



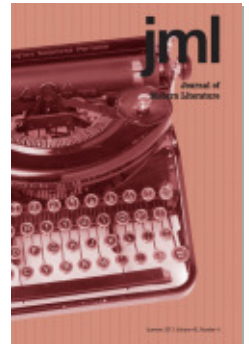
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The Reality of Vagueness

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Megan Quigley. *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2015. xiv, 228 pp. \$95.00 cloth; \$76.00 ebook.

In Modernist Fiction and Vagueness, Megan Quigley establishes the historical connections between vague language in the works of Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and T.S. Eliot and the philosophical problem of vagueness in early twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy. She argues that these literary modernists saw vagueness not as a problem, but as a fundamental aspect of experience. They rejected philosophical attempts to create logically precise languages because logical precision fails to capture the complexity of concepts and experience. Quigley thus orients modernist aesthetics toward practical concerns: modernists sought to represent the vagueness of reality rather than simply detaching themselves from the real world. Quigley advocates “Fuzzy Studies” as a way to counteract recent empirical methods in literary criticism that tend to problematize vagueness.

Keywords: philosophy / pragmatism / linguistic turn / realism

Vagueness is surely an apt description for many readers’ encounters with modernist literature, and Megan Quigley embraces the term as a fundamental aspect of the period and its debates about language. *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* reveals a historical moment when the vagueness of language presented itself as a crisis for philosophers who tried to clarify philosophical language with logical precision. Quigley argues that the experimental styles of Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce developed as a critique of such logical precision and the authorities—philosophical and social—that enforce it.

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She contends that while literary movements since New Criticism have sought aesthetic order in the chaos of modernist literature (and deconstruction has, conversely, sought chaos in aesthetic order), criticism should attend to vagueness as the best way to understand language and the world it describes. For Quigley, vagueness is not a problematic lack of order or a barrier to communication. At the heart of her argument is an insistence that modernists are realists whose close attention to the vagueness of concepts and objects aims to faithfully represent the world. Thus, Quigley's book is a timely history and polemic that pushes recent object-oriented criticism and empirically descriptive criticism back to the inevitably hazy philosophical and phenomenological questions of how subjects perceive and make sense of the real world.

Modernist Fiction and Vagueness provides an excellent historical background of intellectual connections between Anglo-American philosophy and experimental literature in the early twentieth century. Despite what she claims are "vague" connections between literature and philosophy, Quigley provides convincing textual evidence for seeing experimental modernists working toward the same conclusions as pragmatic philosophers. Her book follows recent studies such as Lisi Schoenbach's *Pragmatic Modernism* and Liesl Olson's *Modernism and the Ordinary* that sought to recast modernists' engagement with habit and ordinary life. Arguing against conceptions of modernists' formal order and elitist detachment from the world, Quigley shows that modernist fiction writers, like pragmatists, made vague language and vague concepts the foundations of their experimentation.

Quigley argues that Henry James, Woolf, and Joyce reflect William James's pragmatic solution to the problem of vague language. To make William James's version of pragmatism clear, she lays out philosophical responses to vagueness that center on a classical philosophical thought experiment called "the sorites paradox," or "the heap paradox." According to Quigley, this paradox, first proposed by Eubulides of Miletus in fourth century BCE Greece, asks us to consider how many grains of sand make a heap. Is one grain of sand a heap? Two? Three? If we keep adding grains of sand, how do we know at what point the sand constitutes a heap? Approached with mathematical logic, there seems to be no distinction between a heap of sand and a few grains. How, then, can we precisely define what a heap is? Quigley describes how the vagueness of words like "heap" proved problematic for many Western philosophers. On the one hand, logicians such as Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell tried to eliminate vague definitions by creating ideal forms of language. On the other hand, pragmatists such as Charles S. Peirce and William James recognized vagueness as a valuable tool for understanding language and discovering truth. But while Peirce thought that recognizing the vagueness of language would eventually lead to a clearer picture of precise objects, James maintained that because objects themselves were vague, vague language was perfectly suited to scientific investigations. Ludwig Wittgenstein takes both positions at different points in his career. His early *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* can be seen as an extension of the work of Frege and Russell in defining an ideal logical language, while his later work, especially the

posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*, turns toward a pragmatic view of language that accepts vague conceptual boundaries. In Wittgenstein's later thought, vagueness is not a problem for philosophy at all; vague language can be used to convey definite understanding.

