell me, do you think that a single grain of wheat is a heap? Thereupon you say: No. Then I say: What do you say about 2 grains? For it is my purpose to ask you questions in succession, and if you do not admit that 2 grains are a heap then I shall ask you about 3 grains. Then I shall proceed to interrogate you further with respect to 4 grains, then 5 and 6 and 7 and 8, and you will assuredly say that none of these makes a heap.<sup>25</sup>

The boundary between several grains of sand and a heap, or a man with little hair and a bald man, appears unstable. Recent theorists of vagueness continue to wrestle with this problem—to such an extent that M. F. Burnyeat exclaims, “Eubulides himself can hardly have foreseen that his modest heap of grain would grow to menace Olympus and undermine the foundations of logic.”<sup>26</sup> The sorites paradox menaces logic because

If you remove a single grain of sand from a heap of sand, you surely still have a heap of sand. But if you take a heap and remove grains one by one, you can apply that principle at each stage, which will commit you to counting even the solitary final grain as a heap. This is the sorites paradox.<sup>27</sup>

Logicians emphasize that terms such as ‘heap’ and ‘tall,’ or even ‘child’ or ‘belief,’ have boundaries that are so fuzzy that when logic is applied to define them, although “the premises are highly plausible, [and] the inference seems valid, . . . the conclusions are absurd.”<sup>28</sup> Vague boundaries appear to undermine the principle of bivalence—either something is or is not true—therefore shaking the foundations of classical logic.

Though in classical times paradoxes like the sorites were actually used to test scholars’ dialectical skills—and the ‘heap’ was so famous a paradox that the average reader was supposed to note allusions to heaps<sup>29</sup>—it was not until the end of the nineteenth century with the origins of the analytic tradition that vagueness resurfaced as a key concept. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the problem of vagueness in language became a central subject of debate in pragmatism and the philosophy of language. Ideal language theorists like Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell devised new formal languages and symbolic systems in order to avoid the “irregular, unobtrusive, and ambiguous” qualities of colloquial language, while pragmatists like Charles Sanders Peirce and William James believed that the logicians’ efforts to avoid vagueness were futile and therefore chose to enlist vagueness as a tool.<sup>30</sup> Both Peirce and William James recommend “‘vagueness’ as a counteraction to the dogmatizing of existent truths and as the necessary condition for the exploratory search for new truths”; but Peirce believed that the new truths would themselves be precise whereas William James asserted that vagueness itself finally had a “proper place in our mental life.”<sup>31</sup> The positive re-evaluation of vagueness culminated in Wittgenstein’s praise of the “blur” in *Philosophical Investigations*, where all language is defined as necessarily vague, but unproblematically so, since vagueness does not undermine a language’s utility.

Gottlob Frege, “the father of modern mathematical logic,” created in his 1879 *Begriffsschrift* (*Concept-notation*) a formal language to avoid ordinary language’s ambiguities. He argued:

If it is a question of the truth of something . . . We have to throw away concepts that do not have a meaning . . . These are . . . such as have vague boundaries. It must be determinate for every object whether it falls under a concept or not; a concept-word which does not meet this requirement on its meaning is meaningless.<sup>32</sup>

Frege noted that, since “a large part of a philosopher’s task consists—or at least should consist—in a struggle with language,” a philosopher’s language needs to be as precise as possible; therefore, “vagueness, like madness, must be mentioned in order to be excluded.”<sup>33</sup> Frege, and Russell in his wake, turned their backs on ordinary language’s slipperiness in order to address crucial logical questions. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*—also published in 1922—with its “picture theory of language” can be seen to contribute to the ideal language tradition, if we concur, with Russell’s introduction, that the *Trac-*

*tatus* sets out “the conditions which would have to be fulfilled by a logically perfect language.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards’s *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) and Ogden’s later work on Basic English can be linked to this “ideal language” tradition.<sup>35</sup> Russell’s view that a “vague” concept may be the origin of a philosophical question but that vagueness must be eliminated in the approach and in the fruits of philosophy seems typical of the ideal language tradition:

The process of sound philosophizing, to my mind, consists mainly in passing from those obvious, vague, ambiguous things, that we feel quite sure of, to something precise, clear, definite, which by reflection and analysis we find is involved in the vague thing that we started from, and is, so to speak, the real truth of which the vague thing is a sort of shadow.<sup>36</sup>

Russell insists that “vagueness” may exist before a problem is addressed but that the final result must be “precise, clear and definite.”<sup>37</sup>

However, the pragmatic countercurrent in philosophy, utilizing rather than trying to stamp out vagueness, was gaining momentum in the first decades of the twentieth century. Peirce, a friend of William and Henry James and the coiner of the term “pragmatism,” is often seen as the first rigorous theorist of vagueness, though his attitude towards vagueness was ambivalent. Regretting that “logicians have been at fault in giving Vagueness the go-by, so far as not even to analyze it,” he had “worked out the logic of vagueness with something like completeness.”<sup>38</sup> When called upon to define “Vague” for the 1902 *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, Peirce wrote:

A proposition is vague when there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or included by the proposition. By intrinsically uncertain we mean not uncertain in consequence of any ignorance of the interpreter, but because the speaker’s habits of language were indeterminate; so that one day he would regard the proposition as excluding, another as admitting, those states of things. Yet this must be understood to have reference to what might be *deduced* from a perfect knowledge of his state of mind; for it is precisely because these questions never did, or did not frequently, present themselves that his habit remained indeterminate.<sup>39</sup>

For Peirce, therefore, vagueness is due to an “indeterminate” habit of language, resulting from incomplete self-consciousness, the failing of a thinker who did not bother to press himself with essential questions. Peirce does not assert that the world itself might be vague, but that indeterminacy stems from a speaker’s inconsistent relationship to language. Nonetheless, he simultaneously stresses that vague terms, even in science, can be extremely valuable steps along the way to discovering truth, “so the practice of science is better served by vague predicates than by precise ones.”<sup>40</sup> Peirce called the excessive need for clarity in every step of logical thought the “fallacy of over-precision,” and warned against it (*CP* 8:244).

In contrast to Peirce’s desire to refine vagueness out of existence, William James believed that both the scientific method and the truths discovered are themselves



108 “vague.” “[L]et the science be as vague as its subject,” he writes in *The Principles of Psychology*. Just as “the boundary line of the mental is certainly vague,” so also consciousness and language reflect that vagueness (*PP* 1:6). James resisted fixed truths and concrete mathematical terms. In addition, he found Russell’s desire to read language as a precise science ridiculous. He writes:

A mathematical term, as *a, b, c, x, y, sin, log*, is self-sufficient, and terms of this sort, once equated, can be substituted for one another in an endless series without error. Mr. Russell . . . seem[s] to think that in our mouth also such terms as “meaning,” “truth,” “belief,” “object,” “definition,” are self-sufficients with no context of varying relations that might be further asked about. What a word means is expressed by its definition, isn’t it? The definition claims to be exact and adequate, doesn’t it? Then it can be substituted for the word—since the two are identical—can’t it? Then two words with the same definition can be substituted for one another, *n’est-ce pas?* Likewise two definitions of the same word, *nicht wahr*, etc., till it will be indeed strange if you can’t convict someone of self-contradiction and absurdity.<sup>41</sup>

James emphasizes the importance of “varying relations” to definitions and demonstrates that substituting “same” words (“doesn’t it?” “*n’est-ce pas?*” “*nicht wahr?*”) as one would substitute equal mathematical terms quickly leads to “absurdity.” Instead, since topics like psychology, philosophy, and belief are vague, language, that vague medium, is well suited to investigate their principles.

Ludwig Wittgenstein is the central figure to bridge the competing approaches to vagueness. The *Tractatus* can be seen to sum up Frege, Russell and G. E. Moore’s goal of an “instrumental language,” but his *Philosophical Investigations* reverses his earlier views. The *Tractatus* investigates “the conditions for a logically perfect language,” attempting to resolve the problem that “language is always more or less vague,” with a new “picture” theory of language.<sup>42</sup> The *Philosophical Investigations*, however, demonstrates the influence of the pragmatist re-evaluation of vagueness but pushes the reassessment even further.<sup>43</sup> Like William James, Wittgenstein disagrees with Frege’s dismissal of “vague boundaries”:

Frege compares a concept to an area and says that an area with vague boundaries cannot be called an area at all. This presumably means that we cannot do anything with it.—But is it senseless to say: ‘Stand roughly there’? Suppose that I were standing with someone in a city square and said that. As I say it I do not draw any kind of boundary, but perhaps point with my hand—as if I were indicating a particular *spot*.

