

“Fuzziness Abounds: Affinities between philosophy and literature”

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“Impressions *are* experience”, Henry James reckons in “The Art of Fiction” (1884), with a matter-of-factness that makes the indistinct sound equal to the self-evident. But what does it mean to equate visceral experience so confidently with the phenomenological fuzziness of perception? Perhaps the insistent tenor of James’s claim about ephemeral sensations befits the literary aesthetic it both requires and endorses.

Paradoxes of this kind remained creatively fruitful for modernist fiction, suggesting literary affinities with philosophy’s shifting propositions about language. It is this connection which provides the premiss of Megan Quigley’s deeply engaging book, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness*, in which she reads Charles S. Peirce alongside Henry and William James, places Bertrand Russell beside Virginia Woolf, and uses Wittgenstein and C. K. Ogden as lenses through which to view the work of James Joyce. What develops is more than a study in intellectual influence or conceptual coincidence. Rather, Quigley encourages us to “see the fictions of these philosophies and philosophies of these fictions as integrally related”; and, furthermore, to appreciate how the novel “could offer answers to philosophical problems that philosophy itself could not resolve”.

Throughout, a persuasive analytical line is clear: “that in the early twentieth century the problem of modernity’s vagueness transformed literary realism just as it shook the principles of philosophical realism”. One might be suspicious of such synchronicities – Quigley converts into a substantial comparison here what could otherwise be simply a fortuitous conjunction between artistic transitions and the history of ideas. She seems alert, however, to the risks of producing this sort of argument-by-analogy. In refreshingly straightforward terms, she reflects on what it means to synchronize accounts of novelistic experimentation and an early twentieth-century “pragmatic counter-current in philosophy”, refusing the temptation to track philosophy’s “sudden interest in language’s vagueness” as merely “imported” into fiction. Attentive readings of syntax and abstraction in *The Sacred Fount*, for instance, reveal that Henry James defers, “sometimes indefinitely, the ‘substantive’ parts of language”, soliciting our response to verbal flow and transitivity instead. Such a style, in this as in later works, emphasizes the “vagueness of language” with which William James was concerned in *Principles of Psychology*.

Drawn to instances of a “simultaneous revolt against positivism” in philosophy and fiction alike, Quigley helps us to grasp the advantages of reading vagueness – “whether it be indefinability, fuzziness, or the reconceptualization of literary realism” – not as “an aesthetic deficiency” but rather as “a defining attribute of much modernist fiction”. Each chapter of *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* culminates by turning to a monument of modernist innovation – *The Ambassadors*, *The Waves*, *Finnegans Wake* – and Quigley is candid about the need to justify why we might want yet “another book on these canonical figures”. Flying somewhat unfashionably in the face of the new modernist studies’ ethos of geographical expansion and recuperation, she sheds new light on familiar icons, without becoming mired in the formidable secondary-critical archive that inevitably accompanies their work. We learn, for example, that Joyce and Wittgenstein have “pragmatic tendencies” in common; Wittgenstein’s “celebrated gesture

of throwing away the ladder at the end of the *Tractatus* and thus declaring as ‘nonsense’ everything that the entire book had carefully argued” is echoed in the way *Ulysses* self-reflexively “dissolves” the very “concept of ‘character’ and reveals the conventions” behind Joyce’s stream-of-consciousness technique.

Joyce – and Woolf especially – emerge here as prescient of current interests in so-called fuzzy criticism as well: an approach that “neither argues science or logic can vanquish vagueness nor that language’s vagueness places meanings always out of reach”. Woolf’s probing of language’s ability to capture the “vagueness of our experience” does not merely pre-empt these present-day debates; it also allows us to “return her aesthetic concerns to the forefront”, without playing down the extent to which literary experimentation “underscores her philosophical enquiries”.

Quigley’s final chapter offers an illuminating reassessment of T. S. Eliot’s legacy, in terms of the mid-twentieth-century institutional consolidation of exactitude and organicism as critical and pedagogical rubrics for modernist writing. Given Eliot’s “devotion to ‘unity’ and ‘structure’, at the expense of abstraction or ‘verbalism’”, Quigley points out “one path of modernist literary criticism, originating in Frege’s and Russell’s work on logic”. Such is the urge, in Eliot and William Empson after him, “to root out vagueness” – though its “thorny stepchild” eventually arrives under the guise of deconstruction. Yet Quigley’s conclusions also emphasize her study’s broader yield for those working on later periods: she invites us to rethink, for example, the multifarious history of postmodern writers’ engagements with philosophical arguments (as Michael Le-Mahieu has done by charting post-war American fiction’s reception of logical positivism), in order to generate richer portraits of post-modernism itself. *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* will likely reach readers who are interested in what it means today to do justice to those capricious, seemingly unsystematic aspects of literary invention after the ascendancy across the humanities of cognitive and quantitative methods; and who might share something of Megan Quigley’s wariness of the recent drive to place “higher value on scholarly work modelling ‘hard-hat’ science”.