MODERNIST FICTION AND VAGUENESS

Modernist Fiction and Vagueness marries the artistic and philosophical versions of vagueness, linking the development of literary modernism to changes in philosophy. This book argues that the puzzle of vagueness – language's unavoidable imprecision – led to transformations in both fiction and philosophy in the early twentieth century. Both twentieth-century philosophers and their literary counterparts (including James, Eliot, Woolf, and Joyce) were fascinated by the vagueness of words and the dream of creating a perfectly precise language. Building on the connections among analytic philosophy, pragmatism, and modern literature, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* demonstrates that vagueness should be read not as an artistic problem but as a defining quality of modernist fiction.

MEGAN QUIGLEY is Assistant Professor of English at Villanova University. Her work has appeared in *The Cambridge Companion to European Modernism*, the *James Joyce Quarterly*, *The Journal of the T. S. Eliot Society*, *Modernism/modernity*, and *Philosophy and Literature*.

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Philosophy, Form, and Language

MEGAN QUIGLEY
Villanova University

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You will no doubt think that, in the words of the poet:
"Who speaks of vagueness should himself be vague."
–Bertrand Russell, "Vagueness"

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Preface

In true Jamesian style, at a fashionable dinner party in New York City several years ago, the young man next to me told me he was writing a play about a person obsessed with vagueness. During the course of the play, the enraged protagonist begins to shout: "It's all vague! It's all vague!" Needless to say, I did not share with my dinner companion the fact that I was busily writing my own book on vagueness.

Vagueness invites insanity and inanity: It is by its very nature impossible to pin down to a single definition, and historically it has been a term of censure. For literary critics and art historians the term *vague* is related to terms such as blurry, hazy, fuzzy, woolly, impressionistic, ambiguous, and subjective. Vagueness conjures up misty images of cloudy mountaintops, Romantic fog, Gothic encounters, and pre-Raphaelite portraiture.

In contrast, in analytic philosophy today the question of vagueness refers to a very specific problem: the problem of borderline cases associated with the sorites or heap paradox. Put simply, this philosophical vagueness refers to the imprecise boundaries of concepts – for instance, how many grains of sand make a heap? Some philosophers argue that this border problem is purely a matter of language; others, that the sorites paradox undermines philosophical realism, which posits a solid and objective rather than a fuzzy and subjective world. Indeed, the simple paradox has no comparably simple solution; hundreds of articles and books aim to solve it. The growth of analytic philosophy and the logical notations found in works like *Principia Mathematica* (1910–13) mirrored Gottlob Frege's and Bertrand Russell's desire to create new "special languages," free of vagueness. The so-called Linguistic Turn in early twentieth-century philosophy analyzed ordinary language's vagueness, making language the subject rather than merely the tool of philosophy. Early pragmatists such as William James and Charles S. Peirce were also fascinated by the problem of vagueness, James calling out, "let the science be as vague as its subject." Ludwig Wittgenstein ended up praising "the blur," and Richard Rorty,

more recently, ushered in "the heyday of the fuzzy." Vagueness continues to this day to challenge philosophers, linguists, and logicians, who range from demanding various alternatives to vague language to endorsing Artificial Intelligence studies that indoctrinate robots in the virtues of vagueness to enable "human" communication.

This book links the aesthetic and philosophical versions of vagueness, asking what a fiction would look like that takes seriously the problems posed by vagueness and the sorites paradox: Might objects themselves be vague? Can vagueness be eliminated? Is vagueness really only a property of language rather than of some nonlinguistic reality? *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* argues that the novels of Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce (among others) interrogate exactly these questions. Whether through, for example, the victory of "the great vagueness" in James's "The Beast in the Jungle," Woolf's declaration that she could only bear "vague" symbols, or Joyce's exploration of "vague speech" in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, vagueness was a vital feature in the self-definition of the modernist novel, at the level of both form and reference. Novelistic elements as diverse as the narrator's theory in *The Sacred Fount*, Orlando's gender and age, and *Ulysses'* streams of consciousness are in fact linked insofar as each responds to the puzzle of vagueness. Modernist vagueness may reside in dialogue that is impenetrable, characters that are only shadowy subjects, or even novels that create their own languages in order to evade the vagueness of all natural languages. It might reside in a precise simulacrum of vagueness. I argue that the challenge posed to philosophical realism by vagueness offered the parallel problem for literary realism, opening the door to much of what we now recognize as modernist experimentation.