“Stand roughly there,” according to Wittgenstein, is a meaningful command. Moreover, it is not only as meaningful as less vague assertions, but also often more so. Wittgenstein’s notion of the way language itself works, the language “game,” is itself necessarily a blurred concept:

One might say that the concept ‘game’ is a concept with blurred edges.—‘But is a blurred concept a concept at all?’—Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it

even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need?<sup>44</sup>

For Wittgenstein the “indistinct” photograph or “blurred” concept represents an inescapable property of language. Vagueness, according to Wittgenstein’s “functionalist” theory of language, cannot truly be evaded and is indeed “exactly what we need” in order to perform philosophical investigations, to capture meaningful images, and to communicate in daily life. Wittgenstein disagreed with those who claimed a new language was needed:

It is clear that every sentence in our language ‘is in order as it is’. That is to say, we are not *striving after* an ideal, as if our ordinary vague sentences had not yet got a quite unexceptionable sense, and a perfect language awaited construction by us.—On the other hand it seems clear that where there is sense there must be perfect order.—So there must be perfect order even in the vaguest sentence.<sup>45</sup>

In contrast to Russell and Frege’s “perfect language,” Wittgenstein asserts that truth can be found even in, and precisely in, the “vaguest sentence.”

Wittgenstein’s change of opinion about the question of vagueness may indeed circle back to Peirce, through the figure of Frank P. Ramsey.<sup>46</sup> Ramsey, a Cambridge mathematician who died at the age of twenty-six, studied Peirce and knew Russell and Wittgenstein personally. (He may have also inspired Woolf’s choice in the profession and name of the semi-fictional portrait of her father, the philosopher Mr. Ramsay, in *To The Lighthouse*.<sup>47</sup>) Ramsey’s influence on Wittgenstein’s philosophical revisions in *Philosophical Investigations* is undeniable—in the Preface, Wittgenstein notes that “to a degree which I myself am hardly able to estimate,” the changes were instigated “by the criticism which my ideas encountered from Frank Ramsey, with whom I discussed them in innumerable conversations during the last two years of his life” (*PI* xe). Similarly, Ramsey himself stressed Peirce’s influence on his own later thought; in “Truth and Probability” (1929) he writes, “What follows to the end of the section is almost entirely based on the writings of C. S. Peirce.”<sup>48</sup> While the extent of Ramsey’s effect on the pragmatic strain of the later Wittgenstein is hotly debated, what is notable is Ramsey’s emphasis in his last writings (and therefore perhaps in these conversations recalled by Wittgenstein) on the importance of vagueness.<sup>49</sup> For example, in a late paper entitled “Philosophy,” Ramsey writes:

I could not see how we could understand a word and not be able to recognize whether a proposed definition of it was or was not correct. I did not realize the vagueness of the whole idea of understanding. . . The chief danger to our philosophy, apart from laziness and wooliness is *scholasticism*, the essence of which is treating what is vague as if it were precise and trying to fit it into an exact logical category.<sup>50</sup>

Ramsey’s revised approach to the meaning of words like “understanding” and his refusal to treat “what is vague as if it were precise” foreshadow Wittgenstein’s focus on the vagueness (*Vagheit*) of language-games.

110 Debates about vagueness, and particularly sorites paradoxes, raise two main issues pertinent to modernist fiction. First, if, as both analytic and many pragmatic theorists imply, vagueness is *epistemic*, that is, if boundaries of vague terms are not actually blurry but “our failure to detect a sharp transition” is “merely a defect in our knowledge,” then vagueness could be (ideally) eliminated, and greater and greater precision should smooth the problems apparent in definition and communication.<sup>51</sup> Henry James’s assertion that Flaubert’s *not juste* nonetheless misses something “beneath and behind, that belongs to the realm of vagueness and uncertainty,” seems to deny this possible cure for vagueness.<sup>52</sup> Second, if vagueness is not epistemic but *semantic*, that is, if it is not just that we do not have enough knowledge about the case at hand to determine whether a borderline heap is a grain or a heap (or whether Orlando is a man or a woman) but that there is no actual answer, then vagueness might demonstrate “some real indeterminacy in the non-linguistic world itself;” hence, arguments that “vague language undermines realism.”<sup>53</sup> Writings by both William James and Wittgenstein appear to contend that vagueness might be semantic, and engagement with semantic vagueness seems particularly germane to the revision of character, motivation, and consciousness occurring in modern novels. Indeed, the questions philosophers were asking about heaps and non-heaps suggested an interesting middle ground between Idealist and Realist ways of looking at the world, a possibility that was simultaneously considered in literature.

While many early twentieth-century novelists, such as Henry James, Woolf, and Stein, had personal ties to the philosophers investigating vagueness, particularly William James, Charles Peirce, and Bertrand Russell, they were also writing, like the philosophers, in a cultural and intellectual climate that encountered and countered the limitations of precision. Why did literary realism, like a transparent language of logic, prove insufficient at the beginning of the twentieth century for capturing the vagaries of consciousness or modern life, leading to Woolf’s question: “Is life like this? Must novels be like this?” (*CR* 212). Woolf herself posed one famous answer to that question, when she argued that fiction needed to change since “on or about December 1910 human character changed” (*EVW* 3:421). Woolf labels this a “very vague” assertion and omits mentioning the possible historical factors behind her choice of that date, such as the death of Edward VII and succession of George V in May or the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition in November. In addition to changes in government and art, another important event in that year—specifically in December 1910—was Russell’s and Alfred North Whitehead’s publication of the first volume of *Principia Mathematica*, setting out proofs for the logical basis of all mathematics.<sup>54</sup> The imprecision of Woolf’s declaration—“on or about”—is very different from the logically sound mathematical language set out in that work. Woolf specifically calls attention to the imprecision of her declaration; she writes that the “change” in human character was not “‘definite,’ like a ‘hen [that] had laid an egg’” (*EVW* 3:421). Indeed, though Woolf adds that one “may well complain about the vagueness of my language” (*EVW* 3:431), assertions such as “on or about December 1910 human character changed” embrace vagueness for tone and irony while crystallizing the distinction between Woolf’s vision of ‘reality’ and that endorsed by philosophers like Bertrand Russell (*EVW* 3:431).

### III. Virginia Woolf, Bertrand Russell, and the Question of Vagueness: Mush & the Telescope

When the Ramsays are finally sailing to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay, the philosopher, looks at his daughter Cam and thinks to himself:

Women are always like that; the vagueness of their minds is hopeless; it was a thing he had never been able to understand; but so it was. It had been so with her—his wife. They could not keep anything clearly fixed in their minds. But he had been wrong to be angry with her; moreover, did he not rather like this vagueness in women?<sup>55</sup>

Woolf's philosopher, who is "stuck" in his own writing, nonetheless picks apart the minds of women and chooses "vagueness"—an inability "to keep anything clearly fixed in their minds"—as a fault. Though he admits to liking "this vagueness in women," his own work and philosophy of life lie in stark contrast to it—his work is a "definite contribution to philosophy" (*TTL* 39), and his rule to his children is that "life is difficult; facts uncompromising" (*TTL* 11). He thinks of his philosophy in a purely linear fashion; to him, "thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order," and "his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q" (*TTL* 53). The vagueness of his daughter Cam and his deceased wife may be charming, but he does not believe it is the way forward in rigorous intellectual pursuits.<sup>56</sup>

Ramsay is not wrong in believing that the women's minds in *To The Lighthouse* work in opposition to his. When Lily tries to consider Ramsay's work, she feels "vagueness as to what Mr. Ramsay did think about" (*TTL* 232), and she digresses in her thoughts, first about Andrew's sudden death, then about the symbol she has created to imagine Ramsay's philosophy. Her "circular tendency" in thinking is more akin to Woolf's writing in "The Mark on the Wall" or "An Unwritten Novel" than to Mr. Ramsay's orderly keyboard.<sup>57</sup> Both Lily and Mrs. Ramsay also chastise Mr. Ramsay for the impersonal nature of his thought. Mrs. Ramsay admits to herself that "[t]o pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings" seems to her a horrible "outrage of human decency" (*TTL* 51). Lily allows that "[n]aturally, if one's days were passed in this seeing of angular essences, this reducing of lovely evenings, with all their flamingo clouds and blue and silver . . . naturally one could not be judged like an ordinary person" (*TTL* 38). (Her repetition of "naturally" puts into question, however, the notion that "reducing" the world is really natural to her at all.) Woolf later wrote that her depiction of the Ramsays was largely autobiographical and mostly derived from observing her parents. And yet, her portrayal of a philosopher who detests "vagueness," who believes philosophical inquiry must be "impersonal," and who posits that philosophical thought is best rendered in alphabetical letters, also calls to mind her relationship with Bertrand Russell.

