Forum

Members of the Association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the Editor, and the authors of the articles discussed will be invited to reply.

Yeats's Sources

To the Editor:

John R. O'Connor ("Flaubert: *Trois Contes* and the Figure of the Double Cone," *PMLA*, 95 [1980], 812–26) has overlooked the most likely source of Yeats's knowledge of Flaubert's "La Spirale." As Daphne Fullwood suggested some years ago, Yeats probably heard of the story through his close friend T. Sturge Moore, who refers to Eduard-Wilhelm Fischer's *Etudes sur Flaubert inédit* in one of the appendixes to *Art and Life* (London: Methuen, 1910), a copy of which is preserved in Yeats's library. Fullwood's suggestion first appears in print in a note in A. Norman Jeffares' *The Circus Animals: Essays on W. B. Yeats* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 103, n. 3. (I owe the reference to *A Critical Edition of* A Vision *(1925)*, ed. George Mills Harper and Walter Kelly Hood [London: Macmillan, 1978], Notes, p. 31.) To Fullwood's suggestion might be added the coincidence that when, on 29 December 1921, Sturge Moore published a long letter in *TLS* attacking an anonymous leading article on Flaubert, he might well have been staying in Oxford with Yeats, who was then deeply involved in working on *A Vision*. On 4 November, Yeats had written Moore "if you are up in London any time after Christmas extend your journey a little and come and stay with us" (*W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence, 1901–1937*, ed. Ursula Bridge [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953], p. 45).

I might also note that Yeats refers to "La Spirale" not only in both the 1925 and 1937 editions of *A Vision* but also in his Introduction to *Selections from the Poems of Dorothy Wellesley* (London: Macmillan, 1936), pp. xiv–xv: "Flaubert talked of writing a story called 'L'Aspirail' [sic] about a man who dreamed more and more magnificently as his daily circumstance declined, and at last, when that circumstance reached abject poverty, celebrated asleep his marriage to a princess."

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Mr. O'Connor replies:

Richard J. Finneran's interesting note but further corroborates my speculation as to the specifically secondhand nature of Yeats's knowledge of "La Spirale," a circumstance that permitted Yeats, untroubled by Flaubert's notes for the story, the better to invent its truth.

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Eliot's "Journey of the Magi"

To the Editor:

In Daniel A. Harris' "Language, History, and Text in Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi'" (*PMLA*, 95 [1980], 838–56) there are several serious misreadings of text, contradictions of argument, and errors of interpretation that distort both the meaning of the poem with which Harris deals as well as Eliot's religious position. At the outset, Harris is uncertain, first, of the nature of the Magus' religious experience and, in turn, of the reader's experience of the poem. If the Magus has "no idea of divine teleology" (p. 840) and is "ignorant of . . . eschatology" and "denied" "[k]nowledge of Christ's ministry, the Death and Resurrection" (p. 843), how is it that he knows more than the reader (p. 841), "reads correctly the divine paradox in the central sign, the Birth," and "understands that Christ's nature . . . invites ascetic renunciation" (p. 843)? Furthermore, how can the Magus have acquired so rational and precise a knowledge of Christian dogma from his witness of the Incarnation if he has undergone a "baffled consciousness of mystery" (p. 841), having experienced only a "confusion upon seeing Christ" (p. 851)? These are contradictions of critical argument, not the divine paradoxes of Christian theology or the elucidation of aesthetic subtleties. Harris also has difficulties when he considers what the functions of religious texts are for Eliot and for readers of Eliot's poetry. How can Eliot believe "that Christian literature undermines the faith it was meant to foster" (p. 842), that it has "the capacity . . . to

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subvert Christian belief" (p. 849), and, at the same time, that it "defines the Christian experience" and "provides belief with indispensable support" (p. 849)? To assert that Eliot "questions the value of literate culture itself" (p. 842), in any of his poems, is a remarkable assessment of a writer who fought so passionately in his prose for the preservation of literature and who expended so much effort to make a significant literary contribution.

