

MODERNIST FICTION AND VAGUENESS: PHILOSOPHY, FORM, AND LANGUAGE. By Megan Quigley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 224 p.

Megan Quigley's *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language* brings together two concurrent movements in literature and philosophy from the beginning of the twentieth century. In one there is a striving for greater clarity and exactitude—in the other, an embrace of linguistic “vagueness.” These tendencies are not, she suggests, directly coextensive with the two realms of activity she addresses: early twentieth-century philosophy includes in her view an openness to the “vague,” at least in William James's rejection of Charles Sanders Peirce's search for eventual scientific revelation in favor of contingent usable truth, or in the trajectory of Wittgenstein's thought toward an acceptance of the evolving, use-driven rules of “language games.”

The main philosophical figure characterized as remaining attached to a language of ideal symbolic precision is Bertrand Russell, who propounds this goal as a chief objective of “science.” Russell finds affiliates in the history of literary criticism: Quigley discovers his influence in T.S. Eliot's concern with the containing power of “structure,” including the famous precept of the “objective correlative.” She also links the logical-positivist trend to the wider endeavors of the Cambridge literary critics in the advocacy of “Basic English” by I.A. Richards.

The book is organized according to a philosophical-literary comparison, with the first chapter tracing Henry James's “pragmatizing,” or gradual attainment to a literary approximation of his brother's philosophical outlook. Quigley sees Henry James's literary development marked by a repudiation of the marriage plot of his first novel *Watch and Ward* (and subsequent disowning of this text) in preference, ultimately, for the moral “vagueness” compassed by *The Ambassadors*. Along the way, she uncovers a “parody” of Peirce's truth-search in “The Beast in the Jungle.” Also corroborative is James's negative demonstration, in *The Sacred Fount*, of two key pragmatist principles that William James liberated from Peirce's absolutism: the adoption of beliefs for their “usefulness” and for their “effect.” In the second chapter, Quigley juxtaposes Virginia Woolf's progression toward an aesthetic of “vagueness” with the propositions of Bertrand Russell's lecture “Vagueness.” In that talk, Russell outlined the obstacles to the achievement of an ideal, “impersonal” knowledge.

For Woolf, Quigley observes, vagueness is “gendered,” signaling a dissolution of the distinctions—between subject and object and between subject and subject—supporting an institutionally exclusionary academic philosophy. Like Henry James, Woolf achieves this dissolution in part by abandoning the marriage plot (still operative in *Night and Day*), fashioning instead modes of subjective dispersal. These emerge through the uncertainty of the protagonist's fate in *Jacob's Room* and the fusion or “continuity” between a series of individual characters in *The Waves*.

The third chapter, on Joyce and Wittgenstein, is also concerned with subjective diffusion. Quigley traces the displacement, across Joyce's work, of the centrality of an individual consciousness (Stephen Daedalus) and the final submergence of its cultural references in the dismembered civilizational “language game” that is *Finnegans Wake*. The last chapter develops the analysis of Bertrand Russell's influence on T.S. Eliot into a warning against “scholarly work modeling ‘hard-hat’ science” and the “evaluation of literary works based on criteria derived from science” in contemporary literary studies. Drawing on Jeffrey Perl, Quigley advocates “fuzzy studies,” which will be adequate to the “vagueness” of modernist literature, and a focus on cultural and disciplinary “mixing,” “overlap,” and “coexistence.”

Such a conclusion raises important questions about the parameters of the study. Alongside its justified suspicion of an interdisciplinarity predicated on the prestige of natural science, the final remarks reaffirm a note sounded throughout the book: a positive valorization of “vagueness” in modernist literature and more generally. Quigley also underlines the central propulsion of her argument, which takes as a framework an opposition between

the criteria of scientific or analytic-philosophical inquiry and the adventures of literary experimentation. (The chapter on the Jameses, and its equation of pragmatist philosophical judgment with receptivity to vagueness, turns out to constitute an exception to this framework.) Against the conclusion, one might object that whether or not neuroscientific or neo-empirical methods in the humanities currently enjoy a dubious ascendancy, it remains far from obvious that scientific criteria exercised any kind of constraining designs on literary experimentation in the modernist era. Even if we agree that traces of such criteria appear in modernist literary criticism, the ensuing evaluative judgments did not persist or achieve continuity with contemporary literary studies.

Consequently, the framing of the literary material in *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* may succeed above all in making a familiar account of modernist aesthetics look new. Moreover, the complaint about “scientific” influences in literary criticism poses a converse conundrum: the extent to which an analysis concentrating mainly on the exploration of literary texts can productively theorize the basis and formulation of hard-scientific criteria. In its discussion of Russell, the book seems to assume that the search for ever-greater precision in science is a negative and potentially dangerous enterprise. The broader emancipatory aims of logical positivism are underplayed, and scientific method is conflated with the political misuses of technology. On a biographical level, Russell’s “tempestuous personal life” is mentioned, but not his pacifist commitments.