At a dinner party in 1921 Woolf's reaction to Russell foreshadowed elements of her creation of Ramsay, composed six years later. Recalling the conversation in her diary, she

112 claimed to have waved her hand about the room and admitted to him that “[a]ll this is mush [to me]; & you can put a telescope to your eye & see through it.” This comment initiated the following discussion about their different views of life. Woolf writes:

If you had my brain you would find the world a very thin, colourless place, he said.  
 But my colours are so foolish I replied.  
 You want them for your writing, he said. Do you never see things impersonally? . . .  
 But I have a feeling that human affairs are impure.  
 God does mathematics. That’s my feeling. It is the most exalted form of art.  
 Art? I said. (*DVW* 2:147)

Woolf and Russell parody their own ways of seeing the world (“mush,” “colourless”) and yet their characterizations quite succinctly summarize their different approaches. Russell acknowledges the limitations of his method in which, echoed in Woolf’s later portrayal of Mr. Ramsay, the “flamingo clouds and blue and silver” do not factor into his colorless world. Similarly, Woolf claims her vision ends in “mush” and is “foolish.” Yet Russell’s question, “Do you never see things impersonally?” and Woolf’s response, that she has a “feeling that human affairs are impure,” clearly demonstrate their antagonistic viewpoints. Woolf makes subjective even her statement that human affairs are subjective; Russell sparringly equates mathematics with divinity. Russell grants that Woolf’s writing may benefit from feeling and from color, but science and impersonal mathematics direct the brain of the philosopher. Woolf, in contrast, gives herself the last word in her journal, questioning whether mathematics is really an “Art” at all, and implying Art is more “exalted” than mathematics.

Less than a year later Russell delivered his “Vagueness” lecture at Oxford and Woolf published *Jacob’s Room*. In “Vagueness,” Russell advocates moving philosophical inquiry away from traditional questions—What is truth? What is reality? Words are vague, he argues, but the mere fact that words are not precise does not mean that the world itself is not precise; this error stems from the “fallacy of verbalism” (*V* 62). At the same time that Russell advocated new mathematical approaches to philosophy, Woolf’s novels take up the philosophical questions Russell has discarded as “vague.” Woolf wrote fiction and essays that incarnate an antithetical philosophy to that being ushered in by Russell. In Woolf’s view, the world itself and our position within it are necessarily vague, shifting, and blurred. Woolf’s famous “semi-transparent envelope” as a description of life is practically the definition of a boundary-less term (*EVW* 3:33). Moreover, the vagueness of language is its strength; it refuses to fix concepts the way Russell’s ideal language seeks to do. While Russell aims to move philosophy away from “impure” English, Woolf’s novels become “fictionalized epistemology.”<sup>58</sup> Her novels explode the realist conventions of the nineteenth-century novel in order to satisfy the question she poses in “Modern Fiction”: “Must novels be like this?” (*CR* 212). Woolf’s novels require new complex forms in order to render the “vague general confusion” of modern life; rather than a plot that runs from A to Z, she blends genres, and includes narrative interruptions, fragmentation, and gaps that necessitate the reader’s own associations. Although Woolf often expresses a kind of nostalgia for a time of fact, and

longs to represent the objective precise fact, she also insists that modern literature must represent “Life” the way it really is—blurred and distorted—and language is the best tool we have at our disposal.<sup>59</sup>

Woolf, of course, was not a philosopher per se. She was a novelist, journalist, and essayist. Although her father, Leslie Stephen (another model for Mr. Ramsay), wrote philosophy and wished to be remembered as a philosopher, Woolf herself exclaimed in her diary, “I don’t want ‘a philosophy’ in the least,” and complained that the novels of D. H. Lawrence were tiring since “[a]rt [should be] being rid of all preaching” (*DVW* 4:126). In *The Waves*, Bernard, the voice of the novelist, exclaims, “Certain things lie beyond my scope. I shall never understand the harder problems of philosophy” (*W* 186). Woolf also professed a rather scathing attitude towards any kind of institutionalized philosophy, as we might expect from the writer shut out of Oxbridge in *A Room of One’s Own*—“philosophic words,” she wrote there, “if one has not been educated at a university are apt to play one false.”<sup>60</sup> Although she admired the “philosophical novel,” she feared the influence that too much knowledge of philosophy might have on a novelist, as well as too much systemization on a philosophy. She wrote in a book review:

[W]hen philosophy is not consumed in a novel, when we can underline this phrase with a pencil and cut out that exhortation with a pair of scissors and paste the whole into a system, it is safe to say that there is something wrong with the philosophy or with the novel or with both.<sup>61</sup>

She also minimized her knowledge of philosophy, though she knew both Russell and G. E. Moore personally, attended open lectures, and lived in Bloomsbury society where, as she wrote, “discussing philosophy, art, religion” was in the atmosphere itself.<sup>62</sup>

Moreover her essays, such as “Modern Fiction,” certainly have a theory (if never a named and explicit one) behind them—what she calls at one point a “philosophy.”<sup>63</sup> Recent critical works have tried to pin down this philosophy. I agree with Mark Hussey’s statement in *The Singing of the Real World* that forcing Woolf’s fiction into a philosophical school does it a disservice; or, as Matz explains, “Woolf’s philosophical affiliations change with the moods of her characters, which is why no philosophical affiliation can define her vague theory of fiction.”<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, juxtaposing her investigations of language and desire to dismantle the “materialist” novel to Russell’s disdain for “vagueness” and creation of a new symbolic language demonstrates a clear opposition. Further, Woolf’s dislike of institutional philosophy is in keeping with her philosophical novels, as she moves epistemological questions out of the academy where they are addressed by only a (usually male) privileged few and into novels, open to the Common Reader.<sup>65</sup>

In her radio broadcast on “Craftsmanship,” Woolf offered a more generous view of language’s imprecision than that expressed by Russell in his lecture on “Vagueness.”<sup>66</sup> The BBC aired the talk on 29 April 1937, near the end of Woolf’s life. Her broadcast was part of a series entitled, “Words Fail Me,” and Woolf’s talk acts as a challenge to the series title. In “Craftsmanship,” Woolf accepts that she is meant to take “for our

114 starting point the statement that words are not useful" (C 245), and analyzes the idea that "[i]t is words that are to blame" for the confusion and miscommunication in the world (C 249). But, taking advantage of, as she notes, the "crafty" (in the sense of "cajolery" and "cunning") meaning of the word craftsmanship, Woolf teasingly plays with philosophies of language like Russell's, undermining the idea of inventing a new language and praising the "democratic," associative, and personal nature of words. Words are "irreclaimable vagabonds," Woolf makes clear, but "that is because the truth they try to catch is many-sided" (C 251).

According to the preview of the talk published in the *Radio Times* on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April:

In Virginia Woolf's opinion, craftsmanship is a word that can be applied to the making of pots and pans, but not to words in the way in which writers use them. There is a distinction to be made between the useful use of words and their literary use. The novelist and the scientist use words very differently.<sup>67</sup>

This is a peculiarly misleading summary of Woolf's talk (perhaps written by the producer). In fact, Woolf makes no distinction between scientific language and literary language, insisting that all words are "not useful." Words "always" tell the truth, she argues, but that is because "it is the nature of words to mean many things" (C 247). The only nod Woolf makes to the scientist's use of words may be in her playful examination of the new "language of signs" that she claims "we are beginning to invent."

Quentin Bell expressed dismay at the tone of voice in Woolf's (his aunt's) recording: "Her voice is deprived of depth and resonance; it seems altogether too fast and too flat; it is barely recognizable."<sup>68</sup> With more recent critics, however, I would argue that Woolf's tone varies, and that in many moments her quickness marks her attempt to mask her humor and irony.<sup>69</sup> For example, in order to prove that "words are not useful," Woolf chooses as if by hazard "Passing Russell Square" as her first example of three words to repeat "over and over again" as a demonstration of how words "shuffle and change." "Passing Russell Square, Passing Russell Square," she repeats, but in her repetition, she loses the useful meaning of the words and hears instead the resonance of "Passing away saith the world, passing away." Christina Rossetti's verse makes Woolf forget to exit at Russell Square, the correct Tube stop. Woolf concludes that words proved "that they hate being useful" because "it is their nature not to express one simple statement but a thousand possibilities." Woolf notes:

[a]t last, happily, we are beginning to face the fact. We are beginning to invent another language—a language perfectly and beautifully adapted to express useful statements, a language of signs. (C 246)

This new language of "signs" will be "useful," helping Woolf to exit the train rather than to recite poetry.

Russell Square was a familiar and frequent tube stop for Woolf, so she may have chosen to repeat "Passing Russell Square" by chance as her example for the need to

create a new language. However, since the focus of her talk is the multiple meanings of words, she notes that “Russell” suggests “the rustling of leaves and the skirt on a polished floor,” as well as “the ducal house of Bedford” (i.e., Bertrand Russell’s family). Moreover, given her knowledge of Bertrand Russell, it seems her new “beautifully adapted language” may be referring to the “special language” Russell invented.

