

LT332 The Reinstatement of the Vague: Indistinct/Confused/Unconscious/Intuitive /Fuzzy Thinking in Fiction and Psychology

Seminar Leader: Ross Shields
Email: r.shields@berlin.bard.edu
Office Hours: by appointment

Description

According to the old arrangement, brokered by Alexander Baumgarten in the early eighteenth century, the difference between literature and psychology was grounded in the mode of cognition involved in either case: here confused, there distinct. As plausible as this may sound today, the relatively sharp division between confusion and distinctness began to blur over the course of the nineteenth century, which culminated in two related phenomena. On the one hand, the birth of the modern psychological novel, which sought—somewhat paradoxically—to render unconscious mental processes distinct. On the other, the “reinstatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life”—as William James described the program of his own *Principles of Psychology* (1890). As the line between vagueness and distinctness itself became fuzzy, psychology and literature were enmeshed in a disciplinary chiaroscuro that led to their mutual redefinition. This course will interrogate the concept of vagueness through a series of close readings of psychological and literary texts. We will explore how the meaning and status of vagueness underwent a dramatic shift as a result of discoveries in experimental psychology and psychoanalysis, and ask how this shift is reflected and refracted in the work of contemporaneous literary authors. Our aim is not so much to apply psychological theories of vagueness to literary texts, but to understand how the insights communicated through fiction can nuance and complicate hardened systems of thought—very much in the spirit of Franz Kafka’s observation that “a book must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us.”

Requirements

- Thoughtful preparation of reading assignments and engaged participation in class discussions.
- Weekly postings (see below)
- Midterm exam (see below)
- Final research paper (see below)

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the staunchest regard for academic integrity and expects good academic practice from students in their studies. All work must be one’s own, and all sources must be properly cited. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with according to the Code of Student Conduct, section 14.3 (academic misconduct).

Attendance

Attendance of all sessions is mandatory. More than one absence will significantly affect your participation grade for the course. You must e-mail me in advance of class if you are unable to attend due to illness or any other unavoidable circumstance. Consult the Student Handbook for regulations governing extended periods of illness or leaves of absence (see section 2.8). Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences, whether excused or unexcused. **Note: special arrangements for students who are unable to attend individual classes for reasons related to the corona pandemic will be made on a case-by-case basis and at the discretion of the instructor.** Depending on the situation, it may become necessary to adopt a hybrid format for some sessions (*i.e.*, dividing the class into in-person and online sessions).

Assignments

- Weekly postings in forum (completion grade).
- Midterm exam (to take place on October 11th).
- One research paper (12-15 pages), due on December 15th. You may choose your own topic, but you must discuss it with me prior to November 19th.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

The Student Handbook stipulates the following concerning late essays: “*essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment.*” Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

- 30% Preparation of readings and participation in discussion
- 15% Weekly postings in forum
- 15% Midterm exam
- 40% Final research paper

Schedule

The Lure of the Vague

Week 1 (8/30)

- Franz Kafka: “At the Building of the Great Wall of China”

Week 2 (9/6)

- William James: *Psychology* (excerpts)

Week 3 (9/13)

- Henry James: “The Figure in the Carpet”

Language in Crisis

Week 4 (9/20)

- Alexander Baumgarten: *Aesthetics* (selection)
- Bertrand Russell: “Vagueness”

Week 5 (9/27)

- Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations* (excerpts)
- Hugo von Hofmannsthal: “Lord Chandos Letter”

Week 6 (10/04)

- Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations* (excerpts)
- Virginia Woolf: “Craftsmanship” and “Modern Fiction”

Week 7 (10/11)

- **Midterm Exam**
- Additional reading (t.b.d.)

Week 8 (10/18)

- Fall Break (no class)

Intuition/Duration

Week 9 (10/25)

- Virginia Woolf: *To The Lighthouse*
- Henri Bergson: *Time and Free Will*

Week 10 (11/01)

- Virginia Woolf: *To The Lighthouse* (continued)
- Henri Bergson: *Time and Free Will* (continued)

Week 11 (11/08)

- Virginia Woolf: *To The Lighthouse* (continued)
- Henri Bergson: *Time and Free Will* (continued)

Week 12 (11/15):

- Virginia Woolf: *To The Lighthouse* (continued)
- Henri Bergson: *Time and Free Will* (continued)

The Supernatural

Week 13 (11/22)

- William James: *Varieties of Religious Experience* (excerpts)

Week 14 (11/29):

- George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans): “The Lifted Veil”

Week 15 (12/06)

- Henry James: “The Beast in the Jungle”

-----Final research paper due December 15th-----

Library and Book Purchase Policies

You are required to purchase the following edition of the following book (other readings will be made available online): Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* (vintage classics, 2016; ISBN: 978-1784870836)