This project stemmed from two observations, one historical and one stylistic. First, vagueness, while an age-old problem, pops up everywhere at the beginning of the twentieth century in both philosophical and literary texts. For just a few examples: Peirce declared himself the first rigorous theorist of vagueness right before Russell gave a lecture entitled "Vagueness," while, on the literary side, Henry James lamented Flaubert's lack of vagueness and Woolf parodied an anti-vague philosopher. These coincidences point to an overlooked subject, particularly within literary criticism: the fascination with the problem of vagueness for a certain group of influential, largely Anglo-American intellectuals in the modernist period. This book aims to restore vagueness to its prominence in a period before it became, as it is now, a thriving topic in contemporary philosophy. In order to emphasize the blurry boundaries between fiction and philosophy in the

early twentieth century, each chapter of the project joins a philosopher and a novelist and uses little known biographical facts, as well as analysis of philosophical and literary texts, to prove its claims.

Second, stylistically, literary modernism has two opposing reputations: on the one hand, characterized as intensely subjective, formally disruptive, and aesthetically self-conscious; on the other, associated with the quest for objectivity, impersonality, precision, and structure. This latter analytic temperament, associated with T. S. Eliot and T. E. Hulme, is examined in a growing group of recent critical texts comparing analytic philosophy to literary modernism. While the desire to create a perfect atomistic or pared-down language certainly inspired some modernists, the flip side of modernism, embodied in long indeterminate clauses, blurry impressions, and Joyce's *Finnegans Wakese* reflects a different philosophy. This book aims to correct the impression that analytic philosophy influenced literary modernist theories of language more than pragmatism's "reinstatement of the vague"; instead, both of these significant developments in the Anglo-American philosophy of language are essential contexts for understanding modernist vagueness. If vagueness could not be stamped out, regardless of rigorous philosophical attempts to do so, what would a vague new world look like? My project pinpoints the ramifications of this philosophical question in early twentieth-century fiction: Novelists played with the idea that what was once believed to be certain was now deemed vague, or that what was once a binary opposition between sense and non-sense had come to seem adaptable to context and angle of vision.

Two caveats. Having asserted the vagueness of all language, this book is nonetheless not written in an intentionally vague style. I acknowledge the irony that while often praising fiction writers who critique positivistic approaches to truth, the book itself sometimes adopts such methods in its attempts to embrace the "fuzziness" of literature. *Pace* one of the manuscript's earliest readers who recommended more vagueness in style! In addition, any book on James, Woolf, Joyce, and Eliot needs to justify why we need another book on these canonical figures. In teaching these works, I have found that rather than using contemporary literary theory to analyze modernist texts, highlighting the philosophical questions with which these novelists might actually have been familiar inspires my students to push through the stylistic and philosophical difficulties. While I am sympathetic to and engage here the issues of queerness, feminism, ecocriticism, and politics, I have nonetheless prioritized early twentieth-century philosophy as a lens to read these works. Woolf and Russell dined together on December 2, 1921; Joyce and C. K. Ogden spent hours in the

summer of 1929 making one of the only audio recordings of Joyce reading aloud, although Joyce's growing blindness made the progress slow. I think we are all fundamentally nosy and like to imagine we might actually have stumbled upon these historical conversations between Woolf and Russell, or Joyce and Ogden, where they exchanged important ideas. *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* aims to represent those possible conversations and their impact on well-loved literary texts.

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Although William James wrote to Henry that he was happy to have "thrown off the nightmare" of being a professor, my former advisors made it seem an enviable lot, and because this project began at Yale University, my thanks will start there. For their generous feedback, their keen insights into my project, and their friendship, I give my heartfelt thanks to David Bromwich and Pericles Lewis.

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This project is dedicated to my mother, Lynn Pfohl Quigley, and to the memory of my father, Leonard V. Quigley (1933–2005). My mother's wisdom, strength, and courage help me to keep my head up, and my father's humor, love for John Donne and A. E. Housman, and unshakable faith in me guided every line of this work – you were right, Dad, I was lucky to be born to you.