Woolf’s praise of “a new language of signs” is heavy with irony. She continues:

There is one great living master of this language to whom we are all indebted, that anonymous writer—whether man, woman, or disembodied spirit, nobody knows—who describes hotels in the Michelin Guide. He wants to tell us that one hotel is moderate, another good, and a third the best in the place. How does he do it? Not with words . . . He sticks to signs; one gable, two gables, three gables. That is all he says and all he needs to say. (C 246)

Though this method of signs may work very well for Michelin and Baedeker, to address “truth” (and Woolf spells out she means not only “literary truth” but also “God’s or gospel truth and home truth”), she returns to words. Words are the “the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things.” However, since “the truth they try to catch is many-sided,” words are well suited, “being themselves many-sided, flashing this way, then that.” Woolf implies that a new language like Russell’s may be satisfactory for certain tasks (like judging hotels) but words, which “lapse and flow into each other like reeds upon the bed of a river,” are needed to address truth. In contrast to Russell, who believes that the problem of language is that it is “one-many,” Woolf asserts that truth itself is “many-sided,” so the many meanings of words are their strength. Moreover, Woolf emphasizes that the kind of truth language can capture is more important than a language of signs—“words are the only things that tell the truth and nothing but the truth,” she insists (C 245).

Woolf also notes that it is impossible for words to be impersonal, nor can a language remain pure. “But has any writer,” she asks, “succeeded in being wholly impersonal? Always, inevitably, we know them as well as their books” (C 248). In contrast to Russell’s notion (and also that of T. S. Eliot) that “impersonality” is possible or desirable, Woolf insists that language reveals personality; further, “If you start a Society for Pure English, [words] will show their resentment by starting another for impure English.”<sup>70</sup> Just as Woolf commented to Russell over dinner that she feared that “human affairs are impure,” so also she insists that language is impure, but its impurity is a strength, because it is “highly democratic too . . . uneducated words are as good as educated words, uncultivated words as cultivated words, there are no ranks or titles in their society” (C 250).

Most criticism of Woolf’s attitude to language tends to focus on a few stock negative lines from her writings, and disregards her important claims that language is “democratic” or her gendering of language itself as female.<sup>71</sup> Critics point, for example, to Lily Briscoe’s assertion that “in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman . . . were stood, like treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out would teach everything,” yet the knowledge is “nothing that



116 could be written in any language known to men” (*TTL* 79). Lily longs to understand Mrs. Ramsay in a way freed from language “known to men.” Julia Kristeva’s view of Woolf is often cited as a truism about Woolf’s relationship to the logos:

In women’s writing, language seems to be seen from a foreign land; is it seen from the point of view of an asymbolic, spastic body? Virginia Woolf describes suspended states, subtle sensation, and above all, colors—green, blue—but she does not dissect language as Joyce does. Estranged from language, women are visionaries, dancers who suffer as they speak.<sup>72</sup>

Although my investigation into Woolf’s vagueness similarly finds gender and open-endedness essential to Woolf’s prose, I hesitate to see Woolf as necessarily more “estranged from language” than male writers like Joyce. I would agree with Kate Flint that it is “misleading” to take Woolf’s language as some sort of “prefiguration of new French Feminist thought,” which seems essentialist and ahistorical; as Flint argues, “for Woolf, women, language, and consciousness intertwine in a way which is ultimately inseparable from social context.”<sup>73</sup>

In fact, one important social context involved access to lectures, such as Russell’s, and philosophy departments at Oxbridge. Woolf would not have heard Russell’s actual lecture “Vagueness” as it was given at a private club at Oxford. However, Woolf admitted she went to some of his open lectures, since “[t]he touchstone of virtue. . . now is whether you attend Bertie’s lectures or not” (*DVW* 1:273). Her reaction was none too favorable. She jokes in a letter that “Bertie lectures on Tuesdays, and thinks to issue a new constitution, so we are told, with the help of young Cambridge.”<sup>74</sup> Her thoughts on Russell’s lecture and the war lead her to exclaim, “I become steadily more feminist.” Russell may have worked for the suffrage campaign, but his philosophy and his new mathematical language voiced from the pulpit of Cambridge irked Woolf. Unlike the ranks and titles of Cambridge—which Woolf deplores in *Three Guineas*—language is open to all. Judith Shakespeare’s writing suffered because she lacked education and a room of her own; nonetheless, Woolf suggests language was still her tool: “Anon,” she argues, “who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.”<sup>75</sup>

When Woolf depicts vagueness it is usually gendered. She recalls, for example, that her father was always “cracking up sense and manliness” and “crying down sentiment and vagueness.”<sup>76</sup> When she praises Dorothy Richardson’s “psychological sentence of the female gender” it is “of a more elastic fibre than the old,” capable of “enveloping the vaguest shapes.”<sup>77</sup> In Woolf’s second novel, *Night and Day*, she contrasts her two heroines as follows:

Where Katherine was simple, Cassandra was complex; where Katharine was solid and direct, Cassandra was vague and evasive. In short, they represented very well the manly and the womanly sides of the feminine nature. (*ND* 290)

Woolf’s narrator here, like Mr. Ramsay and like Leslie Stephen, finds fault with “the feminine nature” for its vagueness. In “Women and Fiction,” Woolf wonders if the vote

will change women from being “fluctuating and vague” “toward the impersonal” (*CE* 2:147); in *Jacob’s Room* young girls and old ladies are “[b]right yet vague”; and Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out* is consistently depicted as vague, though Helen warns, “She seems vague, but she’s a will of her own.”<sup>78</sup> When male characters like Terence Hewett in *The Voyage Out* are depicted as vague, their manliness seems at stake. Hirst critically asks Hewett, “I wonder if it’s really nice to be as vague as you are?” (*VO* 97). Solidity and directness are gendered male, whereas vagueness and “dear Mother English” are aligned to “the feminine nature.”

Woolf concludes “Craftsmanship” with a conceit comparing writing to moth collecting.

Perhaps that is [words’] most striking peculiarity—their need of change. It is because the truth they catch is many-sided, and they convey it by being themselves many-sided, flashing this way, then that. Thus they mean one thing to one person, another thing to another; they are unintelligible to one generation, plain as a pikestaff to the next. And it is because of this complexity that they survive. Perhaps then one reason why we have no great poet, novelist, or critic writing today is that we refuse words their liberty. We pin them down to one meaning. . . . And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die. (*C* 251)

Woolf asserts that we “have no great poet, novelist, or critic” because writers, like moth collectors, pin words down and kill them in the effort to examine them. “We are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English Literature,” she asserts in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” and though “Grammar is violated, syntax disintegrated,” the language of the moderns will achieve where the Edwardians’ flounders.<sup>79</sup> Allowing language its liberty will require freedom from what Woolf calls in her diary, “This appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner” (*DVW* 3:209). Woolf calls words “irreclaimable vagabonds,” and just as she discovered craftiness in the root of craftsmanship, we can locate “vague” in the root of the word vagabond. “Wandering, inconstant, uncertain,” the vagueness that Woolf praises in language and the new novel is exactly that which Russell would have eliminated in the search for truths.

Indeed, although Woolf generally avoided coining new words, one word which the *Oxford English Dictionary* still cites Woolf as creating is *vagulous*. During the same summer that Woolf commented repeatedly in her diary about Russell’s lectures,—“They were going to hear Bertie lecture; I preferred the songsters of Trafalgar square” (*DVW* 1:270)—Woolf uses *vagulous* to describe E. M. Forster. “I like Forster very much,” Woolf writes, “though I find him whimsical and vagulous to an extent that frightens me with my own clumsiness & definiteness” (*DVW* 1:291). Derived from the latin *vagulus*, Woolf’s word seems both a compliment and also the opposite of “definiteness,” the quality praised by Russell, but clearly a fault according to Woolf. Forster’s *vagulous* character seems to hold some sort of negative capability that Woolf fears she lacks. This becomes evident when she uses the word in print in *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1925:

[Old Sir Harry] liked her; respected her, in spite of her damnable, difficult upper-class refinement, which made it impossible to ask Clarissa Dalloway to sit on his knee. And up came that wandering will-o'-the-wisp, that vagulous phosphorescence, old Mrs. Hilberry, stretching her hands to the blaze of his laughter (about the Duke and the Lady), which, as she heard it across the room, seemed to reassure her on a point which sometimes bothered her if she woke early in the morning . . . how it is certain we must die. (*MD* 175)