Quigley shows the heap paradox at work in many forms throughout modernist philosophy and literature. For Russell, a smudged photograph is an imperfect likeness because it "might equally represent Brown or Jones or Robinson" (qtd. in Quigley 72), while Wittgenstein praises "the blur" and insists that the command, "stand roughly there" is fully comprehensible despite its vagueness (17). For William James, the stream of consciousness exemplifies the watery indivisibility of experience, where consciousness flows and thoughts cannot be clearly distinguished from memory and sensation. Images of water and waves proliferate in modernist literature, too: Woolf's *The Waves* (translated into French as *Les Vagues*), blurs boundaries between its characters, and when Joyce's Stephen Dedalus meets a prostitute, Stephen relives the fall of the mythical Icarus, becoming a "fallen" man, and dropping into water metaphors that begin to blur the solidity of his world. More fundamentally, metaphor itself offers a structure for vagueness because it constantly defers contact with solid things-in-themselves. Quigley's examples include metaphors such as the "beast" in Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle," a metaphor for the vague dread of catastrophe, and trees in Woolf's work, which might stand for solid objects if they weren't growing, collapsing and killing people, and transforming into chests of drawers and books. For Quigley's modernists, objectivity finds itself in a curious state of flux.

Each chapter builds on personal connections between modernist writers and language philosophers. The opening chapter provides the strongest personal connection: that of brothers Henry and William James and their friend Peirce. By connecting Henry's aesthetic practice with his brother's pragmatism, Quigley challenges conceptions of Henry as an "aesthete" who resists modernity (24). Instead, she depicts him as an enthusiastic proponent of William's emphasis on vagueness, rejecting the latent idealism in the ostensibly practical concerns of Peirce and Gustave Flaubert. Quigley proposes that Henry's first novel, *Watch and Ward* (which the author later disowned as his first novel), is an aesthetic failure for the author because it is not vague enough. Instead of distancing themes of incest and pedophilia from its romantic content, *Watch and Ward* leaves these "secret" themes open from the beginning, thus it fails aesthetically. Quigley follows James's oeuvre as it grows steadily more vague. In "The Beast in the Jungle," for example, she finds vagueness maintained to the end, as John Marcher's sense of foreboding can only be expressed in terms of the metaphor of the "beast." Quigley claims that Marcher's character is strikingly similar to Charles S. Peirce, whose own "beast," his vague ambition of promoting "pragmatism," caused his wife to leave him. While Quigley's desire to read certain biographical details of Peirce in James's story are novel, the importance of this vague resemblance is unclear. Still, her readings of James's stylistic and metaphorical affinities with his brother William provide strong evidence for seeing "The Master" in a more pragmatic light.

The second chapter traces the social connections between Virginia Woolf and Anglo-American language philosophers, arguing that Woolf's vague language rejects the precision and masculinity of Bertrand Russell's logical positivism. Quigley takes a comprehensive look at Woolf's oeuvre by analyzing her published fiction, manuscripts, diaries, essays, and even her 1937 BBC radio broadcast, "Craftsmanship," in which Woolf advocates the multiplicity of linguistic meaning in opposition to Russell's attempts to refine it. These sources construct a Woolf whose vague, philosophical texts critique dominant patriarchal structures. Recognizing that critics have read Woolf as both realist and idealist, Quigley contends that Woolf's use of vague language allows her to be both: Woolf rejects idealist Truth while accepting a multiplicity of experienced truths reflected in language. Thus, Quigley emphasizes the affinities of Virginia Woolf's stylistic projects with those other opponents of Russell: Henry and William James. Yet, Quigley reaches an unsatisfying conclusion when she claims that *The Waves*, Woolf's vaguest novel, approaches solipsism by collapsing the distinctions between facts and subjective experiences. Such solipsism feels out of tune both with the political Woolf, who sees vagueness as a strength of language rather than a problem, and with the pragmatic Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*, who ardently refutes skepticism.