These contradictions arise because Harris has not considered fully the rhetorical dynamics of the second strophe, on which he bases these observations. Although Harris argues that the reader's religious sensibility is faulty because the reader notices the iconographic overtones of the passage, were it not for that sensitivity to Christian symbolism, the reader would not be able to distinguish the second strophe from the naturalistic narrative of the first. In fact, the reader who failed to give a symbolic reading to the passage would be unaware that the Magus is undergoing a religious experience at all. Eliot is not "testing" (p. 840) or "criticizing" (p. 842) the reader with the indirection of this symbolism but rather imparting to the reader a religious experience similar to the Magus'. Symbols are imprecise in order to avoid any definite dogmatic categories that would not be present in the Magus' experience or in religious feeling itself. Because of this "spontaneous apprehension of the numinous" (p. 843), the poem cannot be exploring the question "how much can one *know* from the Incarnation alone?" (p. 843; my emphasis). As our usage and understanding of the term has derived from Rudolf Otto, we can only *experience* the numinous: we can *feel*, *sense*, the religious, but we cannot define it rationally. Thus we cannot *know* or *understand* religious feeling, only religious dogma. This poem expresses the intensity of religious feeling as opposed to the difficulty of understanding and accepting, logically, religious dogma; hence, it is about the difficulty of belief.

Had Harris heeded the thesis of E. S. Shaffer's book as he did her interpretation of "A Death in the Desert," he would have considered the intellectual milieu in which Eliot's poem was written instead of reading "Journey" as a reincarnation of Browning's poem and offering Benjamin Jowett as Eliot's spokesman. By the time Eliot wrote "Journey," the Higher Criticism had been surpassed by the neoorthodox theology of Schweitzer and Barth; the quest for the historical Jesus continued only as an academic exercise. There is no evidence in Eliot's collected and uncollected prose or in his verse that the "central issues of the Higher Criticism" (p. 852) were of immediate concern to him either. He believed, following Bradley, that objective historical fact was impossible on *philosophical* grounds; he would have regarded the Higher Criticism's *empirical* enterprise as misguided—and irrelevant. For Eliot, *myth* and *dogma* are the important elements of religion. Myth involves the feelings in the meaning, whereas dogma alone cannot. Eliot wants to integrate both the intellect and the emotions in religious experience in order to maintain a unified spiritual sensibility. Contrary to Harris' assertion, Eliot's repeated emphasis on Original Sin and the Incarnation demonstrates that he has no "distrust of dogma" (p. 852): he criticizes the Catholic church only for what he perceives to be false interpretations of dogma and myth. Dogma encapsulates one's beliefs so the intellect can grasp them. Likewise, Eliot does not, as Harris implies, oppose "Matthew's mythologizing" (p. 851); this "historical-mythological pageant" (p. 851) is also crucial to religious experience.

In "Journey" Eliot adopts the dramatic mask of the Magus in order to express his own struggles with literal belief, his real "religious position in 1927" (Abstract, p. 782). *Not* being a primitive Christian, the Magus is caught between two dispensations, as Eliot is caught between belief and doubt. The prose that Eliot wrote at this time shows that Eliot did not "admire" Tennyson's doubt (p. 852); in fact he found it an agony. The "ambivalence," the "difficulty," the "victim[ization]" (p. 845) that the Magus feels over being caught in the middle are really Eliot's feelings. As "Journey" can hardly be an attempt by Eliot to correct a false biblical account of "primitive Christianity" (p. 843), so it cannot be a "critique of the development of Christianity" (p. 850). Harris claims that Eliot is suggesting that, "[h]ad the Magus' account been accorded a status like that of a synoptic gospel, . . . its emphasis on the struggle to believe might have made Christianity a more ecumenical institution . . ." (p. 852). Yet, dogmas and mythologies like those recorded by Matthew are required in order to have beliefs and institutions in the first place. How can texts that arrive at no resolution of the problem of doubt ever establish the truths of a religion? Eliot demonstrates more common sense than "irony" when he implies, according to Harris, that "the 'right' kind of gospel for the making of Christianity is . . . one that excludes the problem of belief" (p. 851). Eliot's own writings reveal that the simultaneity of time sequences in "Journey," as in *The Waste Land*, demonstrates, not that Eliot had a "latitudinarian consciousness" (p. 853), but that he believed, on the basis of Frazer's work, that the Christian church grew out of older Oriental religious and fertility cults and that all such cults, including Christianity, are successive mythic reincarnations of the same

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

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The Vanishing Subject

To the Editor:

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

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

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

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

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

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