The “vagulous phosphorescence” of “old Mrs. Hilberry” contrasts with Sir Harry’s physicality: his booming laughter and desire to hold Clarissa upon his knee. Yet her indefiniteness is also a kind of knowledge, and, unlike Sir Harry, she emphatically faces the fact that “we must die.” Though she may appear inconsequential to the outside observer (“that wandering will-o'-the-wisp”), she shares with other Woolf heroines, particularly Clarissa herself, a self-consciousness about her own mortality which, kept within reason, is the basis of knowledge in Woolf’s work. To be *vagulous*, therefore, reflects a kind of wisdom. Woolf’s additional use of a variant of *vagulous* in her diary, describing Ottoline Morrell as “undulated and vagulated,” connects *vagulous* to the French word *vague* or wave (*DVW* 3:93). Morrell’s character appears changeable to Woolf, like the waves, suggesting a relationship between *vagulousness* and waves. Waves work as important figures of inescapable change in Woolf’s writing. Stretching from her recollection of the childhood waves at St. Ives in *Moments of Being* to their depiction in *The Waves*, waves act as an apt metaphor for the ineradicable vagueness of “dear Mother English” (*C* 250) and its openness to new associations and democratic coinages.<sup>80</sup>

#### IV. *Night and Day* and “the semi-transparent envelope”

*Night and Day*’s protagonist, Katharine Hilbery, sounds as if she would gladly help to usher in Russell’s new constitution if she had the chance. Katharine thinks to herself:

[I]n her mind mathematics were directly opposed to literature. She would not have cared to confess how infinitely she preferred the exactitude, the star-like impersonality, of figures to the confusion, agitation, and vagueness of the finest prose. (*ND* 34)

Katherine Mansfield, whose scathing review of *Night and Day* continues to set the standard criticism of Woolf’s longest and most neglected novel, comments on the strangeness of this phrase of Woolf’s. She emphasizes that the heroine, the granddaughter of one of England’s most famous poets, is in “profound protest against the family tradition, against the making of phrases (and what Mrs Woolf rather curiously calls) ‘the confusion, agitation, and vagueness of the finest prose.’”<sup>81</sup> Mansfield’s review strives to pigeon-hole *Night and Day* as anachronistic, a wartime novel which refuses to acknowledge the war, a traditional English novel, complete with two concluding marriages and Shakespearean laurels, during the “age of experiment.” “In the midst of our admiration,” she concludes, “it makes us feel old and chill: we had never thought to look upon its like again!” However, this oddity of “Mrs Woolf’s” phrasing, and her

heroine's absolute distrust of language—even as Katharine is the symbolic heir to England's literature—make it both more of a war novel and less a rote exercise in tradition than Mansfield suggests. Woolf's heroine doubts something about language that is actually central to the novel's "love" plot and comic conclusion, and the focus on language's "confusion, agitation, and vagueness" connects Woolf's early novel to her more obviously experimental later works. In fact, in *Night and Day*, Woolf teaches her heroine (ironically named Katharine) in a novel in the realist tradition something about language and the power of vagueness that Woolf embodies in the form of her later experimental novels.

Mansfield not unfairly highlighted the debt of *Night and Day* to an earlier English literary tradition. Woolf wrote in a letter to Roger Fry that *Night and Day* was an attempt at "the large, old fashioned, high minded English novel."<sup>82</sup> A combination of *Bildungsroman*, portraiture, and autobiography, *Night and Day*, in a "leisurely progression," tells the story of Katharine Hilbery's engagements, first to a young suitable man of her same class, next to the clerk whom she comes to 'love.'<sup>83</sup> As in Jane Austen's novels, the plot focuses on the marriage of a worthy young protagonist, and in the vein of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, two marriages rather than one bring the novel to its happy conclusion. The omniscient narrative style is strongly reminiscent of the careful control of Austen or Eliot. Woolf chose to set her novel in a literary environment, where Henry James appears in the caricature of "Mr Fortescue, the eminent novelist" (*ND* 4), and Katharine's employment when she is not showing off the literary memorabilia of her ancestor is to read Henry Fielding to her parents (*ND* 84). In fact contemporary writers, "the moderns," are caricatured as "too clever and cheap and nasty for words."<sup>84</sup>

Rather than admiring her literary ancestors, Katharine strives for a world of impersonal fact beyond the reaches of impure feelings. Katharine's utter distrust of language makes her impervious to the offers of love she receives. "But I haven't got the sort of feeling—love, I mean—I don't know what to call it," she insists to her mother and fiancé. She cannot accept that "love" has multiple interpretations, noting that:

Much depended, as usual, upon the interpretation of the word love; which word came up again and again, whether she considered Rodney, Denham, Mary Datchet, or herself; and in each case it seemed to stand for something not to be passed by. (*ND* 266)

Each time the word "love" means something important, but it fails "to stand for something" static. Language seems insufficient to Katharine, so that whereas Mrs. Hilbery argues, "The best of life is built on what we say when we're in love," Katharine merely insists, "we talk a lot of nonsense" (*ND* 260). Just as Rosalind in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, to whom Katharine is three times compared, urges that "men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love," so also Katharine refuses to accept any profundity in the words of love that first Rodney, then Ralph, urge upon her.<sup>85</sup> Instead, Katharine craves "figures, laws, stars, facts" (*ND* 240). Her disbelief in language actually foils the story and stretches Woolf's novel out much longer than

120 one could conceive (and perhaps, honestly, than one would desire), since her heroine repeatedly refuses Woolf's marriage plot.

Yet, through her mother, Katharine learns that language, rather than the precise astronomy she admires, can best suit the "impure" affairs of humanity. Before Mrs. Hilbery's intervention Katharine and Ralph are paralyzed, not feeling themselves in the kind of love that the other couple, Cassandra and William, obviously share, though Ralph asks "what other word describes the state we're in?" (*ND* 360). In contrast Katharine thinks:

Ah but her romance wasn't that romance. It was a desire, an echo, a sound; she could drape it in colour, see it in form, hear it in music, but not in words; no never in words. She sighed, teased by desires so incoherent, so incommunicable. (*ND* 243)

When Ralph tries to make her into something she is not, she fights against his "damn romantic nonsense," stating, "I'm a matter of fact" person (*ND* 323). Their main difficulty is that their love comes and goes, and they often appear to each other as mere illusions. The lovers in *Night and Day* experience a great division between Night and Day, between Dreams and Reality (Woolf's manuscript title for the novel), and they fail to believe language will connect their experiences.

Mrs. Hilbery elicits the help of words and stories to beguile the lovers, and upsets Katharine's belief in mathematics by forcing her to speak of her emotions. Unlike the kind of writing that Katharine says she could admire, which "ought to go from point to point" (*ND* 93), Woolf writes that Mrs. Hilbery "veiled purposely by the vagueness of her words." She describes "[t]he night and the stars, the dawn coming up, the barges swimming past, the sun setting," all the time staring with "a gaze that was at once very vague and penetrating" (*ND* 362). Mrs. Hilbery's stories are both "ancient fairy-tales" and fragments of poetry like the natural interludes in Woolf's *The Waves*. Mrs. Hilbery calls Katharine's mathematics (as well as her notion that she and Ralph might just live together rather than get married) "ugly" compared to the mystical tale of love by which Katharine, in listening to her mother's words, feels compelled. "A plus B minus C equals *xyz*. It's so dreadfully ugly, Katharine," Mrs. Hilbery retorts to Katharine's mathematics, whereas "a soothing word when uttered by another, a riveting together of the shattered fragments of the world" calms both Ralph and Katharine (*ND* 411). Although "A plus B minus C equals *xyz*" may mirror Russell's approach to philosophy, as a philosophy of life for Woolf's young protagonist it is absolutely stultifying and needs to be replaced by evocative "shattered fragments" of stories to assure growth.

Leonard Woolf, however, found *Night and Day* depressing. "L. finds the philosophy very melancholy," Woolf noted in her diary, yet, "[t]he process of discarding the old [answers] when one is by no means certain what to put in their place, is a sad one" (*DVW* 1:259). In some ways Woolf's novel's ending is very bleak, as the heroine must set aside her passion for mathematics to find passion and companionship. Katharine and Mary Datchet, characters who figure in many ways as twins, are exiled from each other at the book's end; Woolf's moral may be that love and work are mutually exclu-

sive. And yet, as a philosophy posited in a novel it is less stark because Woolf argues in favor of the power of literature, noting that mathematics fails to hold the answers that Shakespeare's fool or vague prose can offer. Solid answers, like Katharine's astronomy, and even traditional writing demonstrating "unity of phrase," like that of *Night and Day* itself, must be discarded for a writing which is "unfinished," "unsoldered," and "unwritten." Only the possibilities inherent in this new "unfinished" language, whether in the scribbles of Katharine and Ralph or in Mary's manuscript (bad as it allegedly is) conclude the book with a sense of hope.

