

*Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language*

By Megan Quigley

Published by Cambridge University Press, 2015, 244 pages

Reviewed by Jeffrey Blevins

In their recent book *Objectivity*, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison describe how our standards for objectivity have evolved over the past several centuries. Individual chapters focus on specific technological advancements: the development of microscopy, the invention of photography, etc. In each case, objectivity comes to signify a ratio between precision and detail: how much of one can a given mechanism or technology provide without sacrificing the other? One chapter, however, breaks this pattern. Focused on the period between 1890 and 1930, it describes how a coterie of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers came to envision a new ground for objectivity. Rather than continuing to rely on empirical methods of representing or depicting the world—methods which seemed to guarantee, in principle, that some amount of information must be lost, regardless of the precision of measurement—this group sought to root objectivity in the dream of an impersonal, clear, and precise language. No longer, this group claimed, would objectivity mean, say, looking more and more closely at the process of binary fission or at the particularities of a horse's gait. Rather, they said, it would mean something closer to an exacting logical language—cleansed of all ambiguity, equivocation, and vagueness. Metaphysically speaking, this new objectivity would stand on the internal coherence of a formal system (*a la* pure mathematics) rather than on the robustness of that system's correspondences to things (material or conceptual) beyond itself. It would, it was believed, make possible the age old philosopher's dream: an exact and complete description of the world.

Megan Quigley's *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* recounts the history of the quest for this new objectivity of formal precision—how it came about, briefly flourished, and then declined— and examines how modernist authors bore witness to that quest in their lives and art. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as philosophers like C.S. Peirce, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein were testing the limits of logical language, literary figures like Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and T.S. Eliot were exploring the “porous” borders between early 20<sup>th</sup>-century art and philosophy, and beginning to engage with logic's grand vision of formal precision. Quigley charts how these modernists and philosophers, though in fervent agreement that empiricism had failed and intellectual discourse had better reattune itself to the power of language, split over what that power might be.

Philosophers like Russell and Wittgenstein sought to recreate the frameworks of science within language itself by eliminating its semantic ambivalence, referential murkiness, and conceptual vagueness. If vagueness could not be eliminated from language, early 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers feared that humanity would have no common semantic ground on which to stand, plunging the world into a solipsistic nightmare of constant misunderstanding and deep-rooted obscurity not unrelated to the Great War and its aftermath. It was as a reaction against philosophy's struggle with this threat that, Quigley argues, certain hallmarks of modernist aesthetics emerged, especially the period's experiments with fluid, hazy, imprecise, and otherwise “blurred” forms of characterization, plotting, and style. Far from solipsism, Quigley claims that these new novelistic

criteria helped modernist art project a collective experience of shared complexity founded on an acceptance and even celebration of vagueness as an intrinsic quality of language and life.

Each of Quigley's chapters explores the ways in which a single modernist took up and played upon the ideas of a particular philosopher: Peirce and James, Russell and Woolf, Joyce and Wittgenstein. The chapter on Russell and Woolf, for instance, shows how both sought to stake out positions between realism and idealism—in the “medium” of what Woolf called a “perfectly and beautifully adapted” language. Russell strove—and failed—to reveal such perfection within mathematics (to provide, that is, mathematics with a consistent and non-contradictory foundation) through a logical language cleansed of all ambiguity, and Woolf sardonically observed his efforts at various society dinners and public lectures. Based on these interactions, Quigley theorizes, Woolf cultivated aspects of her aesthetic explicitly in reaction to Russell's ideas, an aesthetic that extended even James's nebulous plots into the still-more impenetrable style of books like *The Waves* (which in one of Quigley's best readings she links to the French word for wave: *vague*). Another chapter pairs Joyce with C.K. Ogden, and by extension Wittgenstein (whom Ogden translated), charting Joyce's growth out of a youthful belief that “the study of languages is based on a mathematical foundation” into the author of *Finnegans Wake*, perhaps the least overtly precise novel ever written. The heroes of Joyce's other works—embodied most cogently in the tension between the “fact finder” Leopold Bloom and the “soul seeker” Stephen Dedalus—often track alongside their author's own split personality concerning language's relation to mathematics.

