

Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language by Megan Quigley

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Vagueness as a field of study relies on an understanding of Logic and Philosophy of Language to expose the indefiniteness of the words we use. While Megan Quigley's book doesn't incorporate contemporary discussion of vagueness such as those from David Barnett and B. J. Copeland, this absence can be attributed to the fact that *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language* (2015) is mostly a work of literary criticism, and would make little use of the symbolic logic found in recent developments in the field. There is a substantial amount of discussion regarding Pragmatism, and she relies on the writings and personal notes of Bertrand Russell, William James, Charles S. Pierce, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the critical writing of T.S. Eliot, to provide a background for her project on the use of vague language in Modernist fiction. What follows is an enlightening survey that "joins a philosopher with a novelist" (10) in each of her four chapters to demonstrate how the imprecise boundaries of our language doesn't mean it "cannot connect to our experience of the world" (11). Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce compose the Modernist authors represented in the book with particular attention paid to their later, more experimental words.

The essential question and thesis of her book is to identify, "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?" (19). Vague language took its place as the dominant mode of writing: one of "puzzlement and indecision" (7). Quigley proposes that the three Modernist writers had twin goals: "to revise the conventions of the realist novel and the revolt against positivism in the philosophy of language" (5). The relation between literature and philosophy is explicitly spelled out in her book, often with helpful summaries for those without a background in literary studies, such as the one found at the beginning of chapter one: "In *The Ambassadors*, in syntax as vague as the relations in which Stretcher finds himself embroiled, Henry James dramatizes the difficulty of making moral choices in a vague new world." (26). In terms of the Modernists' opposition to the previous Realist movement, of which Flaubert was emblematic, Quigley offers the same concise evaluations. References to T.S. Eliot, whose early "interest in eradicating literary vagueness" (148), open and close Quigley's book in an elegant demonstration of the development of literary thought influenced by philosophy.

The thesis of her book has been set out in her paper "Modern Novels and Vagueness" (2008) from which the Introduction and second chapter borrow heavily. The first chapter resumes and

expands upon the discussion in “Beastly Vagueness in Charles Sanders Pierce and Henry James” (2007). Those who are familiar with Quigley’s scholarly work will generally not need to re-read these initial sections of her book, though they can serve as excellent introductions to the topics at hand. The remainder of her book delves into territory only briefly discussed in her papers and fleshes out more minor points.

Each chapter is structured around a philosophical background and literary response to it. In most cases, the philosopher and writer discussed in the chapter had close personal ties which gives the tension between them the air of a drama. Chapter one reviews the introduction of *The Metaphysical Club* in Cambridge, Massachusetts where Charles S. Pierce “published papers that William James later called ‘the birth certificates’ of pragmatism” (26). Between James and Pierce there was a conflict in terms of how Pragmatism should be understood. Pierce was committed to clearing out vagueness in language because he believed on focusing on sensible effects of ideas which are “clear and recognizable” (27). James celebrated language’s capacity for vagueness, though when it came to literary works, he had unkind things to say about his brother Henry whose novels *Watch and Ward*, *The Sacred Fount*, and *The Ambassadors* are discussed in the remainder of the chapter. Quigley demonstrates the pragmatic philosophers’ influence on Henry James using biographical information along with a keen eye for influence. Frequently in this chapter, biography proves to be the most assured means when talking about influence and Quigley mines the sibling relationship to venture conclusions like this: “I propose that Henry James’s narrator is a pragmatist, using the pragmatic method William James had propounded in his lectures in 1898. The narrator, however, is a pragmatist gone wrong, entrapped by the beauty of his own theory” (50). Continuing her discussion of *The Sacred Fount*, she writes that Henry James has created a narrator who isolates himself from others due to the seductive quality of his personal theory. Quigley also includes a brief note on the critical response these novels received by Henry James’s contemporaries. The vagueness of the content repelled readers, who claimed they were ambiguous in their intended messages, Quigley identifies in *The Ambassadors* the kind of character that critics deplored, but summarizes Henry James’s main character from the novel as acting as “a strong ambassador even with vague beliefs” (62), which is a reunification of ambiguity and determination.