Ralph and Katharine agree upon a particular "unfinished" fragment as a significant image at the end of the novel that is importantly vague and relates both to an image from Henry James and to Woolf's essay "Modern Fiction." In an effort to communicate with Katharine, Ralph has drawn with "half obliterated scratches" a strange symbol for her. Woolf writes:

It represented by its circumference of smudges surrounding a central blot all that encircling glow which for him surrounded, inexplicably, so many objects of life, softening their sharp outlines, so that he could see certain streets, books, and situations wearing a halo almost perceptible to the physical eye. (ND 420)

Woolf's image merits comparison to a passage from Henry James that Woolf liked. Explaining how he viewed his novel *The Awkward Age*, James described:

The neat figure of a circle consisting of a number of small rounds disposed at equal distances about a central object. The central object was my situation, my subject in itself, to which the thing would owe its title, and the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps, as I liked to call them, the function of each of which would be to light with all due intensity one of its aspects.<sup>86</sup>

In her essay "The Method of Henry James," written for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1918 while she was writing *Night and Day*, Woolf had quoted this passage, admiringly. Woolf notes, "One had almost rather read what [Henry James] meant to do rather than read what he actually did," and praised James's notion of fiction acting as "so many distinct lamps." If "[w]e want to be rid of Realism," as Woolf proclaims, Henry James's theory seems to offer a new method (EVW 3:12).

However, the image in *Night and Day*, which she would soon reconfigure in "Modern Fiction," is markedly different from James's "neat figure." As in James's image, there is a central object of focus and there is a circumference of illumination. Yet in Woolf's novel, James's central object has been blurred, made into a "central blot" and rather than the symmetry of James's lamps at equal distances, Ralph's image is, like Russell's photograph, "smudge[d]." Ralph communicates to Katharine that the world, "streets, books, and situations," is not distinct but blurred and that objects are not precise but they have an "encircling glow."

In his lecture on the vagueness of language Russell emphasizes that words have a similar "penumbra." Russell writes that language cannot maintain precision: "[t]he

122 fact is that all words are attributable without doubt over a certain area,” and yet they “become questionable within a penumbra, outside which they are again certainly not attributable” (V 63). A word, Russell argues, has an area of certain usage but then a penumbra where usage is vague. And one cannot escape this penumbra:

Someone might seek to obtain precision in the use of words by saying that no word is to be applied in the penumbra, but unfortunately the penumbra itself is not accurately definable, and all the vaguenesses which apply to the primary use of words apply also when we try to fix a limit to their indubitable applicability. (V 63–4)

Ralph’s vision of life is like Russell’s view of language; a penumbra or halo inexplicably and inescapably smudges certainty.

Having finished *Night and Day*, Woolf writes in “Modern Fiction”:

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? (EVW 4:160–1)

Woolf clearly rejects James’s vision of symmetrical lamps, and her earlier depiction of Ralph’s picture is now adopted as part of her own belief about “Life.”<sup>87</sup> Woolf’s essay particularly targets “the materialists,” “Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett and Mr. Galsworthy,” whose realist technique “provides scenes of tragedy, comedy, and excitement,” and yet fails to capture life. This is where Woolf writes, “if one were free and could set down what one chose, there would be no plot, little probability, and a vague general confusion in which the clear-cut features of the tragic, the comic, the passionate, and the lyrical were dissolved beyond the possibility of separate recognition” (EVW 3:33). Woolf’s new generation of writers, the moderns or “spiritualists,” will embrace the “vague general confusion” of modern existence and will not cling to the conventional distinctions between tragedy and comedy. Her new image of fiction rejects Henry James’s “fixed lamps” and symmetry as well as the linear plot and probability of the materialists and seeks to replace their sharp shapes and clear-cut categories. Moreover, the penumbra that Russell attributes to language is for Woolf an actual quality of the world, a necessary function of consciousness; the “semi-transparent envelope” that the novelist must convey may be the ontological vagueness that Russell believes is a fallacy.

After *Night and Day*, even in *The Years* or in *Between the Acts*, Woolf demonstrates she has discarded writing that goes “from point to point to point,” in favor of the vision of vagueness that Katherine and Ralph share at the end of *Night and Day* and that she outlines in her essays on modern novels. The experimentation of later works like *Mrs. Dalloway*, combining free indirect discourse, multiple perspectives, and interspersed passages of tragedy (Septimus’s suicide) and comedy (Clarissa Dalloway’s reconnection with Peter Walsh and Sally Seton), embodies the new formal vagueness that *Night and Day* teaches the reader to accept. Clarissa Dalloway’s sense of a penumbra surrounding

her, because “she felt herself everywhere,” leads to her “transcendental theory” that she has “odd affinities” with strangers and unfamiliar places (*MD* 152–3). Woolf’s narrative structure supports Clarissa’s sense of her vague connections to the rest of the world by paralleling Clarissa’s and Septimus’s streams of thought. Indeed, since Clarissa’s party is the closest to a metaphor for Woolf’s own writing in the novel, Woolf underscores the vagueness of her novel’s structure. Fearing Peter Walsh believes she has matured into a mere society hostess, Clarissa asserts that her parties are “an offering; which sounded horribly vague.” Although the meaning of Clarissa’s party, “an offering; to combine, to create,” may seem horrible in being “vague” to her, Woolf’s narrated monologue mirrors Clarissa’s desire to “to combine, to create” in uniting disparate individuals (*MD* 121–2). Clarissa’s party is itself a vague symbol of the structure of Woolf’s later novels.

Indeed, Woolf asserts that any symbolism in her writing needs to be vague, recalling her distaste for Russell’s new symbolic language: “I can’t manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalized way,” she insisted, “directly I’m told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me.”<sup>88</sup> This preference for vagueness and hatred for ‘direct’ writing could similarly be attributed to the other early twentieth-century novelists who constitute the linguistic turn in fiction. Henry James, pace Woolf’s depiction, declared his “confidence in the positive saving virtue of vagueness,” and readers and critics have amply noted his “inveterate indirectness” since his ‘major phase’ works were published: a 1901 reviewer declared, “Henry James at His Vaguest: *The Sacred Fount*, His Latest Work, Is Also His Most Characteristic.”<sup>89</sup> James Joyce’s works, too, move towards greater indirection in the trajectory from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, to *Ulysses*, to the punnings and portmanteaux of *Finnegans Wake*. Yet Joyce emphasizes that even Stephen Dedalus’s writing appears “vague words for a vague emotion” after he has imbibed a “vehicle of a vague speech” from his encounter with a prostitute.<sup>90</sup> The debate about language’s vagueness in philosophy is finally fully dramatized through Joyce’s examination of the “the buried life of language” in *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>91</sup> These modern novelists’ investigation of vague language and form challenges Eliot’s portrayal of modern writing as hard and direct. The simultaneous turn towards vagueness in philosophy and in fiction—a turn that has been crucially overlooked—provides a useful corrective to the overemphasis in literary criticism on classicism and objectivity as characterizing modernist works of art.

## Notes

1. “Modern Novels” was originally published in the *TLS* (10 April 1919); revised and published as “Modern Fiction,” in *The Common Reader*, (1924); reprinted in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, 4 vols. (6 projected), (London: Hogarth Press, 1987), *Essays* 3:30–37, *Essays* 4:157–165, hereafter cited as *EVW*.

2. T. S. Eliot, “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth” (1923), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 177–8, hereafter cited as *SPTSE*.