In the third chapter, Quigley aims to contextualize James Joyce in the era's debates about language philosophy, rather than consigning him to the position of late-classicist or early-postmodernist. She tracks Joyce's developing anti-theological view of language throughout his work in the diminishing role of Stephen Dedalus's Aristotelian worldview, which holds that "God's real name was God" (qtd. in Quigley 134). Stephen's logical order gives way as he learns how language constructs different conceptions of God, the nation, and morality. Quigley aligns the Aristotelian worldview with Wittgenstein's early "picture theory of language," and shows how Wittgenstein's later theory of "language games" and Joyce's dense wordplay express similar understandings of the function and possibilities of language. Although Joyce and Wittgenstein never met, Quigley connects them historically through C.K. Ogden. Ogden translated Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* into English and put its precise logic into practice by developing "Basic English," a simplified language containing only 850 words. Later, Joyce invited Ogden to translate into Basic English the "Anna Livia Plurabelle" section of *Finnegans Wake*. The *Wake*, according to Quigley, is the culmination of Joyce's project to destabilize linguistic idealism by pushing vague language to its limits. Its celebration of vagueness makes it perhaps the most unlikely text to translate into Basic English, a language invented to eliminate vagueness, and Quigley intriguingly suggests that Joyce may have intended the translation to be an over-simplification, a foil for the complexity of language captured in his last work.

The book concludes with a history of literary criticism and vagueness that centers on T.S. Eliot. While Eliot is often considered the coldly formalist and logically precise father of New Criticism, Quigley aims to "reanimate" (149) his work by showing a picture of his changing oeuvre and his complicated mixture of admiration and distaste for Russell's philosophy. She contends that Eliot saw

Russell's logical approach to language as an antidote to abstractions and vagueness in his era's literary criticism—vagueness that Eliot associated primarily with the descent of Romanticism. Such concreteness accounts for Eliot's scientific metaphors (for example, the poet as a chemical catalyst in "Tradition and the Individual Talent") and his term "objective correlative" can be understood like a concept in a "picture theory of language" in which words align precisely with emotions and things. But while Eliot, like Russell, recognized as early as the 1920s that language resists scientific precision, Quigley emphasizes how in his later essays he transitions to a more pragmatic view that "the wobbliness of words is not something to be deplored" (qtd. in Quigley 157). Quigley argues that Eliot's early attempts to find reassuring order amid the chaos of modernity contribute to popular acceptance of modernist literature, even if his later criticism points more accurately to the favorability of literary vagueness.

Quigley concludes with a plea for the use of Jeffrey Perl's concept "Fuzzy Studies" in literary criticism, taking vagueness as an object and method of inquiry rather than an epistemological problem to be overcome. While the New Critics eliminate vagueness to unify meaning and the poststructuralists see meaning as "always already out of reach" (169), Quigley advocates William James's pragmatic dictum that vague methods are ideally suited for investigating vague objects. She insists that analyzing language's vagueness can help readers "to *get somewhere*" (160). She criticizes recent social-scientific and cognitive approaches to literature and follows Perl in thinking that humanists should not subordinate their methods to those of scientists. (Ironically, she supports her argument for "Fuzzy Studies" in the humanities with evidence of the success of Fuzzy Studies in the sciences). Quigley suggests that prioritizing scientific methods in literary criticism risks ignoring the importance of context and all its difficulties.

This discussion of Fuzzy Studies is intriguing, but may leave readers with many questions. If literary criticism is to get us "somewhere," where would that be? What pragmatic results follow from realistic representation? How could these results be pragmatic but not utilitarian? Quigley does not answer these questions. It is somewhat troubling that she finds it necessary to take sides against precision—a tool with its own pragmatic applications, and one that Quigley would admit Eliot employed successfully. The power of Fuzzy Studies in "hard" sciences seems proof that vagueness and precision are not mutually exclusive. Recently, Heather Love has provocatively suggested that literature might benefit from including both empirical and interpretive methods, which she calls "thin description" and "thick description," following anthropologist Clifford Geertz (Love 430). Such a catholic view opens critical possibilities that include attention to vagueness without problematizing precision. Quigley maintains the ethical commitments to reality and complexity that her focal modernist writers and philosophers practiced, noting that Woolf saw patriarchal domination in Russell's logical precision and Joyce may have seen in *Basic English* the demands of global commerce and the domination of British culture. But these authors certainly retained commitments to accurate description and historical detail. In the end,

Quigley successfully posits vagueness as a crucial question for modernist criticism, challenging her readers to read textual openness and multiplicity as an extension of the real world rather than an epistemological problem.

Works Cited

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