Chapter two is set in Bloomsbury where Virginia Woolf is ready to acknowledge in her novels that “modern literature must present ‘Life’ the way it really is - blurred and distorted” (66) but Bertrand Russell “insists that ‘discrimination’ and careful ‘analysis’ are the best means to knowledge” (70). *Night and Day*, *Jacob’s Room*, *To The Lighthouse*, and *The Waves* of Woolf’s “novels of vision” are represented in this chapter as is a discussion of Russell’s lectures which Woolf attended. Russell is to a degree sympathetic to the cause of vagueness and notes “[o]n the contrary, a vague belief has a much better chance of being true than a precise one” (73) when referencing the accuracy a smudged photograph might have when one guesses that there is a man in the picture instead of a *specific* man like “asserting it is Brown or Jones or Robinson” (73). The “many-sided” (74) truth of words Woolf takes up as her defining aesthetic is in strict rebellion against Russell’s “special language” which he proposed would have the accuracy of

mathematics. The way in which Woolf presents vagueness as *gendered* sets her apart from the other writers in Quigley's study. Female characters are "associated with 'vagueness' " (78) with a regularity not associated with male figures. As a way of responding to the lectures of Russell, Woolf has her characters speak directly to the nature of his philosophy by aligning themselves with the separateness of language and mathematics. Quigley charts the evolution of Woolf's vagueness with direct reference to her work providing helpful examples of the kind of style associated with vague writing: "combining free indirect discourse, multiple perspectives, and interspersed passages of tragedy" (88). The chapters concludes with a discussion of *The Waves* which Quigley claims is Woolf's masterpiece and deals directly with Russell's claim that the "possible end result of ontological vagueness is solipsism" (100), in a fantastic demonstration of literary criticism.

Chapter three focuses on James Joyce and Ludwig Wittgenstein in a manner similar to the previous chapters. Quigley's work seeks to fill in a gap where there is "startlingly little written comparing these two important twentieth-century figures, one who theorized the language game and one who created perhaps the most famously rebarbative example of one in *Finnegans Wake*." (110). Both authors are intent on redeeming aspects of Pragmatism. Wittgenstein and Joyce were familiar with the writings of F. C. S. Schiller, a contemporary of Russell, and it was Joyce who adopted certain aspects of the new ideas in his writing, "Pragmatism's lure for Joyce is crystallized in its ability to abolish the 'Absolute once and for all,' just as Stephen is 'fond of saying that the Absolute is dead'" (115). More here than in Quigley's other chapters there is an intense agreement between the philosopher and author about how language ought to be approached. Quigley excellently summarizes this point in a discussion about the later work of each writer: "In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein shows how even when words are recognizable, our cultural and social estrangement can make us feel utterly at a loss" (129), She goes on to discuss *Ulysses* and the confusion that arises when reading it by saying: "the multiplicity of styles creates a novel game with constantly changing rules, where readers struggle to find footing" (130). Wittgenstein's 'picture theory' of meaning and C. K. Ogden's translation of Joyce into Basic English are also mentioned in this chapter further tightening the connection between the two.

The final chapter reviews T.S. Eliot's opinions about Henry James, Woolf, and Joyce. Because of his personal connection with Bertrand Russell and status as both an author and a critic it makes for a seamless way to wrap up the theme of vagueness. In his early writing he criticizes philosophy by pointing out that the "'verbalism' of contemporary philosophy is due to those philosophers who believe they deal 'with objects' that are 'of the same exactness as the mathematician's'" (156). He was also skeptical of his fellow authors, worried that they were creating "tentative sketches and rough experiments" (164). The chapter ends with an overview of New Criticism and a brief word on recent investigations into "fuzziness", a concept embodied in the humanities by neo-pragmatists, most famously Richard Rorty (170).

Megan Quigley has succeeded in two ways. Her book is not only a wholly succinct review of the element of vagueness in Modernist writing, but a work which inspires readers to discover for themselves new connections between philosophy and literature. For the philosopher there are new intersections between thought and fiction to be found in these pages. For the literary critic, this book might make solid parts of philosophy which have previously seemed abstract. It would have been interesting to include a counter-point - if one exists - of a Modernist writer detached from philosophic study and suspicious of the usefulness of vague language, but this is minor quibble in an otherwise entertaining and substantial book.