Quigley's introduction and her final chapter on Eliot do crucial work in providing a context for her use of vagueness within the broader canon of literary scholarship. By focalizing this word, Quigley inserts herself into one of the oldest debates in textual hermeneutics, stretching back to literary criticism's pre-history in Biblical exegesis, picking up steam during early 20<sup>th</sup>-century renditions of formalism like the New Criticism, and reaching an apex in poststructuralist thinking. At issue is how to understand imprecise and indeterminate textual features like paradox and ambiguity. Should we follow some critics in working to taxonomize and “pin down” such figures—taking their presence as a call to excavate for an underlying concrete meaning—or others who believe that such figures' value lies in their aura of irresolvability, which should be respected and maintained? Quigley joins an already sizable chorus of voices calling for new, subtler answers to this central question, including recent or forthcoming essays and books by Namwali Serpell, Johanna Winant, Hanna Roman, Daniel Wright, Daniel Williams, Andrea Henderson, Anna Kornbluh, and many others on concepts like ambiguity, paradox, fuzziness, indeterminacy, uncertainty, vagueness, generality, unreliability, contradiction, and tautology.

These essays and books, which are multitudinous yet homogenous enough to constitute a definable new movement in current criticism that we might dub “ambiguity studies,” distinguish themselves from earlier work on similar subjects by obeying a rigorously historicist and interdisciplinary process connecting theoretical abstractions (uncertainty, generality, vagueness, etc.) to particular intellectual-historical developments in contemporaneous discourses usually ignored by literary critics (logic, set theory, physics, etc.). In turn, ambiguity studies' debt to interdisciplinary historicism telegraphs an unexpectedly intense political and ethical energy, empowering a range of theses about formalism's importance to our study of subjects like feminism, democracy, ideology, queerness, justice, religion, and conflict. The wider critical

community often receives new pairings of philosophical ideas with works of literature as a hangover from the era of high theory (à la Derrida), leading almost inevitably into polysemic, ambiguous, and abstract conclusions about big concepts like truth and experience. However just the opposite can be said of ambiguity studies, which operates much more along the lines of what Michael LeMahieu has recently called an “archival method,” drawing evidence from journals, letters, notes, manuscript drafts, lecture attendance rolls, and other similarly documentary sources, in order to reconstruct from the ground up the social, creative, and intellectual networks pertaining between artists and philosophers. Through its efforts to enlarge literature’s archival footprint, ambiguity studies actually resembles recent archive- and canon-expanding projects like the New Modernist Studies more than a new branch of literary theory.

And indeed, as Quigley proves, modernism itself serves as a perfect case study for ambiguity studies as a whole, precisely because of its historical overlaps with what Daston and Galison have highlighted: early 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy’s percolating interest in the ideal of formal precision. By tracing the long-obfuscated links between a discourse like formal logic and one like literary formalism—links preserved as archival traces scattered across diaries entries and sets of notes made after myriad now-forgotten interactions in turn-of-the-century social clubs, secret societies, and university halls—Quigley shows how philosophers and modernists jostled over the logical function of language. In fact, one of the more fantastic implications of Quigley’s book is that not only were early 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers and writers involved in a much profounder dialogue than our intellectual histories typically admit, but also that in many ways the period’s philosophies of formal precision and language-based objectivity *needed* to be inflected through modernist art in order to come to terms with the deeply quixotic and utopian nature of any quest after a perfectly coherent and logical language. Given the broad and convincing array of evidence Quigley amasses to prove this point, perhaps the greatest question left by *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* is why few people had written anything like it before now. Her work proves that we could stand to pay much closer attention to what modernists were absorbing from—and contributing to—their own early 20<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual and especially philosophical milieu, even if that milieu was itself turning toward logical and mathematical doctrines that seemed to devalue art. Modernists, as Quigley demonstrates, thought hard about that turn, and hopefully Quigley’s will be only the first of many forthcoming efforts to uncover those thoughts and parse their huge impact on modernist aesthetics.

Jeffrey Blevins is a Lecturer in English at UC Berkeley. He is currently at work on a book about paradox and modernist style. His essays have most recently appeared in *English Literary History* and *Victorian Poetry*.