3. W. B. Yeats learned to be “definite and concrete” from Pound, quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Eminent Domain: Yeats Among Wilde, Joyce, Pound, Eliot and Auden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 66; the Imagists strove “to employ always the *exact* word, not the nearly-exact . . . we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities,” *Some Imagist*



- 124 *Poets* (1915), in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, ed. Vassiliki Kolocotroni, et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269; in “Hamlet and his Problems,” Eliot famously praised the “objective,” and “particular,” in *SPTSE*, 48; for Pound, the “watchword,” was precision, “Status Rerum,” *Poetry* 1, no. 4 (Jan. 1913): 126; “to refine, to clarify, to intensify,” *Spring and All*, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, ed. A Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, vol. 1 (New York: New Directions, 1987), 178.
4. Joyce to Carlo Linati, 21 September 1920, *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 271.
5. Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols., (London: Hogarth, 1977–1984), 2:13–14, hereafter cited as *DVW*.
6. All records of this event follow Russell’s diary in stating that the lecture occurred on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November. According to the minutes of the Oxford Society, however, “the hon. Bertrand Russell read a paper on ‘vagueness’” on the 25<sup>th</sup> of November, Jowett Society Minutes, MS. Top. Oxon. d. 359, folio 25, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
7. Bertrand Russell, “Vagueness,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy and Psychology* 1 (1923), 84–92. Reprinted in *Vagueness: A Reader*, ed. Rosanna Keefe and Peter Smith (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1996), 61–68, hereafter cited as *V*.
8. From “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism” (1918), in *Essays on Language, Mind and Matter*, *Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, vol. 9, ed. John G. Slater (London: Unwin Hyman), xix–xx, hereafter cited as *CPBR*.
9. Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in the Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 3.
10. Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel: 1600–1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 2, and Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 11–12. For discussion of the “revolt against positivism,” see H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 33–66.
11. Woolf, *Night and Day* (London: Duckworth and Co., 1919; reprinted London: Penguin Books, 1992), 34, hereafter cited as *ND*.
12. Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Hogarth, 1925; reprinted New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 122, hereafter cited as *MD*, and “Modern Fiction,” *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, 1925), 212, hereafter cited as *CR*.
13. Ford, “On Impressionism” (1914), reprinted in *Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Frank MacShane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1964), 37, and Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 169–75.
14. Margery Sabin, “James’s American Dream,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*, ed. Jonathan Freedman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 214.
15. Jesse Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 15.
16. William James argues for “the re-instatement of the vague,” asserting that “there are feelings of tendency . . . often so vague that we are unable to name them at all” and that “language works against our perception of the truth,” in *Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1890, reprint New York: Dover Publications, 1950), 254, hereafter cited as *PP*.
17. William James to Henry James, 22 October 1905, *The Correspondence of William James: William and Henry*, 3 vols., ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992–4), 3:301.
18. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 13–15, and McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel*, 2.
19. For Modernism as a mode of interruption see Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 238, 208.
20. William to Henry James, 4 May 1907, *The Correspondence of William James*, 3:338.
21. *The Holy Bible*, King James Version (New York: New American Library, 1974), 6.
22. Rorty, “How Many Grains Make a Heap?” *The London Review of Books* (20 January 2005). [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n02/rort01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n02/rort01_.html).

23. Rorty, and see Scott Soames, *Philosophical Analysis in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003–2005).

24. Before the early twentieth century the vagueness paradox was known only as the Sorites Paradox. For discussion of vagueness in classical times, see M. F. Burnyeat, “Gods and Heaps,” in *Language and Logos*, ed. Malcolm Schofield and Martha Nussbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 315–38. Jonathan Barnes, “Medicine, Experience and Logic,” in *Science and Speculation*, ed. Barnes et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 24–68, and Timothy Williamson, *Vagueness* (London: Routledge, 1994).

25. Galen, *On Medical Experience XVII*, quoted in Burnyeat, “Gods and Heaps,” 316.

26. Burnyeat, “Gods and Heaps,” 316.

27. Keefe, *Theories of Vagueness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

28. For Gottlob Frege, of course, the concern was how to set up logical axioms avoiding such vague terms, rather than whether or not such vague terms function usefully in daily life.

29. See Williamson, *Vagueness*, 8–12.

30. Thomas Ricketts, “Frege,” *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 328.

31. Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 41–2.

32. Frege, *Posthumous Writings*, ed. Hans Hermes, et al. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 122, quoted in Christopher Hookway, “Vagueness, Logic and Interpretation,” *The Analytic Tradition*, ed. David Bell and Neil Cooper (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 61.

33. Frege, *Nachgelassene Schriften und wissenschaftlicher Briefwechsel*, vol. 1, ed. G. Gabriel et al. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1976), 270, and Williamson, *Vagueness*, 37. For further discussion, see J. Van Heijenoort, “Frege and Vagueness,” in *Frege Synthesized*, ed. Leila Haaparanta and Jaakko Hintikka (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1986), 31–45.

34. Russell, “Introduction,” *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), 7, hereafter cited as *T*.

35. Ogden was considered Peirce’s English disciple. See C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, ed. John Constable (London: Routledge, 2001), 287–99.

36. Russell, “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism,” in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism and Other Essays: 1914–9, CPBR*, 8:161.

37. With Russell, G. E. Moore’s attitude towards vagueness was influential in early twentieth-century philosophical and literary circles, though his philosophy did more to suggest a direction than to formulate a rigorous theory of language. In fact, Wittgenstein took a jaundiced view of Moore, mostly because of what Wittgenstein deemed Moore’s unstable notion of definitions. Wittgenstein noted that although Moore’s attitude towards clarity was a key aspect of his philosophy, he was not primarily concerned with *the way* words mean what they mean. Wittgenstein’s biographer records Wittgenstein’s now infamous dismissal of Moore: “‘Moore?’—he once said—he shows you how far a man can go who has absolutely no intelligence whatever,” Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 262. For discussion of Moore’s attitude to ordinary language and Moore’s influence on Bloomsbury see Norman Malcolm, “Moore and Ordinary Language,” in *The Linguistic Turn*, 122–124, Paul Levy, *Moore: G. E. Moore and the Cambridge Apostles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 238 and Tom Regan, *Bloomsbury’s Prophet* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

38. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles C. Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (vols. 1–6) and A. Burkes (vols. 7–8), 8 vols., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931–60), 5:446, hereafter cited as *CP*.

39. Peirce, *The Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. James Mark Baldwin, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1902), 748.

40. Hookway, “Vagueness, Logic and Interpretation,” 74.

41. William James, *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to “Pragmatism,”* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1907), reprinted in *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 314.

42. Russell, "Introduction," to *T*, 8 and Wittgenstein, *T*, 63. See Teresa M. Iglesias, "Russell on Vagueness and Wittgenstein's Tractatus," in *Wittgenstein and His Impact on Contemporary Thought: Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Wittgenstein Symposium*, ed. Elisabeth Leinfellner et al. (Vienna: Hölder-Picher-Tempsky, 1978), 46–9.

43. "It is a commonplace that Wittgenstein's later work has a 'pragmatist flavor,'" Hookway, "Vagueness, Logic, and Interpretation," 62. For discussion of William James's influence on Wittgenstein, see Hilary Putnam, "Was Wittgenstein a Pragmatist?" in *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); for Peirce's influence on Wittgenstein see Charles S. Hardwick, "Peirce's Influence On Some British Philosophers: A Guess at the Riddle," *Peirce Studies* 1 (1979): 25–30.

44. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §34e, hereafter cited as *PI*.

45. Wittgenstein, *PI* §98; "Vagueness" website, ed. Justin Needle, <http://www.btinternet.com/~justin.needle/>.

46. For the current reassessment of the importance of Frank P. Ramsey to early twentieth-century analytic philosophy see, *Ramsey's Legacy*, ed. Hallvard Lillehammer and D. H. Mellor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), and *F. P. Ramsey: Critical Reassessments*, ed. Maria J. Frápolli (London: Continuum Studies in British Philosophy, 2005).

47. See *DVW* 2:231. Ann Banfield, in her important study of Woolf and Russell, also notes this as a possible source for Ramsay's name. Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 404.

48. Ramsey, *The Foundations of Mathematics and Other Logical Essays*, ed. R. B. Braithwaite (London: Kegan Paul, 1931), 194.

49. For discussion see Hardwick, "Peirce's Influence On Some British Philosophers," 25–30. For a summary of the debate of Ramsey's influence on Wittgenstein, see Hans-Johann Glock, "Ramsey and Wittgenstein: Mutual Influence," in Frápolli, *F. P. Ramsey: Critical Reassessments*, 41–69.

50. Ramsey, *Foundations*, 269.

51. Michael Clark, *Paradoxes from a to z* (London: Routledge, 2002), 71.

52. James, "The Minor French Novelists," *Galaxy* (February 1876), reprinted in *Henry James, Literary Criticism*, ed. Leon Edel, 2 vols., (New York: Library of America, 1984), 2:170.

53. R. M. Sainsbury and Timothy Williamson, "Sorites," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Bob Hale and Crispin Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 466; Francis Jeffrey Pelletier and István Berkeley, "Vagueness," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 946. For a further distinction between semantic and epistemic vagueness in philosophical terminology see Sainsbury and Williamson, 465–7.

54. For this and other possible events that Woolf may have in mind that occurred "on or about December 1910," see Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 10–11.

55. Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927), 249–50, hereafter cited as *TTL*.

56. Banfield also notes this as an example of Ramsay's analytic characteristics. See *The Phantom Table*, 190–192.

57. In "A Mark on the Wall," an unrecognized snail on the wall leads Woolf to many digressions from theoretical questions—"[w]hat should I gain? Knowledge?"—to fantasies of "historical fiction." Similarly in "An Unwritten Novel," an unknown woman encountered on a train leads the narrator to create a long untrue story. In both cases the digressive stories are longer and perhaps more interesting than the actual fact represented by (for example) the snail. See Woolf, *The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. Susan Dick (New York: Harcourt, 1989), 85, 83–89, 112–121.