Quigley’s framing of literary material through contemporary philosophico-linguistic inquiry obscures the striking *lack* of dialogic connection between them. She links Joyce to the earlier Wittgenstein by proposing that *Finnegans Wake* resembles “ethics” as Wittgenstein described it in a 1929 lecture: “nonsense,” a hopeless “tendency” to “run against the boundaries of language” that he nevertheless “respect[s] deeply.” But for the author of the *Tractatus*, literature is a category to be “pass[ed] over in silence,” while the “language game” concept of the *Philosophical Investigations* can accommodate *all* literature, including the very definition of the practice. The Wittgenstein-Joyce chapter seeks its most concrete link between the two figures through C.K. Ogden’s Basic English translation of the last four pages of the “Anna Livia Plurabelle” section of *Finnegans Wake*. Here Quigley teases out some fascinating material, but does not prove the claim that Ogden “put into practice” the “limitations on language” fixed by one of his main sources of inspiration, the early Wittgenstein. As she notes, Ogden never opposed literary complexity or radical innovation, and the Basic translation was solicited by Joyce himself. Contrary to Quigley’s conclusions about one of the phrases she cites from the juxtaposed texts (“She’s dead, little Eve, little Eve she’s dead” for *FW*’s “Die eve, little eve, die!”), Ogden’s rendering does not merely “miss” the diurnal and biblical allusiveness of the original, or unintentionally generate its own new kind of “vagueness”; it also animates an underlying personificatory implication. The at once explicatory and absurd, generative and reductive effects of the translation make it difficult to understand why Quigley sees it primarily as a demonstration of “the vast gulf between logical and natural languages,” and only secondarily as “a version of literary modernist experimentation,” indubitably Joyce’s own expectation of the result.

The overwhelmingly positive valuation given to “vagueness” impedes the investigation of its meanings and implications both as a term and a quality. One definition cited, Russell’s linkage of it to an indeterminate *multiplicity* of possible reference, is thought to inspire T.S. Eliot’s “objective correlative” in “Hamlet and His Problems,” though Eliot’s notion stresses an *insufficiency* of external corroboration for internal states. For at least two modernist novelists, James and Woolf, “vague” is, as Quigley’s study shows, an important and resonant term. But in their work it has recognizable and characteristic connotations: on a general level, as the evocation of a world of reverie and immateriality and a shrouding of the sexual and the physical, which for James resists the dissectional reproofs of French realism’s insistence on the nullity and disappointments of life. A telling semantic contrast between the jargon of “vague” in James and his distaste for “*distinct* marriages” (as plot endings) goes unremarked. Quigley rejects critical insistence on a “homosexual secret” at

the heart of “vagueness” in James’s plots. However, it seems more likely that the word connects to an alternative emphasis (shared by Edel, Posnock, and Brooks) on “sublimation” in James: the sacrifice of the sexual for the endeavor of art. To champion “vagueness” in itself as the effect or primary feature of his texts is perhaps to lose a sense of the origins of the force that they muster, which rests on at least the phantasm of an unrevealed secret or sensational core. In its analysis of both James and Woolf, the study regards vagueness as a rejection of the concrete, without either allowing it to have specific motivations or scrutinizing how it is produced and recognized as an aesthetic effect.

Anyone who loves, enjoys, and continues to study the classic works Quigley explores will greatly appreciate her careful and nuanced tracing of their complex unfolding, and of the careers of artistic development in which they figure. Her philosophical framework, though its larger disciplinary stakes might be questioned, also clarifies pressures, parallels, and evocative contemporary countercurrents that serve as a reminder of the extraordinary context of modernism, even if analytic philosophy cannot be said to be in dialogue with or dynamic opposition to the experiments of fiction. The central challenge of the book emerges from a problem of disciplinary justification that has beset literary studies in English since its beginnings. Quigley’s use of a framework not always in reverberation with the material it contains might be said to repeat the incursion of “science” that her concluding chapter condemns. While deconstruction—for which the book seems to seek a viable successor methodology—tended to subjugate literature to the relentless test of an inevitably failing conceptual consistency, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* defends the prerogatives of the literary aesthetic. In doing so, it paradoxically reiterates an uncertainty about the validity of literary studies. One might reformulate the question it asks in its last line, which oddly revives, even as it dismisses, a stale controversy: “And really, does anyone believe that *Hamlet* is a failure?” Can it really be the case that literary criticism should not elucidate, even as it engages with, “vagueness,” whether it be ambiguity of language, historical morass, or generic confusion? It is a tribute to this book that it does succeed in communicating a richer understanding of the literary texts it analyzes—and of the questions to which it offers a contentious yet illuminating response.

CATHERINE TOAL  
Bard College Berlin

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THE MEDIEVAL PRESENCE IN MODERNIST LITERATURE: THE QUEST TO FAIL. By Jonathan Ullyot. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 275 p.

This learned and original study shows the manner in which a number of canonical modernist works of literature rewrite the medieval myth of the Grail quest. Its aim is not merely to demonstrate the presence of this myth in writers as diverse as Henry James and Samuel Beckett. Ullyot’s more ambitious project is to show what modernist transformations of the Grail quest have to tell us about the fate of narrative in the twentieth century. Foremost among these transformations is the commitment to an aesthetic of failure, which calls into question the values of literary “success” and narrative coherence. The idea that the affirmation or the performance of failure could be an aesthetic value allows Ullyot to move with some agility from traditional myth criticism to the ideas of the Frankfurt school and even psychoanalysis. Where myth criticism establishes the parallels between medieval quest