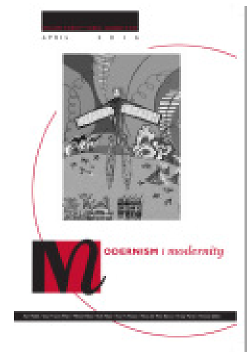
Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language by Megan Quigley (review)

Johanna Winant



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***Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language*. Megan Quigley. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 244. $95.00 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Johanna Winant, Emory University

In 1922, the Cambridge philosopher Bertrand Russell gave a lecture entitled "On Vagueness." In Megan Quigley's excellent new book, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness*, Russell's lecture, while not as decisive as the other literary and philosophical texts of that *annus mirabilis*, is importantly incisive. Russell, she argues, highlights a significant philosophical issue—the problem of vagueness—in the intellectual history of modernism. But in Quigley's book, Russell is just one of many writers and thinkers taking up the problem of vagueness in the first decades of the twentieth century. Others include Russell's former students and (former) friends, Virginia Woolf, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and T.S. Eliot. Quigley connects James Joyce to this group via, unexpectedly and usefully, C.K. Ogden. She also identifies attention to vagueness in the work of writers associated with pragmatism, including C.S. Peirce and William and Henry James. Indeed, one of Quigley's central and valuable aims is showing how in both Cambridges—one the birthplace of analytic philosophy and the other the birthplace of pragmatism—literary writers and philosophers shared a common concern about vagueness and what it reveals about the relationship of language to truth.

In philosophy, this concern manifests as attention to the vagueness of language, a problem that goes back at least as far as the *sorites* paradox of Classical Greece, which demonstrates the fuzziness of semantic concepts, such as a "heap" of sand (if you add grains of sand one by one, when does it become a "heap"?). Russell, Ogden, Peirce, and the early Wittgenstein were troubled by semantic vagueness; Russell's logically ideal language, Ogden's basic English, Peirce's emphasis on clarity, and the propositions that Wittgenstein lays out in the *Tractatus* are attempts to escape natural language's problematic vagueness. James and the later Wittgenstein similarly acknowledge the vagueness of language but do not find it problematic or troubling, in part because their priorities are (or are now) in representing thought and language as they are used in practical situations in ordinary life.

Quigley shows how modernist novels anticipate this second curve of the linguistic turn. Henry James's novels grow, in his own estimation, richer in meaning as they grow more vague: as his style becomes more imprecise, the characters become more diffuse, and the plots thinner. Virginia Woolf similarly increasingly embraces vagueness in her novels; her "sense of community" depends on people being connected "in some vague way," even though vagueness, by endorsing subjectivity, risks solipsism (quoted on 99). The relationship between vagueness and community is picked up by the next chapter on James Joyce. Here, vagueness is tied to sex; the teenage Stephen Dedalus is infected with it after he kisses a prostitute. The infection spreads: Quigley traces vagueness ramifying throughout Joyce's oeuvre and argues that Joyce's transformation from an early idealist belief in logical language to his late diffuse and deliquescent prose parallels Wittgenstein's evolving beliefs about language's necessary vagueness. The final chapter, on T.S. Eliot's criticism, finds this same arc: Eliot's early criticism invokes and attempts to mimic scientific precision, while his later writings acknowledge and even value vagueness.

The great strength of Quigley's work is her ambitious and rigorous interdisciplinarity. She reconstructs a conversation about what she calls the "crepuscular" with clarity and precision. The philosophers she discusses are among the most important, and among the most difficult, of the twentieth century. The same is true of the literary writers. And in discussing both philosophy and literature, Quigley is able to combine breadth—she discusses large oeuvres over the course of long careers—with the depth of an expert close reader. The philosophic and literary figures in

this book have long been canonical and so long been the subjects of critical industries; Quigley provides not only new ways to read them, but also, in her thorough bibliographic work, a resource for literary scholars. This is a book that is both dense with information and still a pleasure to read.

Literary scholars are the intended audience for this book, and those who have even a minor interest or background in analytic philosophy will find that Quigley is able to clearly and cogently explain the positions of and relationships between Russell, Wittgenstein, Peirce, and James without getting bogged down in jargon or minutiae. (This is a gift.) But literary scholars may also wonder at a missed opportunity to theorize vagueness in and for literary studies. Quigley imports the philosophical conversation but does not transmute it. She endorses the position that nearly everyone in this book—literary and philosophical figures alike—ends up taking in opposition to Russell in claiming value for vagueness. That value, she implies, has to do with semantic vagueness being more accurately mimetic of what she calls epistemic vagueness—our knowledge about the world is vague—as well as what might be, she hints but does not name, ontological vagueness—the world may actually *be* vague.

Those implications are surely important, and they position vagueness relative to literary realism. But realism is not the only antonym of vagueness in these pages. Quigley also contrasts vagueness with ambiguity, and I wanted to know more about the way vagueness thwarts interpretation, and so about the relationship of vagueness to difficulty. After all, Quigley discusses *The Ambassadors*, *The Waves*, and *Finnegans Wake*; these are some of the most indisputably difficult modernist novels in terms of style and plot. Quigley also writes about characters that appear "vague" to others; are these characters—often women—also resisting interpretation? Is appearing vague to others a way of preserving or recovering power? In other words, is vagueness always a judgment made by someone trying to interpret who is identifying the difficulty of interpretation? Or again in other words, is "vagueness" an aesthetic term, but not in the way we think it is? Does it not describe the object at hand but rather our own frustrations? And why does this frustration become more acute in the modern era?

Quigley is not frustrated in the face of the vague. Her interpretations are enabled and even energized by encounters with vagueness. As a result, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* is a clear-eyed account of how literature and philosophy can together tell us about the sometimes-loose connection between our world and our words.

***Destruction Was My Beatrice: Dada and the Unmaking of the Twentieth Century*. Jed Rasula. New York: Basic Books, 2015. Pp. xii + 365. $29.99 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Kurt Beals, Washington University in St. Louis

From the moment of its inception in 1916 Zurich, the Dada movement has inspired a seemingly compulsive drive to documentation. During this avant-garde movement's short lifespan, its members produced anthologies and almanacs collecting and canonizing their most significant works. Many Dadaists later published their own accounts of the movement in the form of memoirs, diaries, and collections of essays or letters, often strongly flavored by feuds and ideological oppositions. The intervening years have spawned no shortage of secondary literature on the movement, ranging from anthologies to museum catalogs to works—such as Peter Bürger's classic *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974; English translation 1984), or more recent books such as Richard Sheppard's *Modernism-Dada-Postmodernism* (2000) and Matthew Biro's *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin* (2009)—that advance broader claims for the movement's significance in the history of modern art and culture. In the past decade alone, the breadth of Dada scholarship available in English has expanded appreciably thanks to books such