58. This term is borrowed from Jaakko Hintikka, whose article, "Virginia Woolf and Our Knowledge of the External World" (1979), was a ground-breaking examination of the importance of philosophy to Woolf. Hintikka writes "Philosophical ideas are not the subject matter of her novels, but they are part and parcel of their texture" and focuses on how "external time," like external events, loses its hegemony in Woolf's novels. See Hintikka, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 1979): 5–14.

59. Mark Hussey calls for “a new field of inquiry: the philosophical implications of Woolf’s art, and thus the implications for our lived experience in the world,” in *The Singing of The Real World* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986), xiv. There is actually a limited, though important, amount of scholarship on Woolf and philosophy. S. P. Rosenbaum’s article, “The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf,” *English Literature and British Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), explicates the connection between G. E. Moore’s “Refutation of Idealism” and Woolf’s depiction of the “obduracy of matter.” Rosenbaum’s later works on Bloomsbury (3 vols.) continue to examine the relationship between Bloomsbury and Moore’s philosophy. Tom Regan, author of *Bloomsbury’s Prophet* and “Moore and Bloomsbury: The Myth and the Man,” *The British Tradition in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Philosophy*, ed. Jaakko Hintikka and Klaus Puhl (Vienna: Verlag Holder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1995), similarly emphasizes the connection between Moore’s “naturalistic fallacy,” and Bloomsbury values, claiming that “What Bloomsbury’s Cambridge core also found in the *Principia* was a philosophical justification for their anti-authoritarian and anti-conventional tendencies” (48). He contests Paul Levy, who argues in *G. E. Moore and the Cambridge Apostles* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979) that Bloomsbury was “influenced by Moore’s charismatic personality but by his moral philosophy not at all” (57). Russell in his autobiography denied Moore’s influence on Bloomsbury, stating Bloomsbury embraced an elitist and aesthetic “doctrine, [which] quite unfairly, they fathered upon G. E. Moore, whose disciples they professed to be,” *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little Brown, 1967), 94–5. Gillian Beer’s excellent essay on “Hume, Stephen, and Elegy in *To The Lighthouse*,” *Virginia Woolf’s To The Lighthouse, Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea Publishers, 1988), demonstrates how, through her father, Woolf imbibed the idea of “the fictitiousness of the separation between object and subject,” and argues that in Woolf people “survive . . . in a kind of writing which eschews permanence,” 93. Rosenbaum’s “Wittgenstein in Bloomsbury: 1911–1931,” and Martha Nussbaum’s “The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse*,” both collected in Hintikka and Puhl, are two Wittgensteinian readings of Woolf; the former a historical essay, describing the Apostles and Russell’s influence on Wittgenstein, the latter arguing that Woolf’s “approach can in some respects be fruitfully compared with some interpretations of the later Wittgenstein, particularly that in Stanley Cavell’s *The Claim of Reason*,” and that *To The Lighthouse* depicts the possibility of knowing the other as other. Banfield’s *Phantom Table* and Hussey’s *Singing of the Real World* are the most pertinent texts to my discussion of Woolf, Russell, and vagueness.

60. Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929), 109.

61. Woolf, “The Novels of George Meredith,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf, 4 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966–7), 1:230, hereafter *CE*. See also Woolf, “Philosophy in Fiction,” in *EVW*, 2:208.

62. Woolf, “Old Bloomsbury,” in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Hogarth, 1985), 190.

63. Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” in *Moments of Being*, 72.

64. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, xi, and Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics*, 176.

65. Ann Banfield notes the connection between Ramsay’s dislike of vagueness and his “analytic spirit” and suggests that Woolf may be positing that vagueness, “the inability to distinguish one thing from another” may in fact be a sign of genius (187). Her work focuses, however, on Russell’s *Theory of Knowledge* (1912–14) and argues that “underlying Woolf’s art was a thought, a philosophical project worthy of new attention,” which is “the theory of knowledge” (ix). It seems unlikely that Woolf would actually have been conversant with Russell’s theory of sensibilia, and proving Woolf’s unconscious assimilation of this particular theory often seems to stretch Banfield’s readings of Woolf against the grain.

66. This broadcast, the only known recording of Woolf’s voice, is only preserved in part in the British Library National Sound Archive, and printed as “Craftsmanship,” in *CE*, 2:245–251, hereafter cited as *C*.

67. *Radio Times*, 54; quoted in S. N. Clarke, “Virginia Woolf’s Broadcast and Her Recorded Voice,” *The Virginia Woolf Bulletin*, no. 4 (May 2000): 17–8.

68. Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf, A Biography*, vol. 2 (London: Hogarth, 1972), 200.
69. Leila Brosnan, "Words Fail Me": Virginia Woolf and the Wireless," *Virginia Woolf and the Arts: Selected Papers from the Sixth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Diane F. Gillespie and Leslie K. Hankins (New York: Pace University Press, 1997), 138. See also Brosnan, *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).
70. It was in 1919 that Eliot argued in the pages of the *Egoist* that "[t]he emotion of art is impersonal," in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *SPTSE*, 44.
71. See, for example, Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and The Problem of the Subject* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1987), or Daniel Ferrer, *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
72. Kristeva, "Oscillation Between Power and Denial," 166, quoted in Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 26. Minow-Pinkney, for example, outlines connections between Woolf's and Kristeva's theories of language.
73. Kate Flint, "Revising Jacob's Room: Virginia Woolf, Women and Language," *Review of English Studies* 42 (August 1991): 361–79.
74. Woolf to Margaret Llewelyn Davies, 23 January 1916, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1975–80), 2:76. Woolf also disliked Russell's womanizing, and she wrote: "One does not like him . . . Yet he is brilliant of course. . . His adventures with his wives diminish his importance . . . Nevertheless, I should like the run of his headpiece," *DVW*, 2:295. Woolf's opinion of Russell was also affected by his relationship in 1911–1916 with Ottoline Morrell, with whom Woolf had a long ambivalent relationship until they finally became friends in the 1930s. See "A Modern Salon," in *Carlyle's House and Other Sketches*, ed. David Bradshaw (London: Hesperus Press, 2003). For discussion of Woolf's relationship with Ottoline Morrell, see Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 273–7.
75. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 49.
76. Woolf, "Sketch of the Past" (1939), in *Moments of Being*, 115.
77. Woolf, "Romance and the Heart," in *Essays*, 3: 367.
78. Woolf, *Jacob's Room* (London: Hogarth, 1922; reprinted London: Penguin Books, 1992), 98, *The Voyage Out* (London: Duckworth and Co., 1915; reprinted London: Penguin Books, 1992), 190, hereafter cited as *VO*.
79. Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *The Captain's Deathbed and Other Essays* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1950), 115, 119.
80. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 64–5.
81. Katherine Mansfield, "A Ship Comes Into The Harbour," *Athenaeum* (21 Nov. 1919): 1227. Woolf and Mansfield were both contributing (along with Leonard Woolf, Middleton-Murry, Eliot and other writers that Woolf knew) to the *Athenaeum* at this point, so Mansfield's review was all the more biting. That may explain why the review so "irritated" Woolf, who detected "spite" in it. See *DVW*, 1:314.
82. Woolf to Roger Fry, 2 November 1919, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 2:395.
83. Mansfield, "A Ship Comes Into The Harbour," 1227.
84. Woolf, *ND*, 84. For the stultifying environment Woolf was portraying, see Andrea P. Zemguly, "'Night and Day is Dead': Virginia Woolf in London 'Literary and Historic,'" *Twentieth Century Literature* (Spring 2000): 56–77.
85. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (4.1.106–8), in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 426.
86. James, *Harper's Weekly*, vol. ix, 1898, xvi–xvii; Woolf, "The Method of Henry James," *TLS* (26 Dec. 1918), in *EVW*, 2:346–9.
87. Daniel Mark Fogel also notes the connection between James's quotation and Woolf's image in "Modern Fiction," though he does not connect it to the image in *Night and Day*. Fogel calls Woolf's change "an about-face for Woolf, a repudiation of what she had hailed in 1918 as 'the important side of James.'" Fogel, *Covert Relations: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Henry James* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 8.

88. Woolf to Roger Fry, 27 May 1927, *Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 3:385.
89. "Confidence. . .," Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother, Autobiography*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee (New York: Criterion Books, 1956), 412; "Inveterate Indirectness," F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (New York: George W. Steward Publishers, 1948), 158, and headline, *Louisville Courier-Journal* (9 March 1901), *The Contemporary Reviews* ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 347.
90. Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1992), 274, 108.
91. Vicki Mahaffey, *Reauthorizing Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 10.

